

## 17. To Get Back Suzanne

General Craig Lawrence Ratwell lead Jones into the secret, subterranean laboratory that had been hastily set up in the Virginia headquarters of the OSA and configured to support the forensic investigations critical to what had been code named “Project Dove,” after the carrier pigeon that had delivered the gold plated cartridge that, Jones had correctly surmised, contained a message.

“Hello, doctor!” Ratwell said to a man in a laboratory coat, who was standing with his back to them, looking over some notes on a clipboard.

“Hello, General,” the man answered, turning and dropping the clipboard to his side. “And to what do we owe the honor of this visit?”

“Meet Major Gil Jones,” said Ratwell. “He’s our point man on Project Dove. As you probably remember, he and I recovered the dove in Avignon together. Gil, meet Dr. Sam Peckenridge, our lead investigator for Project Dove.”

Jones and Peckenridge shook hands.

“Gil just flew in from Avignon today,” Ratwell continued. “I’d like you to bring him up to date on what you’ve discovered so far.”

“So you don’t know anything about the bird?” asked Peckenridge.

“Only that it has wings,” answered Jones.

“Well, then,” Peckenridge said, “follow me. I think you’ll find this interesting.”

Jones and Ratwell followed Pekenridge across the laboratory, to a table on the side of the room, which held a hodgepodge of small machines, stacks of books and notebooks, and, toward the side, one large bird cage that contained a single white bird, sitting on a wooden perch. Jones assumed it was the Avignon dove.

“There she is,” said Peckenridge to Jones, then pressed his face close to the cage, to get a better look at the bird. “Quite a little beauty,” he said, over his shoulder. “She’s really doing quite well, too. Quite well!”

“Of course,” Peckenridge continued, turning to face Jones again, “you know the contents of the message, ‘Study me, your fate to see.’”

Jones nodded. On Jones’ arrival, Ratwell had immediately briefed him about the enigmatic inscription that the OSA operatives had discovered, written in a florid hand, on a tiny scroll that had been rolled up and inserted inside the cartridge.

“The bird you see in this cage,” Peckenridge began, “has a biological age of about thirty six months. That’s young, for a bird of this species. As it happens, this bird is fit as well as young.”

“You say it ‘has a biological age of about thirty six months,’” repeated Jones. “You mean, it’s about thirty six months old?”

Peckenridge, glancing at Ratwell, answered, “I do not mean it’s about thirty six months old! It’s possible to determine, from the structure of the beak and of certain cartilaginous masses on the feet, and from certain other modes of microscopic examination, that this bird has an actual, chronological age of over fifteen years! Major Jones, fifteen years is the life expectancy of a white dove. This bird should be in the advanced stages of senescence. Its eyes, its lungs, its circulatory system, its internal organs, should be shot to hell. But they’re not! Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Are you saying,” asked Jones, slowly, measuring his words, “that this bird was old and was made young again?”

“That’s right!” Peckinridge said. “We wouldn’t have noticed anything, except for the note. I mean, it just looked like a young bird. Perfectly normal. And our first tests didn’t show anything unusual, either. It was only because the General kept pushing—thank God you did, General—that we finally struck on the anomalies.”

“So this is supposed to be our fate?” Jones said to Ratwell. “To recover our youth, when we grow old?”

“It doesn’t seem,” said Ratwell, “like much of threat, does it? I keep asking myself, ‘What are we missing?’ But I don’t know! I just don’t know.”

“Obviously,” Jones asked, rhetorically, “these are the fruits of Professor Kinmore’s work in embryonic stem cell research, based on the hypotheses of Roger Bacon?”

“It would seem so,” agreed Peckinridge. “We’ve lost all of his records and all of his notes. But, from the little we can piece together, we know he had reached the stage where testing was possible.”

Jones looked at the bird in the cage. It seemed like an ordinary dove, cute, bright eyed, preening its feathers, sucking up water from its little dispenser, the way pigeons alone did, unlike any other birds. But he knew that this bird was indeed a remarkable creature. It was, however, a singular one. Jones knew how unpredictable, how uncontrollable, embryonic stem cell induced transformations were. This trial had been a success. But how many failures had fallen by the way in order to achieve it?

Ratwell and Jones left the laboratory building together, stepping out into the sunshine, cutting through the now blustering December winds to cross the quad to enter “Topkapi,” the cafeteria that serviced OSA personal in the compound.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Ratwell, stirring his coffee.

“I think we’re missing something,” said Jones, taking a long drink from his cup.

“Is that all you can say?” rejoined Ratwell. “I show you rejuvenation in action, and you comment, ‘I think we’re missing something?’”

“Sorry,” Jones answered. “It is impressive, damned impressive! But—and this idea is just coming to me now—do we know how stable this transformation is?”

“How stable it is?” asked Ratwell. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Jones explained, “the rejuvenation effected by the embryonic stem cell interpolations—and I’m assuming it was accomplished by means of some sort of viral vector—isn’t necessarily permanent. You are aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Well, no,” confessed Ratwell. “I thought the bird was young now, and that was that. Are you saying that it could just, well, become old again?”

“I’m no expert on stem cell research,” continued Jones. “I’m not sure, but I don’t think that the change would just reverse itself without some external trigger. What I’m saying is that, perhaps that bird has been programmed to break down at a certain point. Programmed to begin a process of catastrophic senescence.”

“But what makes you suspect that’s going to happen?” asked Ratwell.

“Study me, your fate to see,” quoted Jones. “I just had a vision of what that fate would have to be, assuming that there’s a threat underlying this big show.”

Ratwell fell silent, pondering Jones’ words.

“So, you’re saying,” Ratwell finally responded, “that, although this dove was made young to prove to us that our adversaries have the power to make people young, its real purpose is to scare us, when it suddenly becomes old and dies—proving that they have the power to infect the world with the disease of old age?”

“That’s what I think,” said Jones.

“If it were anyone else making these statements,” said Ratwell, “I’d laugh them off. Because, boy, are they out in left field. After all, you don’t have a shred of evidence for what you’re saying! But because they’re coming from you, I have to listen. Did I ever tell you, Gil, that you have the most powerful mind I’ve encountered in twenty-five years of service with the OSA? And that’s saying something! The OSA has a way of gathering some extraordinary talents unto itself. After all, that’s what makes it work: The genius of its personnel! We don’t have battalions of tanks or fleets of ships or squadrons of fighter planes or tens of thousands of men at arms. Nevertheless, we are the ones who often shape the way the world moves. We’re smart bastards, let’s face it Gil! And you,” Ratwell, added, staring at Gil pointedly, “are the best goddamned brain we’ve got. So,” he continued, “when you talk, I listen. If you say we should look for programmed senescence, I’m going to tell Pekenridge to start looking for programmed senescence.”

Once Pekenridge knew what he was looking for, it didn’t take long to find it. Hidden within the cell structure of the dove was a structure that appeared at first to have no purpose, but, on more careful examination, was revealed to be a senescence mechanism with a telomeric trigger. As cells divide, they lose little bits from their telomeres, the caps on the ends of their chromosome chains. These losses were, in fact, associated with aging, because, once the telomeres had been entirely worn away, additional cell divisions began to erode the actual chromosomes themselves, that is, they began to destroy the genes and, with them, the information they carried. This process introduced “noise” and confusion into the transmission of information that, finally, resulted in the imperfect replication of cell structures. The breakdowns cause the changes to the body we refer to as “aging,” leading, ultimately, to the death of the

organism. When a given stage of telomeric shorting had been reached, some of the dove's cells—specifically, those in its epidermal tissue—had been programmed to initiate a cascading sequence of accelerated senescence. As best Pekenridge could tell, the aging would occur in the nervous and cardiovascular systems. Pekenridge admired the adroitness of the genetic techniques that had been employed. He was certain that some of the leading scientists in the field must have had a hand in the work, and he wondered who they had been.

In any case, Pekenridge now knew that the dove's cells contained a kind of time bomb. When it went off, the bird would suddenly age with great rapidity and die. Pekenridge couldn't determine exactly when the process had been programmed to begin; but, from his microscopic examination of the shortening cell tips, he knew it couldn't be long before it started. As Jones had suspected, this turn of affairs gave an altered meaning to the message, "Study me, your fate to see."

"I've got to get moving," Jones told Ratwell, as they stood together on the pavement, and he prepared to board the staff car that was to take him to the airport to meet Suzanne. "It's not only a question of recovering the stolen manuscripts and computer files. It's more important than ever that we find and destroy the labs where that work was done. Somebody's getting ready to do something with that rejuvenation and senescence technology. It's a matter of time now, and the clock is ticking. We've had a little grace period—but it's about to expire!"

"Good luck, Gil!" said Ratwell. "You're sure you want to take Suzanne Sebonne with you? I can assign you another operative, someone with more experience."

"Sebonne is ready," Jones explained. "She's smart. She has nerve. She thinks fast. And she's familiar with the operation. We worked together in Avignon for over a week. Besides, I

hate to admit it, but we've both become decoys, since our picture was taken in Avignon.

Objectively, it makes sense for us to go together.”

“Objectively?” repeated Ratwell. “You sound as if you have personal misgivings?”

“You dragged me back into this work, General,” said Jones. “She’s so young, so full of life, so beautiful! Do you really think I like the idea of bringing her into this mess?”

“I’m sorry, Gil,” answered Ratwell, softly. “But, please, don’t get too involved. You know it’s a bad idea.”

Jones stared at Ratwell and said nothing. Eyeing the tough, older man, he wondered if Ratwell had ever tried not to “get too involved” with a woman as compelling as Suzanne.

“You’ll have our full support,” continued Ratwell. “Anything you want. I mean men, money, arms—anything. Just let me know, and it’s yours.”

“Thanks, Craig,” said Jones.

They shook hands and Jones entered the car, which sped away.

Suzanne, wearing a snug pullover pink sweater and blue jeans, her shining black hair drawn back in a ponytail, looked like a college girl to Jones, as she jumped from her seat and sprinted towards him in the airport waiting lounge.

“So, now you’ve become as a child!” said Jones, as she threw her arms around him, and he embraced her tightly as well. “That’s all I need!”

“Whatever do you mean?” said Suzanne, disengaging herself and leading him by the hand, back to where she had been sitting with her suitcase.

“I mean, you’re beautiful!” answered Jones. “Too bad we aren’t on holiday. But we aren’t. We have serious work to do. And I just found out how serious.”

Jones and Suzanne checked into a small suite in the Stanhope Hotel on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, one of the finer luxury hotels in the city and Jones' favorite. And, after all, why not enjoy themselves as much as possible? thought Jones, looking over their elegantly decorated rooms approvingly.

“Mon dieu!” exclaimed Suzanne, dashing to the window, which overlooked Central Park and offered a prospect of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a couple of short blocks to the south. “You like to travel in style, I see.”

“Nothing but the best for my little vixen,” answered Jones.

“And only one bedroom, for both of us, I see?” said Suzanne, confronting Jones, with a naughty smile on her face.

“Yes,” agreed Jones. “But there are two beds, as you can also see. This is a security arrangement. I can't let you out of my sight.”

Suzanne ran over and hugged Jones tightly.

“You never give up, do you?” Suzanne said. “I mean, always the proper gentleman!” She drew back a little. “If you weren't so sexy, I might have lost my patience with you. You do know you're sexy, don't you?”

Jones, embarrassed, pulled away, and said nothing.

“Our plan, as you know, is to find Jack O'Malley and use him to lead us to the conspirators,” Jones told her, trying to turn the conversation to their work. “OSA researchers determined that he lives and works on the Upper West Side.”

“So what do we do?” asked Suzanne. “Call him up? Drop in on him?”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised if our adversaries have contacted him already,” answered Jones. “Remember, they have our photographs, and they have a good reason to be worried about who we are. Right now, they’re probably looking for us as eagerly as we’re looking for them!”

The best plan that Jones could devise was to arrange to meet O’Malley in a public place. This plan entailed a considerable gamble. Jones assumed that his adversaries would be watching, presumably ready to strike from an unseen blind. If they intended to murder him, he would be presenting them with an excellent opportunity for accomplishing their purpose. Jones was speculating, however, that they weren’t ready to finish him off just yet.

Jones had appeared in the home of one of his enemy’s Avignon contacts, asking probing questions about their operations. The Avignon gang, as Jones had begun to think of the shadowy figures appearing in Avignon who seemed connected with the Baconian affair, knew only one thing about Jones: Jones wasn’t working alone. He obviously represented some powerful organization, almost certainly an arm of law enforcement. It would not be sufficient, therefore, Jones thought, for the Avignon gang and whatever group they represented, simply to get rid of him. Before doing that, his adversaries had to find out who sent him and what they knew. Otherwise, their entire operation could well be at peril.

And that meant a kidnapping—or an attempted kidnapping, Jones added to himself with a slight smile, reflecting that his adversaries would discover that abducting him would not be so easy, as he entered the high brass doors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Jones had chosen the Museum because the careful screening at the door meant that there would be no weapons, or, at least, a minimal arsenal—for it was still possible, he knew, for a resourceful man to sneak in a resin automatic, good for a single shot. Although, in theory, Jones could have used his official OSA identification to enable him to bring weapons past the

detectors, he hadn't wanted to call attention to himself; and, besides, he had good reasons for leaving all identifying information back at the hotel. Jones had arranged for O'Malley to meet him at one of the Museum cafeterias at two o'clock, when he knew the crowd would be light. As Jones approached the cafeteria plaza, which was in an airy space, arching over four stories high, the back wall of which was glass, with trees and greenery on the other side, he scanned the people standing around the perimeter. He was hoping not to spot any clandestine operatives. He saw only the ordinary museum visitors, walking this way and that, stopping to chat or to consult their museum brochures: The upscale international travelers, the young bohemian couples, the families with small children in tow, the middle-aged women, the art students, carrying their tablets and supplies, and the occasional older man alone. There, at a small table, by the appointed giant bronze sculpture of reclining Ariadne, sat a handsome young man, with a cup of coffee before him. This, Jones decided, must be Jack O'Malley.

"I'm Thomas Kempis," said Jones, walking up to O'Malley's table.

O'Malley looked up.

"Oh!" O'Malley said. "I'm Jack O'Malley. But I guess you know that, already."

Jones pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Someone's going to be joining us," Jones told him. "My colleague, Suzanne Taylor. As a matter of fact, I see her coming over now!"

Suzanne had timed her arrival a few minutes after Jones, to give her an opportunity to look the place over after he had sat down.

When she reached the table, both men leaped to their feet.

"Mr. O'Malley," said Jones to O'Malley, "I'd like you to meet Suzanne Taylor. Suzanne," he added, turning, "I'd like you to meet Jack O'Malley."

Suzanne smiled and extended her small white hand to O'Malley, who took it, trying not to stare at the young woman, who, he couldn't help but notice, had pouting lips, painted scarlet, that matched the red silk dress that hugged her torso. Jones helped Suzanne into a chair, and he and O'Malley sat down again.

Jones looked at O'Malley, who was dividing his attention between Jones and Suzanne. She's working her magic already, thought Jones, with satisfaction.

"Jack, if I can call you 'Jack,'" Jones began, "I think we should start at the beginning. You don't know us, and that makes things a little difficult. So, I'm just going to have to ask you to listen to what I have to say, and, after I'm through, make up your mind for yourself about what you think about it. Does that seem fair enough?"

O'Malley hadn't been at all sure of what to expect from Kempis. Schmidt had only told him to meet Kempis, if he were invited to do so, and to report about the meeting later. But, somehow, the last thing he thought he would hear from Kempis would be an appeal to his reason. He had assumed, he now realized, that Kempis would try to get tough with him.

"Yes, uh, yes," answered O'Malley, looking from Jones to Suzanne. "Listen, I don't even know why we're here!"

"Suzanne and I work for the Vatican," Jones told O'Malley. "We're on a confidential mission of a very critical nature. We've just returned from Avignon, where we were pursuing our investigation. This may shock you, Jack, but, when we were in Avignon, I was forced to go undercover as a Bishop."

O'Malley was shocked—and he showed it in his face—but not to learn that Kempis posed as a Bishop, a fact he had already been told, as Jones assumed that he would have been. Instead, he was shocked that Kempis was confessing this imposture to him so openly!

“I know what you’re thinking!” Jones continued. “But it’s not a sacrilege. The robes are just pieces of cloth. And I wore them for a holy purpose, even if I wasn’t the man they made me seem to be.”

“Thomas is a devout servant of Christ,” said Suzanne. “But he’s a soldier, not a priest. When the Holy Father asked him to help save the Church from a conspiracy to destroy it, what could he do? What would you have done?”

“I, uh, I—” O’Malley struggled to understand what he was being told. “You mean,” he said softly, looking back at Suzanne, “you’re on the side of the Church? You’re fighting for the Church?” He looked up at Jones, who sat a full head taller than he at the table, “I... don’t understand....”

“What don’t you understand?” asked Jones. “That someone you think of as being loyal to the Church sent you to this meeting to set us up?” O’Malley looked at him bleakly. “Yes,” Jones, seeing the expression on O’Malley’s face, continued his bluff, “we know about that! So now,” Jones leaned toward O’Malley, “this is where you have to make a choice. Tell us about the men who spoke to you about us.”

“You mean Archbishop Halderman?” said O’Malley, “and that other man, the German—I didn’t get his last name, but the Archbishop called him ‘Brandon?’”

Jones shot a glance at Suzanne: Score one for cold reading techniques!

“Yes, Archbishop Halderman,” agreed Jones, “that’s the man. I’m not sure about this Brandon, but I think I know who you mean. What did he look like?”

O’Malley described Schmidt as a powerfully built man of medium height with a crew cut, wearing a business suit.

“OK,” continued Jones. “As I was saying, this is where you have to make your choice. You can continue to play ball with Halderman and his cronies, people who are trying to depose the Pope and destroy the Church, or you can help us to save the Pope and the Church. So, young man, which is it going to be?”

“We really need your help,” said Suzanne. “You would be doing a great service for God and for the entire world!”

“When you put it like that,” answered O’Malley, “what can I say?” He put his head in his hands and fell silent. Then he looked up and went on, “But I still don’t understand, doesn’t Cardinal Donnelly know about all this? Shouldn’t he be told about this conspiracy? Wouldn’t he be the one to bring Archbishop Halderman and anyone else in the Advent, like that German guy, into line?”

Cardinal Donnelly! Jones knew that name. Was he the man in the red hat? Donnelly was a fabulously rich churchman, the venerated head of the Boston diocese. Could he be the man behind all the plotting, all the schemes? Could he be the man pulling the strings on the Baconian rejuvenation and senescence treatments? Could this be the man who wanted to be Pope?

“I’m sorry, son,” Jones told him. “Even Cardinal Donnelly is not above suspicion in this matter. It’s a terrible thing, but we cannot close our eyes to the truth, no matter how much it hurts. It might help us all if you would unburden yourself a little. Tell us what you know about the Advent and Cardinal Donnelly’s work.”

And so, O’Malley proceeded to recount how he had joined the Congregation of Followers, explaining that the Congregation members were a large group of Catholics enlisted by Cardinal Donnelly’s steering committee, the Advent. He didn’t know much about the Advent,

except that they were an elite group who took their orders directly from Cardinal Donnelly, and that many of them were high level churchmen like Archbishop Halderman. O'Malley also told Jones how his Congregation group leader had contacted him to ask him to go to Avignon to train a very special pigeon to deliver a message to the Palais des Papes.

“Very good,” responded Jones, when O'Malley had finished, again eyeing Suzanne significantly. “Of course, there are few surprises in what you've said. I'm happy that you've apparently decided to cooperate with us. You won't be sorry. Naturally, we'll keep our conversation confidential. I suggest that you do the same. If you're asked about what we talked about, just say we said that we were customs agents who wanted to know who hired you to train birds in Avignon, and that you told us it was arranged anonymously, in a very peculiar way, and leave it at that.”

Jones and Suzanne left the Museum in high spirits. They had learned a great deal. It even seemed they had put a face on their enemy: The face of Cardinal Peter Simon Donnelly, Bishop of the Boston Diocese, a man of enormous wealth who, it appeared, ran a large organization, the recent activities of which included sending a message to the White House with torn bits of a manuscript of Roger Bacon, stolen from Oxford University, and sending another message, delivered by a dove, which had been genetically engineered using technology, also stolen from Oxford University. Suzanne had said little, but done much, and Jones was pleased with her performance.

What they didn't realize, as they walked down Fifth Avenue in the late afternoon, hand in hand, was that Schmidt and three assistants were following them, at a distance of thirty or forty feet.

“I don't think our friends ever showed up,” said Suzanne, as they walked.

“Maybe they hung back,” ventured Jones, “and decided to make their play another time.”

Quickly, in near silence, the four men dashed forward to close the gap between them and the couple they were following. At the same moment as they came upon Jones and Suzanne, a car pulled up to the curb in front of the group. One of the men grabbed Jones from behind by the throat, another from behind by the arms, and a third stuck a gun, hard, into his ribcage. At the same time, Schmidt shoved a gun into Suzanne’s back, grabbed her by the left forearm, pushed her toward the car, the back door of which had swung open to accommodate them, and propelled her inside with a blow to her back.

With such speed that his actions could not have been accurately described by witnesses, Jones kicked the man with the gun, disabling him; broke the hold of the man who had been pinning his arms, knocking him out by punching him in the head; and reached behind his head with both hands and choked the man who had been choking him, until Jones released him, and the man fell to the pavement clutching his neck.

Jones whirled to face the car, but the door was already closing, and the vehicle was pulling away from the curb with a screech of its tires. Automatically, he memorized the license number. But he didn’t think that the number would really help in his effort to track the kidnapers down.

I thought of a kidnapping, Jones said to himself, dizzy with recrimination over his audacity in exposing himself and Suzanne to capture. But I thought they would try to kidnap me!

Then Jones remembered Ratwell’s warning, “Don’t get too involved. You know it’s a bad idea.” But it was too late for that now, Jones thought, standing to the side of the three fallen, unconscious and injured, men. A small crowd had gathered and the police would be arriving in

minutes, and he had better be on his way. But where, Jones wondered, as he started walking quickly down Fifth Avenue, losing himself among the press of pedestrians, should he go, where could he go, to get back Suzanne?