

11. My Little Men

Relying upon his authority as Cardinal, Donnelly had created a special squad of twelve shadow Archbishops, to act as his future ministers of the Church. These “Archbishops” had not been, strictly speaking, confirmed in their offices by Rome, nor were they, therefore, known or recognized by the Vatican. Donnelly called these twelve new Archbishops the “Circle of Apostles,” intending to convey by this name the fact that they were his apostles, that is, his messengers—which, he knew, was what the root sense of the word signified—announcing to the world that Pope Peter Simon had come! And, with his coming, would come the Judgment of the World, in which Pope Peter would deal life to the virtuous, death to the sinful and rebellious, and establish the universal rule of the one, true Church, while he reigned, enthroned at Rome and Avignon, literally forever!

These twelve powerful, rapacious men had been carefully selected by Donnelly for their energy and greed, as well for as their staunch, fervid loyalty and their pathological indifference to the tallies of moral calculus. They had been assigned the work of preparing the way for Donnelly’s ascent to power. This ascent, Donnelly knew, would not be a smooth transition. There would be confusion, discord, and bloodshed. None of that mattered, of course. But, what did matter, was securing his authority when the trouble subsided.

Because his Apostles’ participation was needed to effect his seizure of power, the twelve had been apprised of some of Donnelly’s most secret plans. They had been told, for example, that, in a matter of weeks, he planned to stage a coup, unseat the Pope, and take his place as the Vicar of Christ on Earth. They also knew that Donnelly wielded a terrible weapon, with which he was planning to attempt to blackmail the Church and then the entire civilized world into capitulating with his plans. Finally, they knew that Donnelly was certain that his effort at

blackmail would fail, and that he would be forced to use the weapon, after all. Donnelly dispatched his Apostles to various outposts, in Asia, Africa, South America, as well as Europe and the United States, to cement plans with groups that he had identified and cultivated the past few years, that were sympathetic with his quarrel with the Pope. When time ran out for the old world, Donnelly knew, and he took his seat on the Papal throne, he would depend on the services of allies everywhere, to help consolidate his power.

Donnelly himself had visited several of what were, for him, critical spots around the globe, on occasion, traveling incognito. He had traveled to Rome, naturally requiring no disguise in that city. In fact, he richly enjoyed the royal reception he was given by Italy and the Vatican, a welcome he would have received from any civilized, sovereign nation in the world, with attending dignities proper to a visiting Head of State, a President or a Prince. For a Cardinal is so regarded, as a Prince of the Church. Any country that should have the temerity to fail to accord such honors to a Cardinal, would automatically fall under a ban from the Catholic Church.

Donnelly had stopped in Avignon, long a hotbed of dissent against the Vatican, and a region he was cultivating as a primary center of support for his rebellion against Church authority. He'd wanted to meet the leaders of the underground there and use the force of his personality to inspire them to a frenzy of commitment and expectation. And, he admitted, he also wanted to have a look at the Palace of the Popes, which he had never visited before and which he regarded as one of his future homes.

Archbishop Guy Halderman, a young man with a full head of straight black hair, a handsome, angular face, and a hawkish nose, who, as Donnelly's favorite, was first among equals in the Circle of Apostles. Today, he relaxed with Donnelly in the two bedroom penthouse

Donnelly maintained as a secret pied-a-terre in central Manhattan. Donnelly had rented the small apartment under Halderman's brother's name, William. Donnelly invariably arrived there wearing street clothes, sunglasses, and a hat; and no one in the building had any reason to suspect that the man calling himself "Bill Halderman" was actually the Cardinal of the Boston diocese or, indeed, had any connection with the Church.

It was night, and the view from seventy stories up, through the wrap around floor to ceiling windows, showed off the city in all its rich grandeur of a million lights.

"This cognac is marvelous," said Halderman, sitting back on the sofa, swirling round the tawny liquid in the crystal glass. "Even better than the 1932 vintage you served me last time."

"My contacts in France are growing," commented Donnelly, who sat, wearing an opulent paisley silk robe, in a large upholstered armchair, his yellow kidskin slippers propped up on an ottoman. "Better get used to the best of everything, Guy! In a few weeks, the world will bring its treasures to our feet. Just think!" he continued, swinging his legs off the ottoman and turning toward Halderman. "Just think what it will mean when I hold the keys of life in my hands!"

Donnelly stood, placing his hands in his pockets, and inclining his head slightly upwards.

"The keys to the Kingdom of Heaven!" he said, derisively. "That's what St. Peter is supposed to have passed along to the Popes throughout history! But I'll have the keys to the real kingdom of heaven—the keys to life! To life itself! And, Guy," he added, lowering his head, looking straight at the seated man, and leaning over him, "won't the world be at my feet then? Won't the whole world be at my feet?"

"It will be, Your Eminence," answered Halderman, looking up at Donnelly.

“Well, it can’t happen soon enough for me,” added Donnelly, laughing curtly, straightening up, and walking over and sitting down on the edge of the ottoman. “I feel like I’m living in a straightjacket! Can you imagine what it’s like to feel your vital forces surging inside you, to feel your destiny burning to get free, and, yet, to be trapped, unable to do anything but wait?”

“Naturally, I don’t feel those things the way you do, Your Eminence,” answered Halderman, running his left hand back through his abundant hair. “But I’m impatient, as well. I’d like to take my place at the head of your Council of Cardinals!” He paused, then continued, with a small, mischievous smile, “And, I confess, I’m also more than ready to start enjoying some of those fringe benefits we’ve talked about!”

“If you’re referring to women,” said Donnelly, “I promised you your choice, save only that my choices, of course, take precedence.” He paused. “But I should think that the entire world should offer enough beauty to satisfy us both. St. Paul said, ‘It’s better to marry than to burn.’ You won’t burn while I’ll enthroned as Pope, I’ll make certain of that!

“By the way,” Donnelly, stood once again and began pacing slowly, “I don’t think I told you that I’ve been using agents to collect candidates for the Order of St. Teresa of Avila. I’m going to enroll girls in their late teens, mostly from America and Europe—those are the ones I like—and make them part of my household.” He walked to his desk, opened a drawer, and withdrew a small snapshot. “Take a look at this one!” he said, walking over to Halderman and holding out the picture for him to see.

“Even her name is music!” Donnelly said. “Juliette Dubonnette!” A French girl, the daughter of one of our people in Avignon, as it happens. I even caught a quick look at her,

when she was coming out of school, when I was over there. She's even more beautiful in real life!"

Halderman peered at the sharp photograph, taken in the sunlight, evidently using a telephoto lens, with respect and envy. The girl was a perfect beauty, exquisitely slender, with full breasts, long legs, and, most impressive, a stunning face that seemed just on the cusp of transforming from a child's into a woman's.

"Hats off," said Halderman, quietly. "She's perfect. Good luck with her!"

"Well," answered Donnelly, stuffing the photo into the pocket of his robe, "women aren't important, anyway. I wish you could see that, Guy."

Donnelly sat down on the edge of the ottoman and leaned over to continue speaking to Halderman, who was directly in front of him.

"Did I ever tell you the parable, Guy, of 'The Old Man and the Girl like a Young Rose?'"

"No," replied Halderman, dubiously, for he had heard others of Donnelly's stories before, "I don't think so, sir."

"There was once an unmarried, elderly miller who lived alone in a small town outside of Jerusalem," Donnelly began. "Wearying of life alone, he took an orphan boy into his house, and, eventually, adopted him as a son. The boy grew into a strong youth, and the miller grew weaker, until the time came when the youth tended the mill and took care of the old man. Now a girl, like a young rose, who used to come to the miller's house for grain, knew his business was good and that, with the young man's help, he had stored away much gold over the years. 'Send away the boy,' she told the old man, bewitching him, and laying before him a bouquet of fragrant roses, 'so we may consort together and you may have one joy for each rose in this bouquet before you die!' The old man, entranced by her beauty, was well aware that he had only a short

time to live and small hope for the pleasures of love. So he made a quarrel with his son, and sent him away, thinking how he would enjoy the favors of the girl, when his son had gone. But when the two were alone, the girl tore up the roses and infused a strong cup of rose hip tea, lacing it with enough poisons to kill ten men, and served the brew to the old man. As he lay dying, she took the gold from the hiding place that she had long ago discovered. However, on the road to Jerusalem, she was waylaid and murdered by a gang of thieves. The son, learning of her fate, returned to his father's house and found his father, dead, the chest of gold, empty, and a bunch of withering roses, torn to shreds. 'My father did not know that the lovelier the rose,' the son said, 'the faster it withers, and, in spite, curses all who loved it to join it in death!'"

Halderman sat in silence, brooding over how to respond to this tale.

"Do you get the point?" asked Donnelly. "Well, I'm sure you do! It's not exactly subtle, after all. Anyway, think about it. The world doesn't revolve around women! You'll see that better when you have a chance to—to work out your frustrations! I sometimes forget how powerful the erotic drive can be in a young man like you, how all consuming. Especially when you aren't continually visited, as I am, by heavenly powers that keep you strong!"

"Don't worry about me, sir," answered Halderman, smiling once again. "I understand your story. I'll keep my head on straight. Please, give me some credit! I know there's more at stake here for me than a couple of new girlfriends!"

"I give you a great deal of credit, Guy," said Donnelly. "You're my most trusted viceroy. You know I love you, as I love few men. That's why I want to make sure you're ready for the change that's coming."

"I'm ready," said Guy, putting down his glass, rubbing his hands together, and interlocking his fingers. "I'm focused on one thing: Putting you on the Papal throne and making

sure your position is secure. If we can do that, everything else we could possibly want will follow.”

“Exactly!” answered Donnelly, standing, taking a step toward Guy, running his right hand through Guy’s hair and firmly grasping the seated man’s left shoulder. “You will sit at my right hand! I will raise you up, my boy! I will set you free!”

Halderman tried to conceal his reaction, successfully, he hoped; but he shuddered a little at Donnelly’s touch.

“Thank you, Your Eminence,” Halderman said, affecting insouciant enthusiasm, when, unaccountably, he actually felt an attack of inchoate apprehension. “I look forward to our great future—together!”

“By the way,” Donnelly said turning to the panoramic view through the windows over Manhattan, “Rensselaer is coming over tonight. He should be arriving shortly.”

“Rensselaer!” said Halderman, in surprise. “I thought he was in Algiers.”

“He flew back today,” Donnelly told Halderman, then turned to face Halderman. He went on, “I want the two of you to begin working closely together.”

“Whatever you say, Your Eminence,” answered Halderman.

“When you take that tone with me,” laughed Donnelly, “I know that you’re grumbling inside! Look, Rensselaer is the smartest man I have on my staff—next to you, of course, my dear boy! You don’t have to like the man. Just respect what he can do and work with him. I’ll make sure he stays out of your way. You’re still the number one Apostle around here. Don’t forget it.”

“OK,” said Halderman, his grin returning. “Rensselaer and I are a team! Does that make you happy?”

“It does,” said Donnelly.

Just then, the telephone rang. It was the doorman, asking if he should admit Rensselaer. A few minutes later, they heard the doorbell, and Halderman dashed over and opened the door.

“Hello, Guy!” said Christian Rensselaer, a muscular blond man of medium height, with a broad, finely featured face, and full, deeply colored lips. “How’s life in the big city?”

“Hello, Christian,” said Halderman, stepping aside to let the other in and closing and bolting the door behind him.

Donnelly stood in the middle of the living room, facing the entrance, his hands in his pockets, smiling.

“Your Eminence!” Rensselaer called out, spotting Donnelly as he walked into the room. “How wonderful to see you!” Halderman watched as Rensselaer strode quickly past him and over to Donnelly to shake Donnelly’s hand and, as Halderman noticed, with annoyance, to be embraced by the Cardinal.

Donnelly returned to the comfort of his plush armchair, and Rensselaer, having shed his coat and gloves, joined Halderman on the sofa, taking his seat away from the other man, at the far end.

The two make for quite a contrast in appearance, thought Donnelly, looking from Halderman to Rensselaer. Halderman was tall and slender, almost avian, in his dark-haired, pale good looks; and, although he had, of necessity, left behind his robes of office to visit this hideaway, he dressed for the occasion in a three-piece suit. Rensselaer, brightly blond, was squarely and powerfully built; and, having also shed his Archbishop’s costume, sported fine corduroy slacks and a vicuna and cashmere crew neck cable knit sweater. One thing they had in common, Donnelly noted, was an ironic smile, as each looked at the other and then back to him.

Another thing they had in common, he also noted, with a certain pleasure, was their youth, for each was just over thirty years old.

“Say, Your Eminence,” said Rensselaer, leaning forward on the couch and reaching into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet, “you won’t mind if I take a bit of refreshment, will you?”

“Certainly not, Christian,” answered Donnelly, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Here, my boy, we do as we please.”

Halderman watched in amazement, as Rensselaer removed a small, folded paper packet and a hundred dollar bill from his wallet, slipped his wallet back into his pocket, and proceeded to carefully unfold the packet on the glass and chrome cocktail table that stood in front of them. Rensselaer then tapped a few match heads of a white, crystalline powder from the packet onto the table top, rolled up the bill into a tight tube, and sniffed the powder through the tube, first with one nostril, then, with the other.

“Ah!” said Rensselaer, sitting upright, his eyes closed, and shook his head back and forth slowly with pleasure. “I bought this in Germany, believe it or not,” he said, looking at Donnelly and Halderman again. “Usually, you can’t get good cocaine on the Continent! But I know an exception when I see one. This came straight from the German Ambassador’s son!”

“I don’t understand you, Your Eminence,” said Halderman to Donnelly and Rensselaer, in turn. “Christian, we’re on the brink of changing the world, and you’re sitting here, doing drugs! Your Eminence! Why do you allow this to go on?”

“Hey!” said Rensselaer. “I don’t recall asking for your opinion of my activities.”

“My little men,” said Donnelly, “how you quarrel among yourselves! Listen, Guy, your impatience with drugs does you credit. But, remember, my visions have told me that we are, each of us, to be set free! If Christian is inclined to go that way, he must be free as well. I will

judge, if and when he has gone too far.” Donnelly paused, his face grew dark, and, looking Rensselaer squarely in the eyes, he continued, “If he does go too far, he knows he will incur my punishment!”

Rensselaer, in the grip of Donnelly’s gaze, felt a chill of fear that cut through the transports of his intoxication. For he knew that, though a river of indulgence might flow from his master’s heart, not one drop of mercy would ever let fall from there, to save even the most penitent life from destruction and death.