

13. Welcome to the Fold

Brandon Schmidt had thrown his bomber jacket, faded jeans, and dark brown mohair sweater aside on the bed of his hotel room on Central Park West and placed his desert boots together under the night table. He looked approvingly at the spiffy figure he cut, outfitted in his new clothes, in the full length mirror on the outside of the closed bathroom door. The assignment he had received from Donnelly called for business attire; and, the day before, he had made a shopping expedition to Barney's to collect two suits, a few dress shirts, ties, socks, a pair of shoes, and other accessories he needed, including a conservative wristwatch, to replace his weighty gold and platinum military Rolex, which just didn't match the ensemble. Except for the suits, Schmidt had carried his acquisitions back to the hotel in shopping bags. A one hundred dollar bill, slipped to a surprised tailor in the alterations department, ensured that the suits would be finished and delivered this morning, as indeed they had been.

Donnelly had sent a locked attaché case to the hotel by messenger, which was waiting for Schmidt at the desk when he checked in. Inside the case, to which Schmidt had been given a key before he left Locksley House, Schmidt found three photographs, a short backgrounder, mission instructions, including a directive to rendezvous and work together with Guy Halderman, and twenty thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills, to defray his initial expenses.

Schmidt walked to his dresser and began placing his wallet, room card, address book, wad of bills, resin combat knife—which was invisible to metal detectors—cell phone, and other small items into his pockets. As he did so, he looked at the photographs that were propped up, leaning against the bureau mirror.

“Jack O'Malley, bird brain!” Schmidt scoffed, eyeing the first photograph. “You talk too much for your own good! I'm afraid we're going to have to do something about that.”

“Bishop’ Thomas Alain Kempis,” he smirked, glancing at the photograph of Jones in clerical robes, for he had been told the man was an imposter, and, turning his attention to the last photograph, continued, “and Suzanne Taylor, your partner in crime! What could you two be up to? A handsome couple! I wonder,” he mused, looking up to check himself one last time in the glass, before turning and heading for the door, “what you look like today?”

Finding the man who called himself Kempis, Schmidt knew, was serious business for Donnelly’s camp. This unknown man, probably an American, had appeared in Avignon, gone to the trouble of masquerading as a Bishop and infiltrating the homes of one of Donnelly’s local contacts, evidently in order to ask a lot of questions about their operations. Donnelly’s people couldn’t know how much Kempis knew, or what he suspected, or even what he was after. But they recognized a security threat when they saw one. It Schmidt’s mission to run down Kempis and resolve the threat, by one means or another.

O’Malley shared a walkup apartment on the second floor of a brownstone on the Upper West Side with two other young men. He was the junior member of the crew of renters, both in terms of his tenure and the amount of his monthly contribution to the rent; which meant that, while each of the others had his own bedroom, O’Malley was consigned to sleeping on a sofa bed in the living room. It was an awkward, but a thrifty, arrangement. O’Malley worked nights as a waiter in a small, thriving Italian restaurant on West 89th street; his roommates worked day jobs. During most afternoons, O’Malley had the apartment to himself.

Schmidt believed that, sooner or later, Kempis and Taylor would attempt to locate O’Malley. Obviously, then, if he could keep an eye on O’Malley, O’Malley would be the bait he needed to snare his quarry. To initiate the vigil, Schmidt had arranged to convene his initial

meeting with Halderman at the café directly across the street from O'Malley's apartment building.

It was late morning, the air was damp, and the skies were gray and overcast, as Schmidt and Halderman sat having coffee at a deuce in the glass enclosed section of the café that was built out onto the broad sidewalk on Amsterdam Avenue. They each had good view of the entrance to O'Malley's brownstone.

"You look very holy, Your Grace," said Schmidt, with an ironic smile, commenting on the Archbishop's costume that Halderman was wearing. "It's amazing what a change of clothes can do for a man!"

"I might say the same for you," replied Halderman, surprised have been addressed with such candor and tensely uncertain whether he should be amused or annoyed. "The last time I saw you, you looked like a tough guy—a bodyguard, or maybe even a high class thug, if you'll pardon my being rather blunt about it. Now, you could pass for a top executive at a Wall Street investment firm!"

They both looked out at O'Malley's building across the street.

"Well," said Halderman, "you're the one Donnelly's counting on to locate this Kempis character. How do you suggest we proceed?"

"You know that O'Malley is going to lead us to Kempis," said Schmidt. "At least, that's the theory. The question is, do we just sit around and wait for Kempis to find O'Malley, or do we get O'Malley involved, so he can help us out?"

"What do you mean, 'help us out'?" asked Halderman, sipping on his coffee.

“I mean that Kempis may not be an utter fool,” explained Schmidt. “He might not just waltz up to O’Malley in broad daylight. He might contact him on the sly and arrange a surreptitious meeting.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Halderman. “So you’re saying we could miss their encounter entirely!”

“Exactly!” answered Schmidt. “That’s why I’m thinking we should approach O’Malley and give him limited knowledge of our mission. If we enlist his cooperation, we can be assured of being notified, if and when Kempis makes contact—and we can be there, waiting for Kempis, when contact takes place.”

“I get it,” said Halderman. “Well, O’Malley is a member of Donnelly’s Congregation. People who are faithful to the movement and who can be called on to perform ordinary assignments. Of course, Congregation members don’t know anything about the plans to grab the Papacy, much less the means that may be employed to so.”

“Yes,” agreed Schmidt, finally reaching for his cup. “O’Malley is a stooge!”

“You take an unnecessarily cynical view,” replied Halderman. “Our greater purposes are for the greater good of all. No one involved in helping to implement them can properly be called a ‘stooge.’”

“Relax,” said Schmidt, taking another drink of coffee and peering at Halderman intensely. “We’re all friends, here. And we’d better be.” Schmidt put down his cup, placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward slightly, opening his hands to emphasize his point, adding, “Brothers. More than brothers!”

Halderman had been prepared to treat Schmidt as an underling. Certainly, as Donnelly’s prospective second in command in the Church, Halderman would inherit a an office and a mantel of power that would give him a place in the world above anything Schmidt, a man who was not

even part of the Church hierarchy, who was someone who would simply be paid his fee and sent on his way, could hope to aspire to.

“OK,” Halderman answered. “I didn’t mean anything. But, in any case, you’re right in what you say.”

Suddenly, Halderman felt the tension drain out of him. He smiled and inquired, “Where did you grow up, Brandon? If you don’t mind my asking?” After all, Halderman thought, if they were to be brothers, they should know something about one another!

“In Düsseldorf,” answered Schmidt, “an industrial city. My father worked for the steel mills. But I wasn’t cut out for the assembly line.”

“So,” Halderman hazarded, “you became a soldier—that’s my guess, anyway.”

“Good guess,” Schmidt confirmed. “I joined the army, got commando and espionage training. Then I went back to school.” Schmidt noticed the look on Halderman’s face. “That surprises you? Yes, I wanted to be able to read and think—not just kill people and blow up installations with home made explosives!”

Schmidt looked out the window, as if seeing something that wasn’t there, then looked back at Halderman and continued, “Anyway, later, I met Lingarn—he’s a bit of a genius, Herman is, in his own, weird way—and we clicked, and we started providing our own, unique consulting services. So, that’s it, in a nutshell. And you? Might I ask what your story is?”

Halderman, he told Schmidt, came from an old Philadelphia Mainline family that held three partnerships in one of the biggest law firms in the city. Like Laura, his older sister, Halderman had been predestined for a legal career; and, in due course, he had matriculated in the University of Pennsylvania School of Law.

“I hated law,” Halderman said. “But it was more than that! I wanted something out of life that no ordinary business or profession could give me. So I dropped out of law school and started studying comparative religion in graduate school.”

“And you were going to become a professor?” asked Schmidt.

“I didn’t know what I was going to become!” answered Halderman. “Anyway, I met Donnelly at a departmental coffee. You know,” Halderman put in, in a confidential tone, with a proud look on his face, “Donnelly had been searching for young prospects for his Church for years! At the time, when he approached me, it seemed like a chance meeting. But Donnelly was, in effect, interviewing unwitting candidates for his mission. I had no idea!”

He paused, drank from his cup, looked at Schmidt, as if to make sure the other was following his tale, and then continued.

“You know Donnelly!” Halderman expostulated. “His personality is like a natural force! I don’t know how anyone could say ‘no’ to him—or why they would want to! Anyway, he signed me up. And that, in a nutshell, is my story.”

Suddenly, the sky darkened and a downpour began. As the rain fell, Halderman’s memories stirred, of how, ten years ago, his family had all effectively still lived together in their quiet suburban house. It was true that, in those days, Laura, his sister, shared an apartment with two girlfriends in West Philadelphia near the University of Pennsylvania law school. And Halderman had a room at St. Antony’s, a threadbare but socially exclusive fraternity house at Swarthmore. But both schools were less than an hour’s drive from their family home, and both children still kept their childhood rooms, filled with their old and new belongings. As Halderman watched the sheets of water cascade down the café window glass, he had a vision of another rainstorm, one he had observed through the windows of the dining room in his home,

while seated at table during a Thanksgiving dinner. His Aunt Cecile, his mother's older sister, his Uncle Harold, her husband, both practitioners of general medicine, and his cousin Richard, their son, a neurosurgeon, had assembled for dinner, together with Halderman's parents, Laura, and Halderman himself.

"So, Guy," said Aunt Cecile, "have you been taking courses to prepare for law school?"

"You don't really prepare for law school," explained Halderman. "Law is something you study when you get there. You can take any courses you want while you're still in college."

"Is that right, Laura?" asked Aunt Cecile. "When you were in college, Laura, you studied government? And economics? Didn't you? So you'd be prepared when you started law school?"

"I majored in political science," answered Laura. "But Guy's right. It doesn't matter what you take up in undergraduate school—as long as you learn to read and write!"

"I'm studying Eastern religions," said Halderman, speaking up for himself. "It's fascinating. A whole world of beliefs that we grow up knowing nothing about. And, after all," Halderman added, deliberately trying to be provocative, "why should we accept a religion as the true one just because we were born into it?"

Aunt Cecile looked a little shocked, and she caught her sister's eye. But though Aunt Cecile and her sister were both Catholic, neither was particularly orthodox, and neither was concerned about what she regarded as an idle challenge to the faith.

"Next semester, I'm taking an honors seminar on Hinduism," Halderman continued, when he recognized that his heretical declaration wasn't going to elicit a more dramatic reaction.

"I can't imagine what use that can be to you!" Aunt Cecile rejoined. "Can't you just read a book about it? Richard," she continued, addressing Halderman's father, "what do you think?"

“You know the joke about you’re both being right?” Halderman’s father answered. “Sure, I’d like to see him study something with a practical upshot. And not necessarily law. Computers, for example. You can’t know enough about computers, if you want to get ahead in the future. But he’s twenty years old, so leave him alone! He’ll be giving all this up soon enough.”

Halderman remembered how he had winced over his father’s defense of his pursuit of the study of comparative religion. “He’ll be giving all this up soon enough,” his father had said. But he didn’t want to “be giving all this up”! He didn’t want to enter the dreary world of legal cases, researching, writing, and filing briefs, until his life, like his father’s, became nothing but a processing station for an endless train of judicial proceedings.

“I guess that will clear the air!” said Schmidt, breaking into Halderman’s reverie, as the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and sunlight streamed in bright shafts through broken cloud banks. “So, he continued, I guess we’re agreed that we should talk to O’Malley?”

“Sure,” answered Halderman, coming into the present. “Sure.”

That evening, Schmidt sat at the bar at the restaurant where O’Malley worked, nursing vodka on the rocks and waiting for O’Malley to appear.

“Aren’t you Jack O’Malley?” Schmidt said to O’Malley, as O’Malley passed by on the way to his serving station.

“Me?” answered O’Malley, stopping short. “Yes, I am.”

“I understand you train birds,” said Schmidt. “You train birds professionally? Is that right?”

“Yes!” O’Malley’s face lit up. “I work with birds. How did you hear about me?”

“I heard about you from the people who sent you to Avignon,” Schmidt told him.

“Anyway, I’d like you to do some work for me. Are you interested?”

“I sure am!” said O’Malley. “I’m very interested!”

“OK,” said Schmidt, extending his hand, “then meet me at the Oak Room in the Plaza Hotel at eleven thirty tomorrow morning. We can talk then.”

“OK!” answered O’Malley, shaking Schmidt’s hand. “And thanks! I’ll be there!”

Halderman, Schmidt, and O’Malley sat together at a large wooden table in the back corner under the vaulted ceilings of the paneled Oak Room. O’Malley, young and devout, could hardly turn his eyes from Halderman, who, once again, wore his Archbishop’s robes, which O’Malley couldn’t precisely identify, but which he knew belonged to a cleric above the rank of an ordinary priest. Schmidt made the necessary introductions, and, when he revealed Halderman’s position in the Church, he was not surprised to see O’Malley start and assume a demeanor of quiet respectfulness.

The bar was nearly empty at this hour, as Schmidt had expected it would be, when he had arranged the assignation; and, once the waiter had taken their orders and served their drinks, they were left alone, with no one else within thirty feet.

“Mr. O’Malley,” said Schmidt, “Archbishop Halderman and I represent the Catholic Advent,” referencing Donnelly’s name for worldwide movement. “As a member of Cardinal’s Donnelly’s Congregation of Followers, you know that the Catholic Advent is committed to doing the work of God and advancing the cause of the Church, under Cardinal Donnelly’s leadership.”

“Yes, sir,” answered O’Malley. “I’ve been a member of the Congregation for three years. It’s such an honor to be sitting here with an Archbishop and with another important man

from the Advent!” blurted O’Malley, looking from Halderman to Schmidt. “It almost seems like a dream!”

“It’s no dream,” answered Halderman, with a smile.

“No, it’s not a dream,” echoed Schmidt. “Mr. O’Malley—Jack—may I call you ‘Jack’?”

“Sure!” said O’Malley.

“Well, Jack,” Schmidt continued, “We have a problem. It seems that, when you were in Avignon, you talked a little too freely with a young French girl named ‘Juliette Dubonnette.’”

“Juliette?” O’Malley said to Schmidt. “What does she have to do with anything? She was just a girl I met at the house where I was staying.” O’Malley paused, and, finding Schmidt’s face expressionless, looked to Halderman for sympathy, adding, in a confidential tone, “We really liked each other. I know it seems unrealistic, with her living in France, and her being so young, and all, but we were even thinking that, someday, somehow, we might be able to get together again.” O’Malley stopped himself short. “Hey, wait a minute! Is that what this is about?” he blurted, growing agitated. “That she’s so young? Listen, maybe you don’t understand. We didn’t do anything wrong! All we did was talk. Sure, I kissed her. But I didn’t mean to hurt her. Really, I didn’t!”

“Calm down, Jack,” said Halderman. “This has nothing to do with Juliette’s age.”

“It’s a lot more serious than that,” said Schmidt. “As I told you, you talked too freely with her when you in Avignon.”

“‘Talked too freely’?” O’Malley asked. “I don’t understand....”

“You told her you weren’t actually engaged to be married, remember?” said Schmidt.

“Yes,” answered O’Malley, uncertainly, unable to fathom why this disclosure could have any significance to the Church.

“More important,” continued Schmidt, “you told her your name and where you were from.”

O’Malley was silent. Of course, he had told Juliette his real name! And he had told her the truth about where he lived. Now, suddenly, he remembered the promise that he had made, when he’d accepted the assignment in Avignon, not to disclose information about his identity to anyone. Somehow, when he had sat looking into Juliette’s blue eyes, her hands holding his, it hadn’t occurred to him that this restriction could apply to her!

“I’m—I’m sorry!” O’Malley said. “I’m really sorry. You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. But I trust her. She won’t tell anyone. I’m sure of that!”

“She already has told someone,” said Schmidt. “A very dangerous man, who’s going under the name ‘Kempis.’” Schmidt stopped to let the full force of his words penetrate O’Malley’s mind. “Look, she’s entirely innocent. She has nothing to do with any of this. She was tricked into giving out the information. I can’t say the same for you, however. You knew what you were doing—or you should have known!”

“I said I was sorry,” O’Malley responded. “But what can I do about it now?”

“I’m glad you asked that question,” said Schmidt, looking over at Halderman significantly, before looking back at O’Malley, “because that’s exactly what we’re here to talk about!”

Schmidt explained to O’Malley that Halderman and he had been sent by the Advent to track down Kempis and his partner, a woman calling herself “Suzanne Taylor.”

“To give you an idea how ruthless Kempis is,” said Halderman, “you should be aware that, when he was in Avignon, he actually posed as a bishop!”

O’Malley looked shocked.

“Yes!” continued Halderman. “He wore clerical robes—rented from a costume shop, I suppose—and toured the city posing as a Bishop Thomas A. Kempis from Montreal. You understand, now, that it’s small wonder that he was able to win Juliette’s confidence!”

“Yes,” muttered O’Malley, “yes, I see.”

“It’s not important why,” said Schmidt, “but we believe that Kempis is going to look you up. When he does, you should play ball with him. Arrange to meet with him, for example, if that’s what he wants. What you’re going to do for us is let us know as soon as you hear from him and tell us exactly what he tells you. And, of course, you’ll follow any instructions we give you at a later stage. Do you think you understand?”

“I think so,” said O’Malley. “This guy Kempis is going to get in touch with me, maybe try to see me. You want me to go along with him, and to tell you everything that’s happening. Is that it? Do I have it right?”

“That’s right,” answered Halderman. “You’ve made a serious error, son. But we’re all sinners in the eyes of God. The important thing is, to repent of your sins! Do you repent of your sins?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” answered O’Malley, “I do repent, I do!”

“Then prove your repentance by doing this work for your Church,” said Halderman. “If you do this, I, myself, will forgive you for the sins you committed against the Church in Avignon.”

“Thank you, Your Grace!” O’Malley exclaimed. “Thank you! You won’t be disappointed, you or Mr. Schmidt. You have my word!”

“Nice touch,” said Schmidt to Halderman as they walked down Fifth Avenue after the meeting had broken up. “I mean the part about forgiving O’Malley for his sins. That really seemed to get him going!”

“You forget, Brandon,” Halderman answered, “I will forgive him, if he does as we ask.

“ Halderman paused, looking around at the pedestrians streaming by them. “Don’t you believe in anything? Are you just like the rest of these people,” he gestured, indicating the strangers going by, “with no real commitment to the Church or to anything else?”

“I’m committed to the Church,” said Schmidt, “and don’t ever forget it! I thought I made that clear. But that doesn’t mean I believe in the poppycock you teach. You can be sure Donnelly’s committed to the Church! But what makes you think that he believes any of that stuff?”

Halderman, despite his sophistication and his recognition of the fact that it was necessary to work with agnostics and atheists in order to achieve their greater ends, felt shocked to hear a man with whom he had been assigned to work with closely question Donnelly’s faith.

Halderman didn’t know what to say. How could he explain that Donnelly was more than an ordinary man? That he was gifted with visions from heaven? That he received his instructions from the prophets and the Apostles, and, who could say, perhaps from God Himself? Suddenly, Halderman felt sorry for Schmidt, because he realized that Schmidt, though evidently honest and trustworthy, was only in this for the money. Schmidt didn’t have a clue about the new Church that they were going to establish or the new world that they were going to make.

“Maybe I should work on converting you!” said Halderman, finally, trying to sound lighthearted. “Maybe, before this assignment is over, I’ll be saying, ‘Welcome to the fold!’”