

Hit
Bruce McAllister

“If life is a ‘divine comedy,’ as many insist it is, who has the last laugh?”

I’M GIVEN THE ASSIGNMENT by an angel—I mean that, an angel—one wearing a high-end Armani suit with an Ermenegildo Zegna tie. A loud red one. Why red? To project confidence? Hell, I don’t know. I’m having lunch at Parlami’s, a mediocre bistro on Melrose where I met my first ex, when in he walks with what looks like a musical instrument case—French horn or tiny tuba, I’m thinking—and sits down. We do the usual disbelief dialogue from the movies: He announces he’s an angel. I say, “You’re kidding.” He says, “No. Really.” I ask for proof. He says, “Look at my eyes,” and I do. His pupils are missing. “So?” I say. “That’s easy with contacts.” So he makes the butter melt on the plate just by looking at it, and I say, “Any demon could do that.” He says, “Sure, but let’s cut the bullshit, Anthony. God’s got something He wants you to do, and if you’ll take the job, He’ll forgive everything.” I shrug and tell him, “Okay, okay. I believe. Now what?” Everyone wants to be forgiven, and it’s already sounding like any other contract.

He reaches for the case, opens it right there (no one’s watching—not even the two undercover narcs—the angel makes sure of that) and hands it to me. It’s got a brand-new crossbow in it. Then he tells me what I need to do to be forgiven.

“God wants you to kill the oldest vampire.”

“Why?” I ask and can see him fight to keep those pupilless eyes from rolling. Even angels feel boredom, contempt, things like that, I’m thinking, and that makes it all that more convincing.

“Because He can’t do it.”

“And why is that?” I’m getting braver. Maybe they do need me. I’m good—one of the three best repairmen west of Vegas, just like my sainted dad was—and maybe guys who say yes to things like this aren’t all that common.

“Because the fellow—the oldest bloodsucker—is the son of...well, you know...”

“No, I don’t.”

“Does ‘The Prince of Lies’ ring a bell?”

“Oh.” I’m quiet for a second. Then I get it. It’s like the mob and the police back in my uncle’s day in Jersey. You don’t take out the don because then maybe they take out your chief.

I ask him if this is the reasoning.

The contempt drops a notch, but holds. “No, but close enough.”

“And where do I do it?”

“The Vatican.”

“The Holy City?”

“Yes.”

“Big place, but doesn’t have to be tricky.” I’d killed men with a wide range of appliance—the angel knew that—and suddenly this wasn’t sounding any trickier. Crossbow. Composite frame, wooden arrows—darts—whatever they’re called. One to the heart. I’d seen enough movies and TV.

“Well,” he says, “maybe. But most of the Jesuits there are vampires too.”

“Oh.”

“That’s the bad news. The good news is they’re pissed at him—the oldest vampire, I mean. They think he wants to turn mortal. He’s taken up with some 28-year-old bambina who knows almost as many languages as he does—a Vatican interpreter—and they’ve got this place in Siena—Tuscany, no less—and he hasn’t bitten her, and it’s been making the Brothers, his great-great-great-grandchildren, nervous for about a month now. Handle it right and she just might help you even if they don’t.”

“You serious?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because she wants to be one, too—she’s very Euro-goth—you know the

type—and he just won't bite her."

No, I don't know the type, but I say, "She's that vindictive?"

"What woman isn't?"

This sounds awfully sexist for an angel, but I don't argue. Maybe angels get dumped too.

"Does he really?" I ask.

"Does he really what?"

"Want to be mortal again."

"He never was mortal."

"He was born that way?"

The eyes—which suddenly have pupils now, majorly dark blue ones—are starting to roll again. "What do you think? Son of You-Know-Who—who's not exactly happy with the traditional wine and wafer thing, but likes the idea of blood and immortality."

"Makes sense," I say, eyeing the narcs, who are eyeing two Fairfax High girls, "but why does God need someone to kill him if he wants to flip?"

He takes a breath. What an idiot, the pupils say. "Remember when China tried to give Taiwan a pair of pandas?"

I'm impressed. This guy's up on earthly news. "No."

"Taiwan couldn't take them."

"Why not?"

He takes another breath and I hear him counting to ten.

"Okay, okay," I say. "I get it. If they took the pandas, they were in bed with China. They'd have to make nice with them. You accept cute cuddly creatures from someone and it looks like love, right?"

"Basically."

“If You-Know-Who’s son flips—goes mortal—God has to accept him.”

“Right.”

“And that throws everything off. No balance. No order. Chaos and eventually, well, Hell?”

The angel nods, grateful, I can tell, that I’m no stupider than I am.

I think for a moment.

“How many arrows do I get?”

I think he’ll laugh, but he doesn’t.

“Three.”

“Three?” I don’t like the feeling suddenly. It’s like some Bible story where the guy gets screwed so that God can make some point about fatherly love or other form of sacrifice. Nice for God’s message. Bad for the guy.

“It’s a holy number,” he adds.

“I get that,” I say, “but I don’t think so. Not three.”

“That’s all you get.”

“What makes you think three will do it—even if they’re all heart shots?”

“You only need one.”

The bad feeling jumps a notch.

“Why?”

He looks at me and blinks. Then nods. “Well, each has a point made from a piece of the Cross, Mr. Pagano. We were lucky to get even that much. It’s hidden under three floors and four tons of tile in Jerusalem, you know.”

“What is?”

“The Cross. You know which one.”

I blink. “Right. That’s the last thing he needs in the heart.”

“Right.”

“So all I’ve got to do is hit the right spot.”

“Yes.”

“Which means I need practice. How much time do I have?”

“A week.”

I take a breath. “I’m assuming you—and He—know a few good crossbow schools, ones with weekly rates.”

“We’ve got special tutors for that.”

I’m afraid to ask. “And what do these tutors usually do?”

“Kill vampires.”

“And you need me when you’ve got a team of them?”

“He’d spot them a mile away. They’re his kids, you might say. He’s been around 2000 years and he’s had kids and his kids have had kids—in the way that they have them—you know, the biting and sucking thing—and they can sense each other a mile away. These kids—the ones working for us—are ones who’ve come over. Know what I mean?”

“And they weren’t enough to throw off the—the ‘balance.’”

Now he laughs. “No, they’re little fish. Know what I mean?”

I don’t really, but I nod. He’s beginning to sound like my other uncle—Gian Felice—the one from Teaneck, the one with adenoids. *Know what I mean?*

I go home to my overpriced stucco shack in Sherman Oaks and to my girlfriend, who’s got cheekbones like a runway model and lips that make men beg, but wears enough lipstick to stop a truck, and in any case is sick and tired of what I do for a living and probably has a right to be. I should know something besides

killing people, even if they're people the police don't mind having dead and I'm as good at it as my father wanted me to be. It's too easy making excuses. Like a pool hustler who never leaves the back room. You start to think it's the whole world.

She can tell from my face that I've had one of those meetings. She shakes her head and says, "How much?"

"I'm doing it for free."

'No, Anthony, you're not."

"I am."

"Are you trying to get me to go to bed with your brother? He'd like that. Or Aaron, that guy at the gym? Or do you just want me to go live with my sister?"

She can be a real harpy.

"No," I tell her, and mean it.

"You must really hate me."

"I don't hate you, Mandy. I wouldn't put up with your temper tantrums if I hated you." The words are starting to hurt—the ones she's using and the ones I'm using. I do love her, I'm telling myself. I wouldn't live with her if I didn't love her, would I?

"And I live on what while you're away, Anthony?"

"I'll sell the XKE?"

"To who?"

"My cousin. He wants it. He's wanted it for years."

She looks at me for a moment and I see a flicker of— kindness. "You in trouble?"

"No."

"Then you're lying or you're crazy but anyway it comes down to the same thing: You don't love me. If you did, you'd take care of me. I'm moving out tomorrow, Anthony Pagano, and I'm taking the Jag."

“Please....”

“If you’ll charge.”

“I can’t.”

“You are in trouble.”

“No.”

How do you tell her you’ve got to kill a man who isn’t really a man but wants to be one, and that if you do God will forgive you all the other killings?

She heads to the bedroom to start packing.

I get the case out, open it, touch the marblized surface of the thing, and hope to hell that God wants a horny assassin because I’m certainly not seeing any action this night or any other before I leave for Rome, and action does help steady my finger. Which Mandy knows. Which every woman I’ve ever been with knows.

When I get up the next morning, she’s gone. The note on the bathroom mirror, in slashes of that lipstick of hers, says, “I hope you miss my body so bad you can’t walk or shoot straight, Anthony.”

We do the instruction at a dead-grass firing range in Topanga Canyon. My tutor is a no-nonsense kid—maybe 20—with Chinese characters tattooed around his neck like a dog collar, naked eyebrows, pierced tongue, nose, lower lip. He’s serious and strict, but seems happy enough for a vampire killer. He picks me up in his Tundra and on the way to the canyon, three manikins (that holy number) bouncing in the truck bed, he says, “Yeah, I like it—even if it’s not what you’d think from a *Buffy* re-run or a John Carpenter flick—you know, like that one shot in Mexico. More like CSI—not the Bruckheimer, but the Discovery Channel. Same way that being an investigative journalist isn’t as much fun as you think it’ll be—at least that’s what I hear. All those hours Googling the public record. In my line of work, it’s the tracking and casing and light-weapons prep. But you know more about that than I do, Mr. Pagano. Wasn’t your dad—”

“Sounds like you’ve been to college, Kurt,” I say.

“A year at a community college—that’s it. But I’m a reader. Always have

been.”

How do you answer that? I’ve read maybe a dozen books in my life, all of them short and necessary, and I’m sitting with this kid who reads probably three fat ones a week. Not only is he more literate than I am, he’s going to teach *me* how to kill—something I really thought I knew how to do.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “You’ll pick it up. Your—shall we say ‘previous training and experience’—should make up for your age, slower reflexes, *you* know.”

What can I say? I’ve got fifteen years on him and we both know it. My reflexes *are* slower than his.

As we hit the Ventura Freeway, he tells me what I’m packing. “In the case beside you, Mr. Pagano, you’ve got a Horton Legend HD with a Talon Ultra-Light trigger, DP2 CamoTuff limbs, SpeedMax riser, alloy cams, Microflight arrow groove, and Dial-a-Range trajectory compensator—with LS MX aluminum arrows and Hunter Elite 3-arrow quivers. How does that make you feel?”

“Just wonderful,” I tell him.

The firing range is upscale and very hip. There are dozens of trophy wives and starlets wearing \$300 Scala baseball caps, newsboy caps, and sun visors. There are almost as many very metro guys wearing \$600 aviator shades and designer jungle cammies. And all of them are learning Personal Protection under the tutelage of guys who are about as savvy about what they’re doing as the ordinary gym trainer. They’re all trying their best to hit fancy bullseye, GAG, PMT and other tactical targets made for pros, but I’m looking like an even bigger idiot trying to hit, with my handfuls of little crossbow darts, the manikins the kid has lined up for me at 50 yards. The other shooters keep rubbernecking to get a look at us. The kid stares them down and they look away. If they only knew.

“Do the arrows made from the other material—” I begin. Do they—uh—act...?” I ask.

“Arrows with wood made from the Cross act the same,” the kid says, very professional. “We balance them the way we’d balance any arrow.”

“When it hits—”

“When it hits a vampire, I’m sure it doesn’t feel like ordinary wood. I’ve never taken one myself.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Actually, someone did try an arrow once. Deer bow. Two inches off the mark. I’ve got a scar. Want to see it?”

“Not really. How would it feel to *us*?”

“You mean mortals?”

“Right.”

“It would probably hurt like hell, and if you happened to die I doubt it would get you a free pass to Heaven.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Isn’t it.”

When I’ve filled the manikins with ten quivers’ worth of arrows and my heart-shot rate is a sad 10%, we quit for the day. It’s getting close to sunset, one of those gorgeous smoggy ones. The other shooters have hit the road in their Escalades, H3s, and Land Sharks and the kid is acting distracted.

“Date?”

“What?”

“You know. Two people. Dinner and a movie. Clubbing. Whatever.”

“You could say that. But it’s a threesome. Can’t stand the guy—he’s a Red-State crewcut ex-Delta-Forcer—but the girl, she’s so hot she’ll melt your belt buckle.”

He can tell I’m not following.

“A job. It’ll take the three of us about three hours. You know, holy number.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Two Hollywood producers. Both vampires. They’ve got two very sexy, very cool low-budget vampire flicks—ones where the vampires win because, hey, if

you're cool and sexy you should win, right?—in post-production, two more in production and three in development. These flicks will seduce too many teens to the Dark Side, He says, so He wants us to take out their makers. They'll be having late poolside dinner at Blue-on-Blue tonight. We'll be interrupting it."

"I see," I say. I'm staring at him and he beats me to it.

"You want to know what we eat if we can't drink blood."

"Yes, I do."

"We eat what you eat. We don't need blood since we came over."

"Which means you don't—how to put it?—you don't perpetuate the species."

"Right."

"Which can't make the elders very happy."

"No, it can't."

By the end of the sixth day my heart-shot rate is 80% and the kid's nodding, doing a dance move or two in his tight black jeans, and saying "You're the man, Anthony. You're the man." I shouldn't admit it, but what he thinks does matter.

When I get there, courtesy of Alitalia (the angel won't pay for Luftansa), the city of Siena, in lovely Tuscany, country of my forefathers, is a mess. It's just after the horserace, the one where a dozen riders—each of them repping a neighborhood known for an animal (snail, dolphin, goose—you get the picture)—beat each other silly with little riding crops to impress their local Madonna. There's trash everywhere. I've got the crossbow in its case, and a kid on a Vespa tries to grab it as he sails by, but I'm ready. I know kids—I was one once—and I nail him with a kick to his knee. The Vespa skids and he flies into a fountain not far away. The fountain is a big sea shell—a scallop—which I know from reading my *Fodor's* must be this neighborhood's emblem for the race. He gets up crying, gives me the *va-funcu* with his arm and fist, and screams something in native Sienese—which isn't at all the Italian I grew up with but which I'm sure means, "I'm going to tell my dad and brothers, you asshole!"

The apartment is not in the Neighborhood of the Scallop, but in the

Neighborhood of the Salmon, and the girl who answers the door is stunning. Tall. The kind of blonde who tans better than a commercial. Eyes like shattered glass, long legs, cute little dimple in her chin. I don't see how he can keep his teeth off her.

This is Euro-goth? I don't think so.

"So you're the one," she says. Her English is perfect, just enough accent to make it sexy.

"Yeah. Anthony Pagano." I stick out my hand. She doesn't take it.

"Giovanna," she says. "Giovanna Musetti. And that's what you're going to do it with?" She gestures with her head at my case. She can't take her eyes off it.

"Yeah."

"Please don't do it," she says suddenly.

I don't know what to say.

"You're supposed to want him dead."

She looks at me like I'm crazy.

"Why would I want him dead?"

"Because you want him to bite you—because you want to be one too—and he—he won't oblige."

"Who told you that?"

"The—the angel who hired me."

"I know that angel. He was here. He interviewed me."

"You don't want him dead?"

"Of course not. I love him."

I sit down on the sofa. They've got a nice place. Maybe they enjoy the horseraces. Even if they don't, the tourists aren't so bad off-season according to

Fodor's. And maybe when you're the oldest vampire, you don't have to obey the no-daylight rule. Maybe you get to walk around in the day—in a nice, clean, modern medieval city—maybe one you knew when you were only a thousand years old and it was being built and a lot trashier—and feel pretty mortal and normal. Who knows?

“Why did my employer get it wrong?”

She's got the same look the angel did. “The angel didn't get it wrong, Mr. Pagano. He *lied*.”

“Why?” I'm thinking: *Angels are allowed to do that? Lie? Sure, if God wants them to.*

“Why?” I ask again.

“I don't know. That's one of the things I love about Frank—”

“Your man's name is Frank?”

“It is now. That's what he's gone by for the last hundred years, he says, and I believe him. That's one of the things I love.”

“What?”

“That he doesn't lie. That he doesn't need to. He's seen it all. He's had all the power you could want and he doesn't want it anymore. He's bitten so many people he lost count after a century, and he doesn't want to do it anymore. He's tired of living the lie any vampire has to live. He's very human in his heart, Mr. Pagano—in his soul—so human you wouldn't believe it—and he's tired of doing his father's bidding, the darkness, the blasphemy, all of that. I don't think he was ever really into it, but he had to do it. He was his father's son, so he had to do it. Carry on the tradition—the business. Do you know what that's like?”

“Yes. I do.”

I'm starting to like her, of course—really like her. She's great eye candy, but it isn't just that. The more she talks, the more I like what's inside. She understands—she understands the mortal human heart.

“But I'm supposed to kill him,” I say.

“Why?”

“Because of—because of ‘balance.’”

“What?”

“That’s what my employer said. Even though Frank wants to flip, and you’d think that would be a plus, it wouldn’t be. It would throw things off.”

“You really believe that, Anthony?”

Now we’re on first-name basis, and I don’t mind.

I don’t say a thing for a second.

“I don’t know.”

“It sounds wrong, doesn’t it.”

“Yeah, it does.”

We sit silent for a while. I’m looking at her hard, too interested, so I make myself look away.

“Do I make you self-conscious?” she asks gently.

That turns me red. “It’s not you. It’s me. You look awfully good. It’s just me.”

“That’s sweet.” Now she’s doing the looking away, cheeks a little red, and when she looks back, she says, “Any idea why God would *really* want him killed?”

“None whatsoever.”

“But you’ve still got to do it.”

“There was this promise.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Sure. If you do it, He’ll forgive everything. They offered me that too if I

helped you.”

“And you said no?”

“Yes.”

She loves this guy—this vampire—this son of You-Know-Who—so much she’ll turn down an offer like that? Now I’m *really* looking at her. She’s not just beautiful, she’s got *coglioni*. She’ll stand up to God for love.

I’m thinking these things and also wondering whether the angel lied about her because maybe she stiffed him. Because *he’s* the vindictive one.

“There’s nothing I can say to stop you?” she’s asking. She doesn’t say “nothing I can *do*.” She says “nothing I can *say*,” and that’s all the difference in the world.

“Wish there were, but there isn’t. Where is he?”

“You know.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. He’s in the Vatican somewhere trying to convince those Jesuit vampires that it’s okay if he turns.”

“That’s where he said he was going when he left a week ago, so I’m sure it’s true. Like I said, he—”

“Never lies. I know.”

I get up.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

I’m depressed when I get to Rome and not because the city is big and noisy and feels like LA. (My dad’s people were from Calabria and they never had a good thing to say about *Romani*, so I’m biased.) It’s because—well, just because. But when I reach the Vatican, I feel a lot better. Now this—this is beautiful. St. Peter’s. The church, the square, marble everywhere, sunlight blinding you like the flashight of God. Even the silly little Fiats going round and round the circle like

they're trapped and can't get off are nice.

He's not going to be in the basilica, I know. That's where the Pope is—that new strict guy, Benedict—and it's visiting day, dispensations, blessings, the rest. I don't even try to go through the main Vatican doorway on the opposite side. Too many tourists there, too. Instead I go to a side entrance, Via Gerini, where there's no one. Construction cones, sidewalk repair, a big door with carvings on it. Why this entrance, I don't know. Just a hunch.

I know God can open any door for me that He wants to, so if my hunch is right why isn't the door opening? Maybe there'll be a mark on the right door—you know, a shadow that looks like the face of Our Lady, or the number 333, something—but before I can check the door for a sign, something starts flapping above my head and scares the shit out of me. I think it's a bat at first—that would make sense—but it's just a pigeon. No, a dove. Doves are smaller and pigeons aren't this white.

I know my employer thinks I'm slow, but a *white dove*?

The idiot bird keeps flapping two feet from my head and now I see it—a twig of something in its beak. I don't want to know.

The bird flies off, stops, hovers, and waits. I'm supposed to follow, so I do.

The door it's stopped at is the third one down from mine, of course. No face of Our Lady on it, but when I step up to it, it of course clicks and swings open.

We go through the next doorway, and the next, and the next, seven doorways in all—from a library to a little museum, then another library, then an office, then an archive with messy files, then a bigger museum. Some of the rooms are empty—of people, I mean—and some aren't, and when they're not, the people, some in suits and dresses and some in clerical outfits—give me a look like, "Well, he certainly seems to know where he's going with his musical instrument. Perhaps they're having chamber music with *espresso* for *gli ufficiali*. And of course that can't really be a pure white dove with an olive twig in its beak flapping in front of him, so everything's just fine. *Buon giorno, Signore.*"

When the bird stops for good, hovering madly, it's a really big door and it doesn't open right off. But I know this is it—that my guy is on the other side. Whatever he's doing, he's there and I'd better get ready. He's a vampire. Maybe he's confused—maybe he doesn't want to be one any longer—but he's still got, according to the angel, superhuman strength and super-senses and the rest.

When the door opens—without the slightest sound, I note—I’m looking down this spiral staircase into a gorgeous little chapel. Sunlight is coming through the stained glass windows, so there’s got to be a courtyard or something just outside, and the frescoes on the ceiling look like real Michelangelos. Big muscles. Those steroid bodies.

The bird has flown to the ceiling and is perched on a balustrade, waiting for the big event, but that’s not how I know the guy I’m looking down at is Frank. It isn’t even that he’s got that distinguished-gentleman look that old vampires have in the movies. It’s what he’s doing that tells me.

He’s kneeling in front of the altar, in front of this big golden crucifix with an especially bloody Jesus, and he’s very uncomfortable doing it. Even at this distance I can tell he’s shaking. He’s got his hands out in prayer and can barely keep them together. He’s jerking like he’s being electrocuted. He’s got his eyes on the crucifix, and when he speaks, it’s loud and his voice jerks too. It sounds confessional—the tone is right—but it’s not English and it’s not Italian. It may not even be Latin, and why should it be? He’s been around a long time and probably knows the original.

I’m thinking the stained-glass light is playing tricks on me, but it’s not. There really *is* a blue light moving around his hands, his face, his pants legs—blue fire—and this, I see now, it’s what’s making him jerk.

He’s got to be in pain. I mean, here in a chapel—in front of an altar—sunlight coming through the windows—making about the biggest confession any guy has ever made. Painful as hell, but he’s doing it, and suddenly I know why she loves him. Hell, *anyone* would.

Without knowing it I’ve unpacked my crossbow and have it up and ready. This is what God wants, so I probably get some help doing it. I’m shaking too, but go ahead and aim the thing. *I need forgiveness, too, you know*, I want to tell him. You can’t bank your immortal soul, no, but you do get to spend it a lot longer.

I put my finger on the trigger, but don’t pull it yet. I want to keep thinking.

No, I don’t. I don’t want to keep thinking at all.

I lower the crossbow and the moment I do I hear a sound from the back of the chapel where the main door’s got to be, and I crane my neck to see.

It’s the main door all right. Heads are peeking in. They’re wearing black and I think to myself: *Curious priests. That’s all*. But the door opens up more and three

of them—that holy number—step in real quiet. They’re wearing funny Jesuit collars—the ones the angel mentioned—and they don’t look curious. They look like they know exactly what they’re doing, and they look very unhappy.

Vampires have this sixth sense, I know. One of them looks up at me suddenly, smiles this funny smile, and I see sharp little teeth.

He says something to the other two and heads toward me. When he’s halfway up the staircase I shoot him. I must have my heart in it because the arrow nearly goes through him, but that’s not what really bothers him. It’s the *wood*. There’s an explosion of sparks, the same blue fire, and a hole opens up in his chest, grows, and in no time at all he’s just not there anymore.

Frank has turned around to look, but he’s dazed, all that confessing, hands in prayer position and shaking wildly, and he obviously doesn’t get what’s happening. The other two Jesuits are heading up the stairs now, and I nail them with my last two arrows.

The dove has dropped like a stone from its perch and is flapping hysterically in front of me, like *Wrong vampires! Wrong vampires!* I’m tired of its flapping, so I brush it away, turn and leave, and if it takes me (which it will) a whole day to get out of the Vatican without that dove to lead me and make doors open magically, okay. When you’re really depressed, it’s hard to give a shit about anything.

Two days later I’m back at Parlami’s. I haven’t showered. I look like hell. I’ve still got the case with me. God knows why.

I’ve had two martinis and when I look up, there he is. I’m not surprised, but I sigh anyway. I’m not looking forward to this.

“So you didn’t do it,” he says.

“You know I didn’t, asshole.”

“Yes, I do. Word does get out when the spiritual configuration of the universe doesn’t shift the way He’d like it to.”

I want to hit his baby-smooth face, his perfect nose and collagen lips, but I don’t have the energy.

“So what happens now?” I ask.

“You really don’t know?”

“No.”

He shakes his head. Same look of contempt.

“I guess you wouldn’t.”

He takes a deep breath.

“Well, the Jesuits did it for you. They killed him last night.”

“What?”

“They’ve got crossbows too. Where do you think we got the idea?”

“Same wood?”

“Of course. They handle it with special gloves.”

“*Why?*”

“Why kill him? Same line of thought. If he flips, things get thrown off balance. Order is important for them, too, you know. Mortals are the same way, you may have noticed. You all need order. Throw things off and you go crazy. That’s why you’ll put up with despots—even choose them over more benign and loving leaders—just so you don’t have to worry. Disorder makes for a lot of worry, Anthony.”

“You already knew it?”

“Knew what?”

“That I wouldn’t do it and the Jesuits would instead.”

“Yes.”

“Then why send me?”

Again the look, the sigh. “Ah. Think hard.”

I do, and, miracle of miracles, I see it.

“Giovanna is free now,” I say.

“Yes. Frank, bless his immortal soul—which God has indeed agreed to do—is gone in flesh.”

“So He wants me to hook up with her?”

The angel nods. “Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because she’ll love you—*really* love you, innocent that you are—just the way she loved him.”

“That’s it?”

“Not exactly.... Because she’ll love you, you’ll have to stop. You’ll have to stop killing people, Anthony. It’s just not right.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will.”

“Don’t think so.”

“But you will—because, whether you know it yet or not, you love her, too.”

What do you say to that?

The angel’s gotten up, straightened his red Zegna, picked up the case, and is ready to leave.

“By the way,” he adds, “He says He forgives you anyway.”

I nod, tired as hell. “I figured that.”

“You’re catching on.”

“About time,” I say.

“He said that too.”

“And the whole ‘balance’ thing—”

“What do *you* think?”

Pure bullshit is what I’m thinking.

“You got it,” he says, reading my mind because angels can do that.

Twenty-four hours later I’m back in Siena, shaved and showered, and she doesn’t seem surprised to see me. She’s been grieving—that’s obvious. Red eyes. Perfect hair tussled, a mess. She’s been debriefed by the angel—that I can tell—and I don’t know whether she’s got a problem with The Plan or not, or even whether there is a Plan. The angel may have been lying about that too. But when she says quietly, “Hello, Anthony,” and gives me a shy smile, I *know*—and my heart starts flapping like that idiot bird.