

Chapter 1

An Aunt in the Attic

Tony only went to visit his uncle because the man claimed he didn't have much longer to live and said something about an inheritance. Max was a lot like Tony's father, and Tony had no reason to want to relive any of that. He put off going until the weekend when he would have time to deal with whatever shit the old man stirred up.

Though it had been years since the last time they'd met at Tony's father's funeral, there were no pleasantries in this branch of the family. Max, who Tony had noted looked like he was on his last legs, nodded - indicating a chair Tony should sit in, and immediately got to the point, telling him of the one significant string attached to the impending inheritance. "You probably don't remember your Aunt Martha; she went into the hospital when you were little. It wasn't something we talked about - but with the end coming at me I got to let someone know and make provision for carrying on." The gaunt man paused, he seemed resigned. "It's a long story, and I don't know if I want to tell it at all." He looked Tony in the eye and said, "Listen good. I ain't repeating none of it. I guess it all started when she decided that she didn't want to have any children. I told her it wasn't her choice to make. Then she decided that she wasn't happy and wanted to go away and be a writer. Now, you got to remember that there never has been a divorce in our family and I sure wasn't going to be the first. Besides, I told her father I would take care of her. Having her turn into a beatnik wasn't in that agreement. She always was a little strange; I thought I could tame her."

Max stopped and used his inhaler. After a moment he caught his breath and went on. "Back then things were still the way they used to be; this doctor I used to play poker with, he

arranged it so she could go away to the hospital. Just to teach her a lesson. That was in 1967, I think. Plan was it was just going to be until she came to her senses.” He balled his fist and struck the arm of his chair. It was a feeble blow, but it reminded Tony of his father’s anger. The old man continued, “Martha was stubborn and fought it. I fought back. She took me to court, but a case of good scotch and the doc’s statements convinced the judge that she belonged there.”

“It went on and on, but I’ll tell you the one thing I’ve learned, that time will fly by if you give it a chance.” He shook his head, “So one year led to another and then back in ‘85 they told me to come get her. I guess being in the loony bin made her crazy because she didn’t recognize me or pretended not to when I gave her the chance to come live with me. She said some crazy things - still being stubborn, I guess, but she was on enough medication that she followed orders good and seemed pretty happy when she moved up into the attic over the garage. Having the aides from the ward along made it easier too. I made it pretty nice for her; the skylights helped a lot making the place ok and she seemed to settle in pretty good. When she came back she had two dresses, a sweater, and a box of papers. Over the years I learned what she liked to eat by looking at what she threw out.”

“You should get her mostly prepared food, canned soup, cold cuts and cheese and bread. Some things for salad, women like that stuff. Not much of a kitchen up there. Got a fridge though. I buy her one cake and one pie each week as a treat. The only thing she ever asked for was some paper and pens. I bought her a big box of paper and a bunch of pens and that was that. Last Christmas, gave her a sweater.”

He used his oxygen mask, sucking in a couple of breaths, and then went on. “She was always frail, so I heat the place good in the winter. Every week I half expect to find no garbage bag, the place stinking, and that she has gone on to the next world. But, since it looks like I’m

going first, you are going to have to carry on. I'm going into the nursing home next Tuesday and I'll need you to start taking care of her as soon as you can, today even - it's been a week or so since I had someone bring her groceries." He handed Tony some papers that were folded and wrapped with a rubber band. "This is the title to the house – had a lawyer do it up last week. It's yours, everything is taken care of, but you got to take care of her." He paused, and then added a final note, "Garage is open. Key for the door to the stairs is hanging next to it."

Tony could only nod, he was thinking too fast for words. As Max slipped into a doze he quickly read the papers and then let himself out.

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Tony was glad for his cell phone so he could call his wife from outside. "Jesus, Jeanne you got to come here. I got to do something and I don't think I can do it by myself."

"Where are you?"

"Over at Uncle Max's house, remember how I said he called and he wanted to see me? Well I stopped by. Look, I can't talk about it now. Can you come here right now please and bring some food with you, juice and some bread and a pie. No, never mind that - I'll get the food while you're on the way. It's important, come soon."

"What do you mean, 'Locked in the attic?'" Jeanne had that look about her that made him want to explain.

He pointed to the garage, "Up there. You know how I always told you my family was strange?"

"Let's keep it simple Tony. Who is locked in the attic?"

"My Aunt Martha."

Jeanne walked quickly up the driveway, faster than he was ready for. “How long has she been there?”

Tony did the subtraction, “I guess about eighteen years.”

That stopped her in her tracks. She shook her head. “No! Your f-ing family...I thought your father was bad but . . .” Jeanne looked up at the garage – then turned to her husband.

“Tony, you are going to let me handle this. You are not going to say a f-ing word. And if she wants to go in and take an axe to that monster inside, you’re going to find one and give it to her – do you understand?”

The garage was empty and silent; it had spaces for two cars, but held nothing except for a lawnmower and some garbage cans. An enclosed stairway ran up the back wall. The door at the bottom was secured by a heavy padlock. Remembering Max’s instructions, Tony found a key hanging on the wall. As he went up the stairs he was happy to see there was a bag of garbage on the landing. “Do you think we should knock?”

Jeanne shook her head, “She hears us.” As she opened the door at the top of the stairs she called out, “Martha. Hello Martha, We’ve come to help you.”

Because of the slope of the roof, the room was much smaller than the garage below. There was a bed against one wall, a wooden table with a chair against another and an easy chair more or less in the center of the room. Martha was sitting at the table on which was a small pile of paper. She was wearing a worn, but clean, blue dress, her hair was tied into a bun, and although thin and pale, she looked healthy. Tony guessed that she was about sixty, about five years younger than Max.

“It’s about time.” She smiled and looked at Tony. “I’ve been expecting you. I know you

didn't want to come, but it *is* time. ”

Jeanne walked to the table and then bent down so that her face was at a level with Martha's. “I'm Jeanne, this is my husband Tony, he's your nephew, but don't hold it against him. We've come to help you.”

“That's nice dear; I was getting a little worried. My pantry is getting a little bare.”

Jeanne reached in the bag of things Tony had hurriedly bought at the nearby convenience store and pulled out the loaf of bread. She scowled at his selections and said, “We've brought you food, but we can take you out of here to eat if you'd like to come.”

Tony who was still riding his relief that his aunt was well and not obviously demented, wasn't sure that was a good idea, but knew better than to interrupt.

It took Martha a moment to respond. “Leave here? Now?” She paused and looked around. “I know it's time, but I've been here a while, you know. The idea takes some getting used to. Where would we go?”

Jeanne replied, “Why don't we start with a walk in the sun? It's a nice day. We don't have to make any decisions right away.”

Martha picked up her pen. “Could I finish this sentence first? I'm afraid I'll lose the thought I had.”

While she wrote, Tony looked more closely at the apartment and saw small boxes stacked at the foot of the bed. When Martha finished and stood up, he gestured to them, “What's in those boxes?”

“Those? They are my finished books. Now I'll be able to send them off to my publisher.”

Martha had no trouble on the stairs, telling them that she had used them for exercise.

“Twenty times in the morning and again in the evening.”

“What kind of books have you been writing?” Jeanne asked as they walked down the driveway.

“Fiction. Some are romances I guess you would call them, I wrote them when I was lonely. But the best one I wrote when I was angry. It’s about how God sent another child to earth, but this time it was a woman and she wasn’t nice the way Jesus was. It’s my favorite. I’m almost done with the revisions. I had trouble keeping it from getting too long. You see, there was a lot of cleaning up that needed to be done – almost too much for one book.”

She paused and looked at the house. “I used to live there, you know.”

“Yes,” Jeanne said, “And you can again.”

This startled Tony who was just getting used to the fact that the house had been given to him - and he wanted out of the crappy apartment they were in really bad. But he realized that Jeanne was right. It wasn’t his house. It was going to take giving it back as a part of undoing what Max had done to her. Jeanne continued, “Max is in there. He is old and sick and will be leaving soon, in a couple of days.”

“In my book about the female Jesus, who I called Hosanna, I have a scene where she comes and visits him.” Martha smiled, “It was quite a visit, but it was only a preview of what is going to happen when he gets to the other side. Hosanna, you see, can put images inside people’s heads, and can make them feel pain. Jesus could heal, she can summon their demons.” Martha stopped and turned back towards the garage. “You know, I would like to read him that chapter.”

In the few minutes it took for Jeanne to take her back upstairs and for them to find the

passage Tony went inside and roused Max from his doze. The old man spat out the words, “You can’t do that. Don’t let her out. Is this the thanks I get for giving you this house?” He was frail, but there was still an angry force behind his words, and he had the same tone that Tony’s father had used to keep him in line.

Tony blinked, but said nothing as he pulled a couple of chairs closer to Max. He had figured out he owed this man nothing – and was about to say exactly that, when he heard them coming through the kitchen. The scowl on his uncle’s face had been replaced with a look of fear.

“Hello Max,” Martha said as she sat. “That’s how the scene starts when Hosanna, the Daughter of God comes to see you.” She opened the papers she had folded in her hand and began to read.

“Do I know you?’ Max asked, his voice holding that edge of scorn it usually did.

“No,’ she replied, ‘but you are going to understand just how well I know you.’”

“‘Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying,’ he started to close the door, but as he pushed it – it turned into a piece of fine azure silk which fluttered as she passed through.”

Martha looked at the shrunken man and took a deep breath. When she spoke again her voice was more resonate - it seemed larger than what could come from this small woman, “Hosanna said, ‘There is a second part to the golden rule – it will be done unto you as you have done unto others. And perhaps you thought that you could avoid that judgment until the reckoning, but I am Hosanna. I am the reckoning and it is now.’” Martha’s voice dropped back a notch as she went on.

“Max had nothing sharp or cutting to say. The words he had used as clubs all his

life did not come to him. Hosanna stared at him and sent a shiver into his soul. ‘Old, feeble and alone you will be. Filled with pain in your heart and in your mind. That was your living punishment. Then, just when you think it can get no worse and that death will save you – it won’t. Being buddies with a priest doesn’t help. In your hell you will always be wrong. Your damnation will be living with your mean, bitter self and not being able to believe any of the lies you tell yourself.’

Martha paused and looked at the man who had been her husband. “In the book Max falls to his knees and asks forgiveness. That was a fantasy. You won’t do that, your pride is too strong, besides you know there is no forgiveness, not while you are still mean – and you’re going to die mean.” A slight smile crossed her face, “One final thought – even though you don’t believe in reincarnation, that doesn’t mean your next life won’t be interesting. Karma’s a coming Max. Got your name on its bumper.” She folded the papers and slowly stood. Max seemed to have shrunk more in the past few minutes. She turned her back on him and slowly walked towards the kitchen.

It was a hoarse half whisper when he finally spoke, “Wait.”

Jeanne answered for her, “Too late - much too late.”

Chapter 2

Not Your Average Little Old Lady

As they walked down the block Martha said little. Jeanne and Tony refrained, as best they could, from asking questions. It was a beautiful day. The sun felt good and Tony was reveling in the possibility that he was somehow going to be able to walk away unscathed from this encounter with his dysfunctional family. Then Martha spoke again. “I am Hosanna, you know. Not always. Sometimes - when I need to be.”

Tony floundered for an answer, but Jeanne grabbed the right response. “We probably should keep that to ourselves until things get a bit settled.”

Martha nodded. “Yes, wouldn’t do to end up back on 17K.”

When they reached the end of the block Martha turned around, saying, “He’s had enough time to leave.”

Tony was getting ready to say something about how Max was going into the nursing home on Tuesday, but Jeanne put her hand on his arm and he held the words back and was glad he did. The way his aunt had said it was so sure. She was either batty – or really spooky. Leaving earlier meant...he decided not to think about that; adding it to a lengthening list of things he was not dealing with.

As they turned to walk up the driveway Martha said to Tony, “Go see to things in the house.” The way she said it made him even more certain that he would find Max dead. He delayed going in for a minute as he watched his aunt lead Jeanne back into the garage.

The end had come quickly, but not easily. Max was lying on the floor, his legs curled

up, pain etched on his face. A thin stream of blood had flowed out of his ear. His eyes were open as though he had seen death coming and it had taken him before he could blink.

Tony knew to call 911. “My uncle is dead,” he gave the address. He knew that they would introduce Martha as his widow. And simply say that she lived there too. The sleeping arrangements were no business of the police who would not care.

The cops took one look at his oxygen tanks and, after hearing Max had been scheduled to go into a home on Tuesday, canceled the call for an ambulance - instead asking what arrangements Tony wanted to make. He remembered the name of a funeral home they had used for his father, found the listing in the phone book, and called.

“Cremate the body. No services. No wake. I will distribute the ashes later.” Tony nodded, there was something about the way Martha said it that unnerved him, but there was no time for that. He turned and went back down the stairs and to the house where the Funeral director waited.

As Tony moved through the house after the hearse left, he pushed open the door to what had been Max’s bedroom. He didn’t want to go inside; instead he leaned through the doorway and took a quick look around. It was cluttered with the effects of a dying man, a walker, an atomizer on a table next to the bed, and a row of pill bottles lined up on the dresser. As Tony started to pull the door closed, he heard the sound of claws skittering on the floor. A second later a small dog burst from beneath the bed. His first thought was that it was a rat. It was small and had beady eyes. It was a mutt that combined the ugly features of several small breeds. The bowed legs of a bulldog, the low long body of a dachshund, the bug eyes of a bull terrier, the oversized tufted ears of a Chihuahua, a poodle’s tail with a pompom on the end, and coarse hair

that looked the dog had spent the morning sticking its tongue into a wall socket. It growled and launched its-self at him.

Tony slammed the door and heard the dog thud against the wood. He hadn't known that Max had a dog, though it made sense it would be as mean and ugly as this one. It scratched the door growling and barking in an unconvincing high pitch that never-the-less raised the hair on the back of his neck. Just another detail to be wagged he thought.

He came down the stairs to find Martha and Jeanne in the kitchen. Martha nodded when he told her of the dog.

"I'll call the pound," he said, "I don't think you will want it. It's the strangest looking dog I ever saw."

Before he could tell her about its apparent desire to rip him apart, she reached out and touched his arm. "Don't do that. The world is full of little jokes. What do you know about reincarnation?"

It wasn't really a question. Tony didn't know enough to answer anyway, so he kept his mouth shut.

Jeanne, on the other hand seemed to understand. "Not Max's dog, the dog's Max?"

"The dog's Max? I don't understand. That doesn't make any sense," Tony said, trying to edge back into the conversation.

Jeanne did not try to explain, "I think there's a pet store one block up on Oak Ridge. Go and get some food. And a collar and leash."

He added, "And a muzzle, maybe a dart gun with heavy duty tranqs."

Jeanne had already turned back to Martha; she wasn't listening and waved her 'whatever' gesture.

It took Tony the best part of fifteen minutes to catch and subdue the dog using a blanket. Even with a choke collar it kept trying to bite his ankles. Tony shortened the leash in his hand and extended his arm so the dog would lift off the floor as it rushed him.

The snarls became whines as he half led - half dragged it into the kitchen where Martha was sitting at a kitchen table. She looked at the dog, then smiled as she said, "Well here he is. What a bad little boy."

The dog's claws clattered on the floor as it tried to retreat from the room.

"Sit." The word sharp and brooking no resistance scythed across the room.

To Tony's amazement the leash went slack. The dog turned and, with a little whimper, sank to the floor. First his batty aunt tells them she is Hosanna, now she shows them she's a lion tamer.

"What's its name?" He asked realizing that none of them could know as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Martha looked down at the dog for a moment before answering. "When he's good we'll call him Maxie. And he wants to be a good doggie doesn't he?"

This is too strange, Tony thought. He had the wild thought of wondering if Maxie knew tricks, like play dead.

Jeanne must have been having similar thoughts, "Maybe we should not worry about the dog right now."

“You’re right. Open all the windows, will you? I want the smell of that man to be gone.”

It was an old house. Tony expected the windows to stick, but they all opened easily - some seeming to need only a touch. A breeze, strong enough to feel, passed through the house. He sensed Max being expelled.

Martha and Jeanne were in the living room when he came down the stairs. He sat as he heard Martha speaking to his wife, “In the hospital, in all the years, there was one good doctor. Though, to be fair, you never saw most of them. He was one of the young ones who were training there. He told me he couldn’t get me out, but that he could do the next best thing. He taught me how to meditate. He gave me some books too. Meditation came easily to me and I learned I could escape with it. Later, when I came back here I had things to do, writing the book of Hosanna foremost, so I was content to stay up there. Besides, Max was getting his due. He had a miserable life; I knew the end was coming. I started revising the last chapter yesterday. I will finish it tonight and then will leave that place.”

She looked around, “We have to clean this house out. I will need your help in that and many things. There will be enough money. Max was a miser. We’ll get the manuscripts typed and then send them to a publisher. The Hosanna book first, the others will have to go out under another name, maybe my maiden name - Martha Scott.”

The lawyer who had done the title change for the house had a small cluttered office on the second floor of a strip mall at the edge of town. He started out telling Tony and Jeanne that he had only met Max twice. He went a little pale at the news of a more legitimate heir locked away in the attic of the garage. Max had not thrown away any papers so they were able to show him the original marriage certificate. After insisting that he’d been sure the property transfer had

been legal, the lawyer agreed to settle the estate, though he voiced a little concern that the widow had been once committed. Jeanne and Tony had discussed this and agreed that Martha was remarkably well put together, if you didn't spend too much time on the Hosanna thing - which they didn't want to because it made them nervous. They did not mention any of it to the lawyer.

In 1967 Martha had corresponded with a woman named Sally Hester at a large publishing house. The name gave Jeanne something to enter into a search engine on her computer. To her amazement, she found that - after all these years and many mergers, the woman was still there.

The letter they wrote made reference to the earlier correspondence. It did not detail the intervening years, and was accompanied by the first chapter of the book of Hosanna, which Jeanne had typed on her computer.

The call came three days later. "I was just thinking one of those 'what ever happened to' thoughts about you. The sample chapter is promising. I want to look at the rest."

The following day Tony and Jeanne found creative excuses, took days off from their respective jobs, and drove Martha the hour and a half to New York. As they crossed the George Washington Bridge, Tony mentioned the once tall World Trade Towers and realized that they had been built after Martha had been put away.

As they searched for a parking garage Jeanne said, "It might be best to not be Hosanna right yet."

Martha nodded, "One thing you learn in the loony bin is to keep certain things to yourself. Sometimes you worry too much."

After her meeting with Sally Hester, which Martha described as being very brief, professional and noncommittal, they walked around Midtown for a while. She seemed to take it all in stride and Tony mentioned it. “I may have been confined, but in some ways I was free. One of my other books is about a cabdriver. So I was here a lot when I wrote it. As I told you, when I meditate I can go places. I may get some details wrong from time to time.” She pointed, “When I was last here, the stop lights had only red and green – it was a New York thing - the yellow is new here in the city. But most things are the same. The new buildings may be in different locations, but in my travels they were tearing down and putting new ones up. The reason he is a cab driver was because his last job had been in a building that they tore down.”

She stiffened and moved close beside Tony as a man passed. “That man is a thief.” Tony turned and looked, the guy was pretty ordinary looking - better dressed than many on the street, “A thief?”

She turned too. “Watch,” as she said it the man stumbled and half fell against another pedestrian. He caught himself, grabbed the man’s shoulder, recovered and quickly apologized. In a second he was gone, continuing down the street. As the man he had fallen against came abreast of them, Martha said, “Your wallet is gone.”

Instinctively the man patted his pocket and then turned. At the end of the block there was a screech of brakes and a thud. “Go back; I think he may return it to you.” Quickly the man looked at her, patted his pocket again, and set off towards the corner where a crowd was gathering.

Martha turned back and said, “That’s enough of the city for one day; don’t you think?”

It wasn’t until they were in the car and headed up the West Side Highway that Jeanne found the words for the question she had to ask. “Martha, back there, the man, could you tell me

what happened?”

“I think you know.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

Martha nodded and, after a moment, answered. “I was scared in the beginning; I thought that they might be right - that I really was crazy. It was the intense fear that first made me break loose from what the books call normal consciousness. One of the meditation books the doctor gave me talked about how it was like a ship untying the lines that hold it to a dock. Mine were broken by a strong wind. Once you start to float many things are possible – things that we lose in the clutter of daily life.”

Tony said, “So when you said you are Hosanna...?”

“I am. You could be too, perhaps not Hosanna, but there is a spirit hidden inside you too. It’s buried under a lot of things from growing up. Deep. Your father was a lot like Max.” She turned to Jeanne, “With you it is closer, not so far.” Then she smiled, “Relax, you two are good enough. You have little to fear,” She looked at Tony, – “except perhaps the way you sometimes look at that woman in your office.”

Tony’s ears went bright red. The car slowed some and swerved slightly until he caught himself. “I...”

Martha continued, “Jeanne, you need to give him more sex, it’s one of the flaws in men, and about the only way to keep a hold of them. And don’t worry, he hasn’t done anything.”

Jeanne laughed, “I know that. One thing about Tony, he can’t tell a lie if his life depends on it.”

“Comes from when his father trapped him in a lie and beat him so bad he needed stitches, but didn’t get them.” Martha said, “That’s the scar on his arm; the one he told you was

from falling off a bike.” After a second she continued, “Tony, it’s okay to be glad he’s dead.”

Tony focused on getting onto the George Washington Bridge without becoming a truck sandwich. When he could breathe he answered, “Yeah. Some days I know that.”

“Jeanne,” Tony asked later that night, “Have you noticed about the dog? It’s very strange. I mean when he’s with Martha he’s well behaved, but when I take it for walks, it turns into demon dog. I have to stay in the back yard, because on the street it lunges for anyone that comes even close.”

His wife took a moment before she answered, “Yeah, I’ve seen some strange stuff too. The other day I went into the living room and it was pawing at the floor in the corner like it was trying to dig. Maxie didn’t see me and then when I made a noise he turned and sort of pretended to do something else. I mean he moved around and would scratch the floor here and there. I know it’s a dog, but I swear it was behaving like a guilty little boy. I saw that all the time when I was the teacher’s aide.” She paused, “You know, maybe you’d better take a look in the living room. It was the corner away from the door.”

The next morning Tony pulled the rug back a couple of feet and squatted down to look at the floor in the living room. At first he saw nothing, and then he noticed that there was a little gap between the floorboard and the molding. Sliding the screwdriver in between he found it was loose. He moved to the end of the plank, inserted the blade again and pulled. With a squeak the plank rose an inch and he slid the blade deeper. Using a beam for leverage he pushed and the plank came loose.

Nestled between the beams there were two rectangular Tupperware containers of the sort

used to keep leftovers in the refrigerator. As he lifted the first of them out Tony heard the clatter of Maxie's claws in the hall. It gave him time to turn as the little dog rushed across the room at him. With a slap he brushed the small dog away, "No!"

The dog stumbled then got its stubbly legs beneath it. Tony was ready for another assault, but instead Maxie gave a little whine and wagged its tail. It was the posture he took when he wanted to get fed. Tony had the feeling that the dog was trying to manipulate him. He filed it under 'yet another spooky occurrence' and removed the second box. Laying the plank loosely back on the floor he got to his feet. The dog moved to his ankles rubbed against him and like a cat.

Tony had never had a dog while growing up. His father hadn't liked them and that was that. He felt self conscious talking to dogs in general, and this one more than most, because he was not sure exactly what he was talking to. Still he felt the need to say something. "Well this certainly makes the day a bit more interesting. Question is what did you want this for?"

He briefly thought of waiting for Jeanne and Martha to get back, but quickly decided against it. Knowing Max, it might be something mean or nasty. Maxie followed, subdued, as Tony went into the kitchen and set the boxes down on the table. The first box contained some cash, a couple of packs of twenty dollar bills bound with rubber bands that were brittle and broke when he rifled them. The impulse to take a few fluttered through his mind, but Tony looked down and saw the dog watching him. There were some papers, legal stuff, it seemed with blue covers, also closed with rubber bands. These he set off to the side.

The other box was heavier and had rattled some as he moved it. Inside was some jewelry, a string of pearls, a pendant and a few pins, the kind that went on dresses. They looked old. Some of the pins were large and heavy, he wondered if they were gold. He was sure they

had belonged to Martha. There were some more papers and at the bottom were a couple of dozen pieces of cardboard, which, when he turned them over, were very old Polaroid photos. They were so old they were quite faded and yellowed, but he could still make out that they were of a woman. Naked. He looked more closely; she was alone in all the shots. Most were set in crude vulgar poses, one of them seemed to be right here bent over the kitchen table. The faces were faded and indistinct, but he was certain they were Martha.

Not knowing why he looked down at Maxie. “Bad Dog!”

Maxie skittered under the table. Tony wondered if this is what the dog had wanted. Could this have been some blackmail Max had used in his fight to control Martha? He put the photos back in the box and briefly thought about keeping this part of the discovery from Martha.

Most of the legal documents seemed to be involved with the legal proceedings around Martha’s commitment so he put them off in the box with the photos. Tony suspected that Martha would be glad to see the jewelry, and the cash would help. But the other box was going sling some shit at the fan. He put the lid on that box and set it on the top shelf of the cabinet above the dishes. He wanted to talk to Jeanne about it before showing it to Martha.

After helping bring in the bags from the supermarket, Tony announced, “I’ve found something.”

Martha walked to the table and looked down at the blue topped plastic box. She hesitated, and then lifted the lid. Her hand dipped inside and emerged holding one of the pins. “This belonged to my mother. She got it from one of her aunts. My father tried to make her sell it. It was one of the few times she said no to him. I’m glad you found this.” She looked into the box, “Cash too, told you Max was a miser.” Then she looked at Tony. “What else was

there?”

He thought about lying, he really wanted to talk to Jeanne about it first, but there was something about the way Martha said it that forced him to answer. “Another box.” He took three steps to the cabinet. “This one won’t bring back good memories. I kind of think we should burn it.”

Martha nodded. “Probably. But you don’t have to protect me from it.” She turned to Jeanne, “I told you about some of the things Max did to try and break me.” She turned quickly and pointed. The little dog was edging towards the door. “Maxie, sit!”

The dog collapsed as though it had been struck. It lay on the floor quivering. Martha smiled. “As Max used to say, ‘Ha Ha Ha – who’s laughing now?’” She waved her hand, “Git. Get out of here.”

Maxie scampered to his feet and with the claws slipping on the linoleum, ran from the room.

Two days later the editor called. “I have six people transcribing and assembling the book. I’m reading the pages as fast as they can produce them.” She paused, “it is extraordinary. I am not sure exactly how we will do it, but, do it, we will. You see, this is going to be my last project before I retire. It also so happens you were my first project. It makes a wonderful circle. I was just an assistant to an assistant and was given the job of working with you to see what you had. Back then they did things like that. But you disappeared and I moved on and up. Until last week I had forgotten about you.”

Martha said, “When you’ve read it all you should come here and we will talk.”

Chapter 3

Tales From the Loony Bin

“Tony, do you remember the day we found her, how you started to say that your family was strange?”

“Yeah.” He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his shoes. “You kind of cut me off. Do you want me to finish the thought?”

Jeanne nodded, “I just want to know if there are any more surprises.”

He sighed, “I sure hope not. None that I know of. My sister got pregnant when she was young and they sent her away for a while. I was younger by five years – they kept me out of it. All I really remember is my father’s rage, he put his fist through a wall and my mother hung a picture over the hole. Nobody talked about it. I suspect I have a niece or nephew somewhere. I tried talking to her about it once when we went over on Thanksgiving a couple of years ago, but she got so upset I had to turn away.”

“Your family has a habit of sending people away.”

“You noticed that. And keeping secrets. Are you going to tell me that your family doesn’t have any black sheep?”

“Black sheep are one thing – your family uses a magic wand on them.”

Sally Hester arrived with an assistant two days later. “It’s good that this is my last project. I’m going to have to break all the rules. Coming out of the office is most unusual, but the work is so very different from most of the other things we publish. We have to get to know you. Frankly, I’m not sure what the best approach is. The work is very powerful, but at the same time it is,” she paused...

Martha interrupted – “Different.”

Sally nodded. “That’s one way of putting it. When reading it you are caught up in it all. I was totally engrossed. Especially the part when Hosanna first starts to understand that she has these powers. But when you put the book down and look around you say, ‘no way.’ One person who read parts of the manuscript called it ‘spiritual science fiction’.”

Walking to the center of the room, Martha said. “I think you need to hear where this story came from. It is the fruit of a twisted orchard.”

She took a step back so that she faced them all. “It was 1964, I was just married and I realized that being June Cleaver was not my destiny. I woke up and saw that I was married to a man who wanted nothing less than to dominate and control me. I had married him to get away from my father who did the same thing. But it hadn’t worked the way I had hoped and Max was determined that I was going to surrender my self to him. For a while I was able to have a bit of a life of my own when he was at work and he thought I was being a housewife. I discovered a talent to write and saw it as a way out.” She nodded towards Sally, “That’s when I wrote to you those first few times sending you samples of things I’d written.” The last letter you wrote invited me to give you a call if I was ever in the city.

“I hid the letter, but Max used to search my things and found it along with some stories I had written. He accused me of trying to leave him. And it was true. I just took too long.

“He told me that my career was to have his children and nothing else. There was nothing I wanted less – it was what had happened to my mother. Max was a powerful man who seemed to enjoy it when I resisted him. I quickly learned to go somewhere else when he had his way with me. After a while he tired of raping a rag doll, and he set about trying to teach me lessons.

You will find some mention of it in the other books I wrote. Other things I could not include.”

Martha paused and took a sip of water. “I was fighting for my life. He wanted a brainless baby machine, cook, cleaner and occasional punching bag. At some point he realized that hitting me wasn’t going to make me do what he wanted. At least if he restrained himself enough so I didn’t end up in the hospital. He had this doctor he knew sign some papers that put me in a loony bin. It was pretty common then. There were others like me there.”

Martha looked out the window. “It all started in this room. The doctor parked his car out there.” She pointed, “I remember he gave me a shot that made me really sleepy. We went for a car ride. I actually remember enjoying it – whatever he gave me made me feel good. When we got there he led me into this big, dark, drafty building built of stone and cement. The windows placed high on the wall had thick metal screens set inside them.” She spread her fingers and put her hands together to show the lattice. “Behind them the glass was dirty. I had to stand on tiptoe to see out and what I saw was another set of buildings like the one I was inside. I was lucky; this was after they stopped doing lobotomies. The ones they had done that to were still there.”

Martha shook her head slowly, and took a deep breath. “But they did other things, something called hydrotherapy that involved cold water. There is a lot to tell about that place. But not now - I need to move on, just think trapped in a nightmare. One that gets worse when you wake.”

“There was another woman, I try not to use the word patient because it would legitimize that place. Joan was put there her by her husband too. He wanted a divorce so he could ... That’s not important. Anyway, we became close. It was easiest to make friends with the ones who weren’t really crazy. Then one day they assigned a new aide to the ward. One look and we all knew he was sicker than any of the inmates – even the real crazies could see it. He decided that

he liked Joan. She was blonde and kind of pretty when they gave her shampoo and let her wash her hair.”

“At first he just paid a little extra attention to her, but soon he was checking on her all the time. Then one day he followed her into the bathroom. I was there too.”

Martha paused and looked out the window for a second. “I had been there about two years by then I guess. It’s hard to say, time got strange inside that place.”

She looked at Jeanne and nodded, “I already told my niece about the one good doctor I had there and he’d taught me meditation. When he left gave me some books so I could study it on my own. If I do say so, I got pretty good at it. Of course, being there was a little like being in a monastery - it really let me focus. I guess you could say I’d learned some tricks of the mind. Anyway...” she took a deep breath.

“So when this brute came into the bathroom I felt the enormous strength of his hate – it almost overwhelmed me until I removed myself using the meditation. It was like I was in a corner of the room,” Stretching her arm up, Martha pointed up at a corner where the ceiling and walls met. “I was there - watching and feeling as he grabbed for her. She was so scared she was about to give in to him, and then I tried something and found that I could slip into his mind. It was sort of like lifting the lid on a pot or opening a drawer. There are a lot of lids and drawers that we can’t see. “

“But I’m getting diverted. There was so much fear in that room... When I got inside, it was like being in a blizzard – but not cold – the temperature of vomit. I saw how sick he was. For a second I was terrified that I was going to get swept up in it, but then I heard Joan scream. I was there for her so I put feelings into him. Again, it’s hard to describe the how. Just happened, very fast, I made his dick itch so much that he stopped to scratch it. And he kept scratching it

until it bled. He would have torn it off if another aide hadn't walked in on him after a while. They led him out and we never saw him again. They knew something had been going on cause he'd ripped Joan's dress and she was curled up on the floor."

Remembering, she looked at the floor for a second. "When something happened they covered it up faster than you can say, 'nothing happened'. That was the one thing they were good at. They doped Joan up and put her on another ward. Sometimes I went to visit her mind, but she was pretty broken. The aide ended up on another ward. They had to keep him restrained. For a long time. Maybe even now, if he's still alive."

"I was spitting out most of the medication they gave us. So when I started having the dreams when I wasn't quite asleep, I got worried. But there were so many people hearing voices around there it was kind of normal." She was quiet for about ten seconds, which seemed like a very long time to Jeanne.

Her voice was deeper and stronger when Martha spoke again. "*Your talent is not to heal. Your talent is to stop the evil around you. You will know what to do when the times are right.*" She dropped her voice back to normal. Now, that's pretty scary here, but there on ward 17K where the steel doors clanged and everything echoed, it kind of threw me for a loop.

"The next day there was an incident where one of the patients went off in the day room. I tried to go into her head to calm her, but I could not. The voice spoke again, '*not there*', and my attention was drawn to the other side of the room where another woman stood. She was laughing.

"Her name was Rose, and she was mean. She would tease; she would bully you for your cookies and cigarettes. '*There.*' The voice said. Again I floated up to the ceiling. And then I slipped into her mind. This time I knew just what to do. I made her laugh harder and harder

until her ribs hurt and she peed on herself. She couldn't stand. She wiggled on the floor in the puddle she'd made. She tried to stop, but she could not. She laughed until the needle they gave her took effect. After that, whenever Rose tried to say anything she started to laugh. She would laugh until she screamed and they gave her another needle. She learned to keep her mouth shut."

"That night I had a dream. Or maybe I was awake. It's easier to say it was a dream – people will accept strange dreams." She paused and stretched and looked at her small audience. "Are you still with me?"

Jeanne took a deep breath, "Like nowhere I've ever been before."

Chapter 4

The First Reading of Hosanna

“‘*HOSANNA, SING*’ - I swear those words woke me up. You’ve got to understand, it’s never really quiet in the loony bin – even late at night. Besides the farts and the snores, there are the sometimes quiet cries of those both dreaming and awake. It all echoes and if there is the slightest breeze outside, it whistles and moans as it passes. So I was used to sleeping with noise around me. *‘You are the one. I give you the power to speak for me. There is a story that you must tell.’*”

“Long about that time a civil rights lawyer was assigned to the hospital. I wanted to get out of there so badly, a part of me thought I really was going crazy. I sued the hospital and Max. But the doctors had too much to lose, I guess, so they lied and I lost the case. I tried to get into their minds, but I couldn’t. I don’t know why. I couldn’t find the handles on the drawers. I was devastated. I withdrew. I spent two years hearing the voice and learning. The voice told me I needed to be there to become ready. That’s when the idea of Hosanna came to me. You see, she was me - when I was first locked up in that awful place.

“After a while, once I started getting strong, I cleaned up things on that ward. I made it so all the bad nurses and aides stayed away or transferred out. And some of the patients started to follow me. I became strong in a way they didn’t understand. That made me dangerous. A new doctor came and decided that I was cured.”

Gesturing towards the phone Martha went on. “They called Max and he came. I needed him, there was no place else for me to go until I had the books written. And I had a score to settle. Not exactly a coincidence that he had a really miserable life. I made him afraid and guilty

enough that he gave me all that I needed. At first, he wanted me to move back into the house with him, but he got the idea that it would be better if I was up there.” She nodded towards the garage.

“It took a long time to write the books. I would get diverted – I would rebel. I fought it – I wasn’t going to surrender to any voices any more than I would to Max. And if it was God talking to me, I had issues there too. Some of that shows up when Hosanna talks to God in the book.”

She took a deep breath and released it slowly, “The meditation helped a lot. I spent a lot of time traveling. I’m still most comfortable in the upper corners of rooms, but it pretty much does not matter where the rooms are. Then I would have another of those living dreams and I would get brought back. The anger of Hosanna is heavy. It hurts if you carry it too long.

“Max had a long spell of darkness and pain.” She gave a little shake of her head, “I may have got caught up in that. Vengeance gives little satisfaction. It’s sort of like stepping on cockroaches. The crackle they make gives you a little something, but then you have to wipe some slimy goo off your shoe afterwards.” She stood up again and shook her head. “Now that I’ve convinced you that I belong back on 17K, do we have anything to eat? It must be lunch time?”

After lunch Sally took a sheaf of papers out of her briefcase. “I think this is a good place to begin. She began to read, “School was boring, especially when Mrs. Drew substituted for Miss Pettico. Hosanna didn’t like the way she clapped her hands and shouted for them to get quiet.

Her book was open on her desk, but Hosanna wasn’t paying attention. If she

was asked a question, Hosanna knew she could answer it. She wasn't ever going to be one of those Goody Girls who raised there hands and squealed that they knew the answer. Instead she took a little piece of silly putty from its hiding place and made a little dog out of it. She was careful not to let anyone else see what she was doing as she made it as good as she could. Then she used the special touch and watched it move across her desk. Sometimes they didn't move so good, because she'd made the legs funny. Sometimes she made the legs wrong on purpose just to see what happened. Never quite got kangaroos right; they were always falling on their faces.

The first time Hosanna had done the trick with silly putty she'd started giggling and had wanted to show her friend Alex. But then she heard, "*Don't Tell.*" And she knew this was another secret.

There were a lot of secrets. Sometimes she was bursting to tell, other times they made her feel different."

"It's so lonely," said Sally.

Chapter 5

Hosanna's Childhood

She had never understood the vague answers her mother had given why she had been named Hosanna. Growing up amid a classroom full of Nancys and Marys and a ton of Susans she always felt a little wronged. It made her stand out and sometimes the mean kids in class would sing out her name. Hooosaaannnnnaaa. She hated it when that happened. Her mother tried to convince her that it was just one of the things that made her special, but Hosanna did not want to be special. Special kids had thick glasses and went to special classes and everybody knew what that meant.

One day, when Hosanna was in fifth grade and didn't think things could go any lower, she was walking home from school and, as they were passing a vacant debris filled lot, a dog came running at them. This was a dog that was usually chained up behind a house farther up the block and some of the boys would tease it as they went past. They used to make it run at them until the chain jerked it back. Today there was no chain. Growling, not barking, tail down - it was coming fast. The kids she was with screamed and started to run, Hosanna stayed in place. She could feel the rage boiling in the dog and knew she could hurt it because of the rage. Clenching her teeth Hosanna poured some of her own feelings back into the dog. She felt clumsy, but the dog slowed; then stopped. She found the way inside and pushed harder and pinched. In a second the dog was yelping as it ran away. Hosanna then turned back and saw that the other kids were looking at her. She didn't know quite what they'd seen, but

something told her not to take credit for it. “Oh that was scary. Tommy, did you throw that rock?”

Tommy hadn’t thrown any rock, he was too busy trying to run, but he was good at making things up about himself. “Yeah! Did you see that? I’m a hero.” He picked up another rock and threw it in the direction the dog had gone.

In the days that followed Hosanna experimented with that trick. There was Eleanor, a stuck-up know-it-all who always got a hundred on her spelling tests. The next one - she got a forty-five, and cried for the whole afternoon after the teacher returned the tests. Hosanna, who was glad to see the girl’s pride pricked, wondered if maybe she was being mean. It was then that she heard the voice again. It was soft, not much louder than a thought, but she knew it was coming from outside her. *“It will take time for you to learn to use your talent. Do not be afraid to try - you speak for me and that makes whatever you say all right. Besides, she needed a lesson.”* The voice made Hosanna even more scared. It meant that the feelings were real – and that she was the freak she had always feared she was. The thought was cut short. The voice was louder this time. *“Be not afraid – you have the power. You have a destiny – you alone can be proud because I have sent you and you are perfect. But you must be circumspect because you are not ready. There will be a time when you are known, but it will not be for years.”*

Hosanna felt a little better. She did feel stronger, but she was a little confused. “Curcumspect?”, she thought. She reached into her desk and tried to find the word in her dictionary *“C-I-R-CUMSPECT. Don’t let others know of your powers – not yet – that*

day will come, but not for a long while - you did good when you let that boy take credit the other day. In the future you can make others see things differently from what happened. By the way, that word will be on next weeks spelling test."

"Why did you do this to me?" She muttered under her breath

"You are Hosanna, my daughter, whom I have sent. You will act for me. Do not worry. I will tell you more when it is time."

That evening, as her mother was cooking dinner, she asked, "Mom, could you tell me more about my dad?"

"You know I don't like to talk about that."

Hosanna tried to accept it; like she had the other times she had gotten the courage to ask. It made her angry and for a second she thought about going to that part of her mind, but she knew she'd better not. "I think I met him today."

"What?" Her mother turned and put down the pot. "How could you? Tell me what happened."

"It's kind of strange, but there was this voice, he said I was his daughter."

When she'd told her mother that, she suddenly felt a little guilty. Maybe she wasn't supposed to tell. This wasn't circumspect.

Her mother moved to the stove and turned the burners off. Then she sat at the table and motioned for Hosanna to sit too.

Her mother started to speak once and stopped. Then, after a minute, she said, "I've heard that voice. I never told anyone. I wanted to pretend that it didn't happen. Maybe I was going to tell you when you were older."

She stopped and took a deep breath before speaking. "I was young and lonely and drunk and stupid. We went out to this commune. I remember lying out under the stars and later I think I went to bed with this boy I didn't really like. It was kind of hazy. Some of this you are too young to understand, but the next morning when I had the feeling that I was pregnant and I was thinking that I wanted to die, that's when I heard the voice. It said, '*The seed is mine – not his. Her name will be Hosanna and she will perform wonders. Be not afraid, I will care for you.*'"

Hosanna's mother looked at her, "pretty spooky stuff."

Hosanna nodded. "Oh YEAH!" It came out louder than she meant, but her mother only smiled.

"The next day I was calling around to get the name of a doctor and was looking for piece of paper to write on - and in my pocket there was a lottery ticket. I checked in the paper and there it was, just like it was on the ticket. I hadn't felt right about calling the doctor, especially because of the voice, and this settled it. It wasn't enough to be rich, but it took care of us until you started school and I could go to work."

* Dog segment - proper place? *

"I think I'll take Maxie for a walk." Martha stood and picked the leash off the table.

"But you just got back. I mean, do what you want, but . . ."

"I know what you're thinking Tony, and yes, there is something strange about the dog. It's just another thing that can't be explained if you are sitting down."

"Sitting down? What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing really. You could say standing up just as easily."

"Aunt Martha, you've confused me again."

“Not again, still. If you want to be correct. I’m not sure you can say you ever were not confused. And I can’t say I blame you,”

“What do you mean?”

“Come take a walk with Maxie and me. It’s a nice day.”

It was a nice day. The sun warmed without being hot, and the sky was the wonderful blue that seemed to cleanse the world. Tony had expected Martha to continue with the conversation, but after a couple of blocks, she hadn’t and he decided that maybe he shouldn’t pursue it.

Then, a little later, she spoke. “Your father was a lot like Max. He got a lot of it from his father, but that’s not too important. The thing about growing up for you was that you were never sure of anything. You never knew if your father was going to laugh or start swinging. If he said something was going to happen, like going to the movies, the chances of it happening were dependent on his remembering, not changing his mind and not getting drunk and passing out.

“When you did things you thought would please him, he’d often get angry. You didn’t know up from down, but, somehow, you knew what was right. Of course that still leaves a lot of room for confusion. Do you see?”

“No, not really.”

Martha chuckled. “That proves my point. Now, take Maxie here.” She pointed down at the little dog that was scampering on its stumpy legs trying to keep up with their sedate pace. “Maxie is getting a whole new look at the world. He’s learning what it’s like to wear a collar and have a leash jerk him back when he wants to run off. But he’s also learning that without that leash he’d be run over by a truck or eaten by the big bad dog that lives on the other side of the

park. But you know what I like the most?”

“What?”

“I like watching him have to lick his little penis. It was something he tried to make me do before he sent me away. My refusal was probably the straw that made him commit me. Now he can do it for himself. Somehow that’s a nice circle, don’t you think?”

Words did not come. Tony nodded then shook his head. Understanding was not the issue, he realized.

Chapter 6

Hosanna - Several years later

The boys were drunk. Being seventeen, they were already pretty stupid before they had started drinking. The date wasn't working out the way Hosanna had hoped it would. It was a double date and the other girl, Christina, was as unhappy as she was. Two miles up the road there was a tree that was scheduled to be their destiny. Hosanna knew had to stop the car now, but didn't quite know how. She searched for a way then, as she felt the tires slip a little as they went around a corner, it came to her. Diarrhea, she thought, and some vomit for good measure. Right now.

Steve, the driver, suddenly stopped laughing. The car swerved and slowed. The second they were stopped he was out the door, followed quickly by his friend Al. He didn't set the brake and the car rolled down into a gully where the wheels sank into the mud. Hosanna grabbed Christina's hand and led her away from the two boys who were gasping as they rolled in the roadside gravel. In less than a minute a blue car slowed and stopped beside them. It was Mrs. Orandy, the assistant principal. Before she fully understood the situation, another car stopped. It was a police car, driven by Clement, the nemesis of all the teenage boys in town. He was a quick study, "Take the girls home would you?" He looked down at the writhing boys with their shit-stained pants. "I think we're about to have an object lesson."

Two days later Christina came to her in the cafeteria. Hosanna usually sat alone at a table far from the swell crowd. The girl sat and, with her voice a bit tight from being

nervous, said, “I want to say that I know you saved our lives. The way he was driving we were going to crash soon.” She looked around quickly and seeing that no-one was listening continued, “There was a picture of my funeral in my head – I was too scared to even scream. Then I felt something happen. I don’t know how you did that, but it came from you. And then he stopped.” She smiled, “but it was perfect. It’s going to be a long time before they do anything like that again. Did you hear? They were so gross the cop wouldn’t let them in his car - made them walk all the way into town before locking them up.” She paused, as if waiting for Hosanna to say something, and then went on, “Look, I’m not going to tell anybody anything – except how big a jerks those two are. But, it felt like you did something and I’m grateful.”

Hosanna nodded. She wasn’t sure what to say. She didn’t want to acknowledge it because it would be admitting that she did something. But she also knew that she had to say something. “Pretty cool how things turned out.” She pointed to her tray, “Too bad we can’t do something for this food.”

Christina laughed. Hosanna wondered if she would stay and eat her lunch with her, knowing the other girl moved in an inner circle. She did, and they became friends. Though the friendship was always limited by what could not be said.

Chapter 7

Martha Explains

Martha looked at Jeanne and, after taking a sip of tea, said, “Sometimes I was sure I was crazy. When you’re in the loony bin, it is easy to get a little confused about things like that. I started the first book there. Nobody paid much attention to me; or what I was doing – and I was careful to put a paragraph of gibberish at the top of each page – so if anyone picked it up they wouldn’t think anything of it. Once I started writing, it just sort of came to me and kept coming. Sometimes when I was writing – especially the sections where God was speaking to Hosanna, I heard something or imagined that I did. It became very real for me. More real than what was going on around me.” She looked up, “of course you could make the argument that what was going on in the ward was not particularly real.” She shook her head, “anyway, between the writing and the meditation - time passed quickly. It also gave me an escape; a way to avoid being consumed by the lunacy.”

Jeanne asked, her voice a bit unsure, “So you heard the voice of God?”

Martha laughed, “I know better than to answer that. Actually, the truth is that it seemed real to me then. Maybe it still does now. I do know that that book came from somewhere. And, to use an analogy, if ward 17k was a patch of ground you would not expect much in the way of flowers to grow there. Poor soil, no sun and far too much rain. This book is certainly a flower. Tell you something, I think that a lot of people hear the voice of God, but it gets ignored or drowned out by the commercials on TV.”

“Was your mother like the Hosanna’s mother in the book?”

Martha smiled, “Now that’s the kind of questions the psychiatrists should have asked.

No. My mother was a woman who gave in to her version of Max. He crushed her – anything creative was gone. She smiled when she was supposed to, but she was not happy. Not really. Even though she tried to tell herself she was. Watching that as I grew up was what gave me the strength to not surrender to Max. It was what kept me going until that time that I understood that I was supposed to be on the ward even though it was unfair and I wasn't crazy and all that."

"Can you tell me about that moment?"

Martha looked at her wrist where there was no watch. "You know, I still look at my wrist even though I haven't worn a watch in a very long time. And I don't want one now. I'm better off without it. This story will take a while, but we'll have the time for it.

"The ward was either cold or it was hot. Never in-between. It had high ceilings and the floors were concrete covered with some linoleum tile. There were colored lines painted on the floor that led to places like the day room, the nurses' station and the dining area. The walls were hard. Think they were concrete. Painted two tones of green. Dark green down low to about your waist and above that they were a lighter shade. But it was old and was covered with a yellow stain from all the cigarette smoke. Back then everyone smoked. They gave them to us. Kept them from us as punishment. Sometimes the aides cut our ration and sold the extras on the outside."

"Like I said, the place echoed, even the soft sounds like slippers shuffling down the halls. There were big rooms and then there were the little rooms where we slept. The bedrooms had wide doors so they could roll beds in and out, but the rooms were small. There was a small window high on the wall; a fluorescent light and another window in the door with a sliding shutter on it so they could look in on you, but could shut it and close you off. In the rooms there was sometimes a little table and a metal chair. There was a plastic box to keep your things in. It

was clear so people could see if you had anything they wanted to steal. There was a stainless steel toilet in the corner. It was in the corner that they could see from the window in the door, by the way. And that was all.”

“Sometimes people brought in pictures; usually from last year’s calendars. But the walls were too hard and you could not put a tack in them, and, because of the grime, tape didn’t stick for more than a couple of days so the pictures were always starting to fall down with one or more corners sticking out until you put more tape on – if you could get any. When you minded the aides and followed the lines painted on the floor they let you out into the day room, but when they thought you were being difficult they kept you confined. I was difficult when I first got there, because I didn’t belong there. I wasn’t crazy.” She paused, and chuckled, “Of course that was exactly the wrong thing to say because it was what everybody said – even the crazy ones. And besides they really didn’t give a hoot. You were there – they were in charge - that was that. Like I said, it was a world unto itself with a different set of rules. And they made the rules as they went along.”

“The second day I was there I tried to use the phone at the nurses station to make a call. They caught me and locked me in my room for a week. I got angry and started knocking on the door and that pissed them off. So they, three of them came in with this big canvas thing with straps and buckles that turned out to be a straight jacket. They put me in it and tied it to the bed. ‘Scream all you want, the door is sound proof,’ they said. And they left me. They left the light on and there I was. Talk about being alone. I screamed, I cried, I prayed, I cursed and then I screamed some more. Then as I lay there gasping, the jacket was tight and it was hard to take a big breath, something came over me. Something rose up from inside - it was a little like that glow you get from a glass of wine, but it was much more powerful. It felt like I was being held

by God. The straight jacket no longer confined me. It held me but it was a protective shield. It was then that I realized that I had to accept things. And, as I did, things got easier.”

“They kept me that way for days. I lost track, but after a while I started to hear things. There was singing, very soft and far away. Then later, the voice spoke. At first I thought it was just a thought or that I was talking to myself, but I pressed my lips together and it continued.”

“It was sort of cryptic like God is when she speaks to Hosanna. ‘Listen to me, follow my words.’ And ‘Accept the gifts.’ Things like that.” She stopped and slowly shook her head. “I once read a philosophy book that explored questions like what is reality?” Martha smiled, “the woman in the room next to me was sure that the wire people had stolen her brain and put one of theirs in its place. She said that she could see them out of the corner of her eye and of course she could hear them when they taunted her. I felt sorry for her. I reached out trying to help her. It was one of the first times I tried to use that part of my mind. God spoke very directly, ‘Let *her* be, *she must deal with her own demons.*’ Then after a while she said. ‘*I sent Jesus for that sort of thing. You are not Jesus. You have a different job. You have a story to tell.*’

“You can imagine, that as confused as I was, I still had a lot of questions.” She looked at Jeanne, “you do too – but they will have to wait until later. I’m hungry. But I will tell you that some of this is in the book – maybe not exactly as it happened to me, but the answer is the same.”

Chapter 8

Hosanna Goes to College

At the community college, Hosanna had enrolled too late to get into many of the classes she wanted, so she signed up for Managing a Catering Business, Comparative Religion, College Algebra, and Yoga as a phys-ed credit. By this time her relationship with God had matured some, and was now frequently laced with humor. '*Your brother Jesus tried his hand at catering,*' the voice said, '*just think loaves and fishes.*' Actually, the course was a clever idea. The teacher used the students as free labor for her own catering business. At the first party Hosanna realized that God had not been kidding. Her job was to pass a tray of hors d'oeuvres around. After three minutes when the other waiters were going back to the kitchen, her tray was still filled. It also always seemed to have exactly what the person she was serving wanted. Often they were things not on the menu. Later, when she went inside the kitchen to help assemble the dinners, she never had to reach for a piece or a garnish.

She got an A in the course and decided that it was definitely a career option.

The religion course was another matter. Taught by a tired old man who knew it all, Dr. Eldridge would tell them how he had studied at the top seminaries and universities and how he often had astounded his learned teachers with his insights. In her first paper Hosanna made the mistake of quoting some Gnostic scriptures that had not been released to the public by the scholars who were studying them. She made the radical (for a level one course) point that Jesus had been significantly prettified over the years. She stated emphatically that he had performed some dark miracles and disputed

some of the central tenets of the four recognized Gospels.

The paper came back marked with “YOU CAN NOT PROVE THIS. WE DO NOT DEAL IN SPECTACULAR SPECULATION HERE!!! She got a D and realized that asking God for help on her assignments was probably going to get her in a lot of trouble. She did get some kicks though by sending some parts to an online bulletin board frequented by Biblical Scholars. This set off a nifty controversy which convinced her that the more people know; the less they understand.

Yoga proved interesting too. In her third class she was able to enter into a state so deep that the instructor called the paramedics. With a stethoscope they found that she did have a pulse – of 20 but that she was otherwise completely healthy. When she emerged, the shaken instructor offered her an A in the course if she would only go meet with his Yoga Master.

“Do you hear the voice often?” Hosanna’s mother casually asked the question one night as they sat down to eat.

“Sometimes there will be a lot, and then there will be weeks with nothing. I got an earful when I was dating Robert.”

“I’m glad; you certainly weren’t listening to me.”

“MOM!” Hosanna took a breath and quieted herself. “It’s not as though I don’t have the ability to see into the depths of his beady little brain. I knew exactly what he was, but he was funny and he had a way of making me feel good.”

“Look dear, I know all about how you can see inside people. If you can do that to them, you can do that to me and see that I’m just trying to do what is right for you.”

“That’s what she says.”

“She?”

“Yeah, I’ve decided that I’m calling God she. Haven’t gotten any feedback, so I’m going with it.”

“Funny I always heard it as a man.”

“Maybe that’s what you were expecting. Look, Mom, as Kermit says, ‘It’s not easy being green.’ Being what ever I am can be too heavy, sometimes I just want to be plain old me.”

“Yeah I can imagine,” her mother said. “You know, we used to talk about that.”

“We did?”

Shaking her head she pointed up, “That we. Before you were born. I still think it was a he – anyway he was saying that he was going to make you incredibly beautiful so that people would say “Hosanna!” when you walked down the street. “You know that means, ‘praise God.’ He seemed to think that was a neat idea.”

“It does sound like a guy kind of idea.”

“He decided that to make you movie star beautiful would go against what he wanted you to do. He said that he didn’t want you to get noticed until you were ready.”

“Ready for what? I can’t get a straight answer on that one.”

“I’m not sure either. I did get a promise that it was not going to end as badly as it did for you know who. He wasn’t going to repeat that mistake.”

“Yeah I hit on that too; said that it might be nice for Jesus to be hanging around all those rooms, but not quite what I would like to be remembered for. I did get the idea that it’s not going to be an easy road – that’s part of the reason I want to have some fun

now.”

Winter had set in. Hosanna was not having as much fun in college as she had imagined, and in many things she felt stifled. The pompous Dr. Eldridge put some questions on the exam that made it clear that he was looking for justification for failing anybody. Fed up with his petty arrogance, Hosanna answered the first question in Aramaic, the second in Koine Greek and the final one in Linear B. For extra credit she wrote, in Hebrew, a speculative paper on tracing the descendants of James, Jesus’ brother and the implications for modern religion if they turned out to have reverted to Judaism or converted to Islam.

When the grades were posted, the words “See Me” were next to her id number. As she walked down the impossibly long halls Hosanna regretted her impulsive notion to show off to this jerk. *“Congratulations, you’ve just found your first disciple.”*

“Disciple? No. Not him.”

“Think of it as a challenge. Your first job will be to straighten him out. It will give you a chance to practice.”

While walking to his office Hosanna searched for a reason to not go and almost didn’t take the last turn, but she knew there was no avoiding this.

The professor stood as she entered the small cramped office. There were books everywhere. Most were arranged neatly on shelves, but a few lay open on his desk and on two of the chairs. He hurriedly picked them up off of one of the chairs. “Please sit.”

His voice was different. Hosanna dipped into his mind, and found awe where there had been pride and conceit.

God's voice interrupted her thoughts, *'You are going to have to learn how to handle awe. Lots of people can't. He's a pretty safe one to start with.'*

Eldridge stared at her for a moment. Then he cleared his throat. "I've taught this course for thirty-seven years. To tell the truth, they all blend together and some years I don't remember at all. I know that I was just going through the motions. I've seen so many students come and go and have dealt with too many young people who thought they knew it all. I had dismissed your entire class as being absolutely ordinary. When I got your first paper, I assumed you had bought it off of the Internet. And then. And then, after three hours spent grading the most incredibly stupid boring answers to the questions I asked on the final..." He stopped and picked up her blue book. "Then I opened this. For a second I thought it was a joke. I am rusty in Aramaic, but I understood enough to know that I had to get out the dictionary. I was up all night. I translated it and the next from the Greek. You made me work harder than I have in years. And then I turned to the last question."

He touched the book. "I made a copy of the pages and faxed it to McBride in Jerusalem. He gave it to someone on his staff. And then at four in the morning the phone rang. The man on the other end, he said to me, "This is beyond us." Certain passages they could read - those made it seem authentic. Others confounded them. But one phrase astounded them. It gave insight into a passage on a broken shard they had been working over for a long time. They thought it might be a joke, but were sure if so - it was a joke pulled by postdoctoral scholars. He said, "Who ever did this - tell them

there is a position here.” The professor looked sad. “He meant it.” He paused, took a deep breath, and continued, “I spent my entire career hoping, even praying, for an invitation like that. I don’t like to think what I would have given for it.”

Slowly he slid forward, “I am an old man, a proud old man. I do not fall to my knees. Not ever.”

Hosanna reached out, “Don’t start on my account.”

He either didn’t hear or was past the point of being able to stop, so he continued until he slipped off the chair and, with a clunk that had to hurt, knelt. He was holding the blue book as though it was a treasure. “I could not tell him that it was a freshman, a part-time student at this school built of cement blocks who wrote this.” A tear formed at the outside corner of his eye. “I know that I do not have many more years. But I will gladly spend them as your student.”

Hosanna dipped into his mind again, he had shed all the arrogance. He had regained faith. God was right, this was her first disciple, but she didn’t know what the job specs were.

After a minute that passed slowly she said, “I too am learning, just beginning really. You will be a help to me.” She intensified the pain in his arthritic knees until he cried out. “Get up. I am not the one to be worshipped.” She said it loud and, she realized, inside his head. He struggled to get his feet under him. Hosanna took his hand and helped him up.

He sat heavily. She said, “I guess this means I get an A.”

It took him a minute to get it; then he laughed. It was an uncertain act; Hosanna knew he had laughed little.

She said, "There will be more questions than answers. That's about all I am sure of."

"Please tell me."

"I am Hosanna. I am a daughter of God. I have a mission that is not yet clear."

Then she winked, "Stay tuned for further developments."

Chapter 9

Hosanna takes a trip

Dr. Milton Hutch stood at the window of his wood paneled office and looked out on the winter-bound campus. It was a wonderful scene, perfect in many ways. The office was large, warm and wonderfully cluttered with books and papers. On the walls hung some fine paintings and a couple of framed manuscript pages. His new book was receiving reviews that were as good as possible given the contentious nature of his field. He was a big fish in a pond that made up in exclusivity and prestige what it might lack in size. As department chair he was able to command attention when he spoke. The seminary was regarded as one of the three premier institutions of its kind. There was a rarefied atmosphere he secretly relished.

He wondered why he was not happier. With his last promotion, he had moved to this office with the working fireplace and the graduate fellows who tended it. When that did not warm him sufficiently, he had allowed himself to move up to 25 year old scotch while promising himself that he would economize a little by drinking less. That had not happened, though he was sure that he was still a comfortable distance from being out of control.

He was advising six post doctoral students in their pursuit of academic niches with enough elbow room to support their careers. Though the research was, in most of their cases, leading in interesting and fruitful directions, he was not intrigued by any of them. Hutch worried a bit about having lost the joy of discovery. Was he turning into one of the ivy-covered professors like so many of the colleagues he quietly mocked

after the cocktail parties?

He turned back to his desk where the letter from Bill Eldridge sat. Bill had been a classmate at Harvard, and had been an assistant for the same mentor when they'd gone for their doctorates. A good mind, but not brilliant - he hadn't made it into the top tier. In fact, judging from the letterhead, he was on the far edge of Academia. Milton resisted the impulse to look up Ramapo College. He'd gotten a lot of letters like this over the years, classmates and former colleagues looking to use his placement at a leading institution to some advantage. Sometimes it was regarding publication, other times looking for a reference and occasionally to promote a student. There were fewer of these, and they were harder to turn down flat. Hutch had little use for games of self-promotion and upmanship that so tainted the university community. They were there for the students. Say what you would for furthering knowledge, it was the students who were the *raison d'etre*. He was indeed lucky that he only had to deal with the *crème* of the elite.

Normally he was inclined to look at such recommendations, occasionally they turned out to be promising, but this one gave him pause. A freshman at Ramapo College, even one who stood out, would not be likely to have the brilliance that was commonplace here. It would be like calling a high school player up for a tryout with the Yankees. He could have dismissed it out of hand, she was an undergraduate - he dealt with postdoctoral fellows, but there was something – something implied in the letter that kept him from tossing it aside.

Hutch felt the same impulse to explore that had once led him to match two apparently unrelated fragments of manuscript. The result, which became his first major

publication, had probably been the stroke that had kept him from ending up at a school no one ever heard of. It remained a cornerstone of his reputation to this day.

He picked up the phone wondering if he was doing this to give his ego a massage by showing off to his former colleague.

Hosanna was not impressed by the invitation. In fact, she wasn't sure that she liked the ambition that Dr. Eldridge had shown by writing to this man. At least he had not said anything beyond touting her scholarship. She wasn't comfortable revealing herself. She wasn't sure she should and definitely she did not know what she would gain, even if she somehow was accepted at the seminary. These people were very learned, maybe even wise and occasionally, she supposed, even holy. But she was not sure what that had to do with her. These were, she feared, the people who would become her enemies when she revealed who she was. She was not stupid. She understood just how seriously she could threaten their status quo. And it was status quo with hundreds of millions in endowment. It was clear that Dr. Eldridge was in awe of the institution.

"I'm not sure I am ready," she finally said.

He picked up the bluebook. "This alone is enough to get you a doctorate there; though usually the dissertation is the final step." He paused and raised his eyebrow, "There is a possibility they may have things to teach you too."

Those words got to Hosanna. She shifted in her chair. Though she didn't like to dwell on it, Hosanna was scared when she thought about all things that she did not know or understand. "I really wonder if these guys are ready for me – or if I'm ready for them."

"A trip in the country might do you good."

She had been half expecting an answer or a hint. "Didn't you already do the lion's den bit?"

"Humor me, daughter. Maybe it will teach you not to take yourself too seriously."

She refocused her eyes and found the professor watching her intently. He asked, "Lion's den', like Daniel?"

"Figure of speech," she stopped, "You heard that?" She wondered if he had heard the reply.

"Was I eavesdropping?"

"I didn't think I spoke out loud." She paused, "Look, we both know that something a bit unusual is going on here." She pointed to the exam book. "I don't know Aramaic, or Greek. Or I didn't before I took the test. And if I hear voices from time to time who isn't to say that I'm just a confused college freshman?"

He was quiet for a while then answered, "I would guess that it would be more comfortable to be confused than to have to deal with the ..."

"If you're looking for a phrase, media shit storm comes to mind."

He jerked a little, startled by the profanity.

"I've been quiet about this for a long time. Circumspect." Hosanna smiled at the memory. "That, it seems, is changing. I've told you. Who is next? Sooner or later it is going to get out. Tell me I'm wrong. This is a society that goes berserk when a movie star gets married or divorced or takes a gay lover."

"They may be so busy with that sort of thing that they'll miss the big picture."

She nodded. "I wish I could believe that. Still, I guess I'd better go."

“Did you get an answer?”

Hosanna swept her hand around pointing at the books on the shelves. “You got a manual for Messiahs there - or even a handbook for disciples?” She paused, “Thought not. Part of me thinks it’s best if a girl has some secrets. Another part of wants to tell you everything in the hope that you’ll decide I really am nuts.”

He smiled, “We’ll have time on the drive down.” He took a breath, “and we’ll pass close to a hospital or two if you need be put away.”

It took her a second. “Now that’s a genuine miracle. Tell me, when’s the last time you made a joke like that?”

He thought for a minute, “It’s been a while,” he admitted.

Martha had insisted the Jeanne come with her to the meeting at the publisher’s office. They were shown into a large corner office with a view that caused most visitors to lose their train of thought. Apart from the desk there was a table with eight comfortable chairs arranged around it. There was a pitcher of water, a small grouping of glasses in the center of the table. At each seat there was a folder that held a pad of paper.

After the introductions, Sally spoke. “We want to do this book, but there is some question as to the best way to promote it. While the work is powerful, has a message, and gives readers something to connect with on more than one level, we believe that if it is simply produced as just another novel - it will not gain all of the success that is possible.”

She took a sip of water and nodded to another woman who sat across the table. The woman stood and walked to an easel that sat near the door. “Martha, we feel that simply issuing a press release and sending you off on a book reading tour is the wrong way to sell your book.”

She paused, “Your history is extraordinary. We believe that if we commit to publicizing it, we can create a much deeper interest in your work. This is a business and if we can get people interested in you, we can get them to buy your remarkable work.” She paused, “However, this does require you to face questions about your past. To be blunt, are you crazy? Were you ever? How much of the book do you believe? How much is fantasy from inside the locked ward?”

Another woman spoke. “The nature of your work could certainly be controversial especially if it is seen as being anything other than a pure work of fiction. And that is pretty much assured.”

The man seated at the end of the table spoke, “There is some risk. We think we can reduce it, but if the media got away and cast you as a crackpot - then you might suffer personally as well as diminishing sales.”

Martha nodded. “You folks certainly know how to get right to an issue. I have spoken to Sally about this. I have not concealed anything in my past. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I believe in this book. If I have to show the fields where it was sown and grown, then I will.”

She pushed her chair back and stood. She looked down at Jeanne. “For the first time in my life I have people who believe in me. I know what it is like to be dismissed, to be ignored, to be treated as irrelevant.” Her voice gathered strength. “I am Martha Scott, a little not quite old lady who has emerged from a difficult life with a tale to tell. And.” She paused for a few seconds that seemed to drag. “This is really what we are here to talk about, I AM HOSANNA.” She let her voice drop back to its normal timbre. “Am I more a daughter of God than any one here? Or”, she pointed out the window. “There?” She shook her head, “I do not know.” Again she paused, “But I do know that I have had visions. I have been spoken to.” She pointed to the galleys on the table, “And what came out me were not the incoherent ramblings of a crazy

woman.” Martha walked to the window. She stood with her back to the group. Outside the window a very large, elegant seagull soared by. It banked on an air current and hovered just outside. Another swooped up and joined it. With their wing tips almost brushing the window they hovered only inches apart riding an unseen wave. She made a motion with her hands; they rose a few inches and then, with what some would swear was a wave of their wing tips, they slid off the column of rising air and were gone. After a minute she turned, “The first question is, do you believe me?”

She walked back to the table and sat down. It took an additional minute for the executives to find their voices.

Two started to speak at the same time and each differed to the other so there was silence again. Finally Sally spoke. “I, for one, believe. I don’t know exactly what I believe, but if we can convey even a part of that – we will have something bigger than...”

The man interrupted. “I was brought to this meeting to be the doubter. What I just saw was very impossible. I am a bird watcher. Those were albatrosses. They live in the Pacific and Southern Atlantic. I just added a species to my life list. Thank you.” He paused to take in a breath, “But, getting back to the best way to market the book. There is something very powerful I do not deny that, but I must say that it is something that we can’t control. It could become very big and go in directions we cannot imagine.” He focused his eyes on hers, “Remember, in the book when Hosanna went to visit the Seminary? She was not sure she should go, and, when she did, she found herself, on one hand the object of awe, and the object of an assassination attempt? The assassin heard the voice of his God telling him to rid the earth of false prophets. He pointed to the window. Do you have any idea how many people out there are going to hear that voice or one just like it?”

Sally answered, “We could edit the assassin out. We don’t want to give anyone ideas.”

Martha spoke again, “I trust in whatever or whoever it was that brought this book into being. I was just a device, just as I used a pen. Perhaps we could think that my muse used me. Take out the assassin, but I can’t be anyone other than who I am. That can not be edited.”

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When she was packing, Hosanna suggested to God that she consider a ‘miracle’ suitcase. “I would simply open it and find the appropriate clothes, clean, pressed, comfortable, and stylish to the degree Thou deems correct.”

There was no response. She pulled out a pair of dressy shoes. “How about making these comfortable?”

She shrugged and put them in her bag.

About half an hour into the drive, Hosanna asked the Professor, “How much do you want to know?”

Dr. Eldridge did not take his eyes off the road where two huge trucks were seeming to present an active demonstration of some of Newton’s laws. “I have spent my life searching for the truth.”

“Well professor, it’s about to bite you on the ass.”

“I doubt that’s a phrase that any prophet has ever used.” He was about to touch on a need for decorum when they got there, but at that moment another car, low slung and red, came out of nowhere, cut in front of the truck on their left and pulled behind them, seemingly inches from their bumper. The driver honked, flashed his lights and

waved his hand.

Hosanna said, "I hate it when this happens." She turned in her seat and took a good hard look at the man who flipped her the bird.

She sensed that the professor was going to try and move to the right – a chancy move given the truck that was in that lane. "Don't do that. That's probably what Jesus would have done, but I'm not him." She kept looking back, "This will take a second. Keep watching him, it will be worth it." Eldridge kept glancing in his mirror as often as he dared and after a few seconds saw a plume of black smoke coming out the edges of the red car's hood. In another second the car was falling back - the smoke thicker. And then the road rager was gone.

"Sorry that took so long, I had to advance his mileage thing so that the warranty won't cover it."

Eldridge looked back in the mirror then accelerated and pulled into the right lane. He looked in the mirror again and then turned his head towards her.

"Pretty cool huh?"

He turned his head back to look ahead. "I saw that. I don't know if I believe it."

"James Graystone is, at this moment, calling triple A on his cell phone. They'll tow the car to the dealer where he bought it six months ago. Everyone is going to be amazed at the way the cylinders kind of melted. Then they are going to tell him it's not covered under the warranty because he's got eighty seven thousand miles on the car. He's going to swear it's only seven, but it won't do him any good because they think he's an asshole too." She paused. "Now there is an interesting theological issue here. Is this a miracle? It's not what we're used to, but it has a lot of the required elements.

You do have to admit that there is an element of divine justice in it.”

He nodded, and then he laughed. “For just a second as the smoke was starting to come I got a look at his face. There was something else going on here. It was priceless.”

“I saw that too, it could have something to do with the voice he was hearing that was telling him that he should be ashamed of how he was acting and to slow down.”

“God’s voice?”

“Even better, his mother. He wouldn’t have paid much attention to God. It was exactly what she told him when he was seven and broke a toy by playing roughly with it.” Hosanna smiled, he sensed a smug satisfaction in her – a pride in how she was doing her job. “Then the smoke kind of drove the point home.”

The campus was stately. Large old trees arched above the drive, the stone buildings covered with the obligatory ivy seemed well rooted. There was an elegance to the heavy wooden doors and the leaded glass windows. A traffic jam cleared as they got to it, and they were exactly on time. The guard at the gate checked their names on a clipboard and assigned them a parking space in front of the building where they were to meet Dr. Hutch. Dr. Eldridge was a bit shaky as he got out the car. Between the exhibition of divine justice and Hosanna’s matter of fact revelations as to her origins, and her conversations with God, he was not really sure of much of anything. The incident had cured Hosanna of her nervousness. She was ready.

The office was up a flight of stone stairs and at the end of a long hall. Dr. Hutch stood as they entered and crossed to shake hands with Eldridge. Then he turned to

Hosanna. "I am pleased to meet you. Professor Eldridge says you are unlike any other student he has ever had."

She smiled, "The Scotch, even if it is single malt and older than I am, is only making the demons stronger." Turning towards the far corner of the office away from the desk, Hosanna blinked and immediately there was hideous creature crouched gnawing on a corner of the oriental carpet. "There they are. This is a one time only opportunity for you to face and kill them. I don't do healings, but I will tell you that you are stronger than they are and if you can hold on long enough you can strangle it.

The creature, combining the tail and claws of a rat, the torso of a mangy dog and the neck and head of an alligator looked up. Its eyes glowed red.

There was sweat on Hutch's forehead, "I don't understand."

"Yes you do. I'll hold your jacket."

Professor Hutch shrugged out of his Harris Tweed and turned to face the creature that was crouched and growling. Eldridge started to say something. Hosanna silenced him with a look.

Hutch took a step towards the creature. It began to wail. He stopped.

He looked back at her. "You have to believe you can do it," Hosanna said. "If you deny it - it will go away. For now, but it will return and consume you much sooner than you think. This is your only chance – believe me, it is God given."

The creature stood taller and rushed at Hutch who shouted, "God be with me", as he reached towards the flailing claws. The demon drew first blood and red seeped into the white Egyptian cotton button-down shirt. Hutch fell to his knees and enveloped the beast. They toppled and rolled towards the stone fireplace. Eldridge took a step

towards them. Hosanna put her hand out and stopped him. "You can not help." She paused, but "I'll give him a sign that he's doing good." The sound of a trumpet, clear and clean, cut through the room. Hutch paid it no mind. The creature snapped his jaws but they couldn't turn to reach the professor. Flailing, grunting, each making hideous sounds, the two rolled to the center of the room.

Hutch landed a blow that caused the beast to whimper, and, grabbing it by the throat he slammed its head down onto the floor. The creature kicked, Hutch lost his grip but regained it after the claws scratched again. Throwing himself forward he slammed its head to the floor. Hosanna moved forward and leaned down. She spoke into Hutch's ear, "Now comes the hard part. You have to take in all his hate and then expel it. Only then can you kill it."

The creature wailed; evil power tangible in the sound. Hutch moaned as it struck. Then with a shriek that rattled the windows he yelled, "I will be free." The wailing from beneath him diminished like a train whistle passing into the distance. They rolled around some more. The creature seemed to convulse, the spasms shaking them so rapidly they became a blur. Then Hutch suddenly was alone on the floor. His pants and shirt were ripped; he was bleeding from scratches on his face, arm and leg and a drop of sweat hung off the end of his nose.

He flailed for a moment longer. Then, realizing he was alone, slowly got to his knees. After locating his glasses on the floor he put them on and looked up. "Thank You." It was a sigh and a prayer at the same time. He started to rise, but then stopped. He took a look around. His gaze took in Eldridge, passed to Hosanna then he looked beyond her.

Hosanna nodded and a soft sound rose. Three angels appeared over his desk softly singing 'Gloria in Excelsius Deo'. "Is that the sign you're looking for?"

He nodded and slowly got to his feet. The angels finished the verse and vanished. There were tears in his eyes. He reached out for his jacket. "That was quite an introduction."

"Forgive the drama, but as a drunk you are no use to me."

He took a couple of unsteady steps to his desk, which he half leaned - half sat on. Taking some deep breaths, the last one held for a few seconds. He exhaled loudly. "My father. That thing, a lot of it was..." He took another deep breath and let it out with a shudder. "It is gone. Thank You. Thank You, God." He looked up at Hosanna. "I've got some penance to do for the things I did while that monster was inside me."

She smiled, "not my department."

Chapter 10

Hosanna at Princeton

Hutch took a couple of minutes to gather his wits, but once back in control, he regained his dignity quickly. Poking a finger through a rip in his trousers, he said, "I suspect I am a bit of a sight. I had arranged for you to go to dinner with one of my students. I will use that as an opportunity to go home and clean myself up. Afterwards, perhaps around eight, I would like to have another chance to get to know you."

Following his directions Hosanna and Dr. Eldridge walked through hallowed halls looking for the common room where they were to meet their guide and escort.

Her name was Eleanor Rafferty, having completed her Ph.D. at Yale the year before she was here to, as she put it, "Find the right vein to mine." Telling them at dinner she was undecided between studies of the very early Christian Church in Egypt and Syria or sects within pre-Christian Judaism and the effects of Roman occupation on them.

Hosanna asked why people were so interested in the extreme minutia of a society so long dead and buried. The woman answered, "These are the people who were there, the people who interpreted the words of the Son of God as they were recorded and passed down. To my way of thinking, the Christ who is worshipped today is very different from the man who walked the dusty, smelly streets of Jerusalem. By reading the original sources, or as close as we can get, by understanding how those people thought, we can see how the Gospels were interpreted and changed. From that we can get a clearer understanding of Jesus and of God."

Hosanna put her fork down and said, "As I see it there can be no understanding - rather - degrees of not understanding." As if on cue the door behind Eleanor opened. A tall man, thin almost to the point of being gaunt, strode in. He walked with a purpose and in something of a rush. Hosanna watched as he carefully scanned the room. He was, she knew without having to look inside him, ambitious. She also knew that he would be joining them.

"Ah Eleanor, I had thought that you were going to be dining with Professor Hutch."

Eleanor did not like him either, Hosanna saw. She smiled and nodded at Hosanna, "this is Hosanna, and Dr. Eldridge, the professor's guests. We will be joining him later."

It was not quite an invitation, but the man pulled out a chair and sat. Hosanna could see him trying to decide if they were important enough to be worth trying to impress. She decided to play with him a bit, "As I was saying, by seeing it as not understanding we can accept the confusions and contradictions that are, in fact, the essence of God."

The man looked a bit bemused, and was getting ready to give an authoritative answer, but Hosanna continued, "If the message was simple it would be clear to all. There would be no sects; there would be one universally accepted creed. But that is not the case. Either God is confused, or is having a bit of fun with us. Probably a bit of both I would guess."

He took the bait like a trout striking some feathers and fur bundled around a sharp hook. "I see doctor, you simplify things to the point of their being just an

amusement?" He paused, smiled, "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name. It is doctor, isn't it?"

"Actually it is not. And if you could get beyond the fact that your older brother used to push your face into the kitty litter, you might be more open to accepting the humor around you."

He opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out. Eleanor stared at Hosanna intently. Dr. Eldridge pushed his chair back and said, "Hosanna is my student. She has many talents and abilities that I do not understand, but I have come to trust. You, sir," he nodded towards the man, "could do with a dose of listening."

Eleanor jumped into the growing quiet that followed, "Can you give us an example of this?"

Hosanna nodded. "Sure. Beetles. In some ways they are God's perfect creature. There are more species of beetle than any other animal. They are an exquisite celebration of life, and yet most of mankind sees them as things to be squashed."

"Excuse me," the man's voice was tentative, "how could you know?"

Hosanna started to say something about the bits of clay still imbedded in his forehead, but changed her mind sensing it was not the right time to be flippant. "It shows," she said at last, "In your walk, in your aggressive needs. You must get beyond it or else it will hold you back for your whole life."

"Hold me back?" His ego overrode his curiosity. "I was first in my class. Always. I happen to be considering several excellent positions. Who are you, again?"

"You know exactly who I am. I am - a nobody. Someone beneath your notice - and that is the essence of your problem. That is the lingering damage." She turned to

Eleanor, "Could we get some fresh air before we meet with Dr. Hutch?"

Once outside, the woman spoke, "I'd like to ask the same question. Who are you?"

Hosanna nodded, "For starters, you are more interested in who I am than my degrees. That's good."

Waving her hand in a circle, she continued. "The answer quickly gets a bit complicated and confusing. There are matters of perception. To a psychiatrist I am certainly delusional, probably paranoid schizophrenic. To some of the learned men here I will be seen as a crackpot."

Hosanna looked around at the campus, "It is not clear to me why I am here. I am not ready to begin teaching. Still working on a syllabus. The last time I saw a burning bush it told me to gather disciples." She paused, "You ready to run yet?"

"Burning bush?" Eleanor replied, a note of skepticism in her voice.

"Well, not really, but if you talk about hearing a voice it makes people twitch a bit." Hosanna rolled her eyes.

"I've noticed that."

Hosanna nodded, "Yes - your Mom. You are doing well keeping it in perspective."

Eleanor smiled, "Thanks. My therapist agrees. So you can see other people's secrets, and there is a voice in your life. Anything else?"

"This and that, when it is called for. I don't want to do the dog and pony show twice. Let's go see Hutch. Just keep an open mind because our first meeting got a little

strange.”

Eleanor hesitated and put her hand on Hosanna’s arm, “Oh, look, I should warn you. I hope tonight is ok, sometimes this late he gets a little...”

“I don’t think so. Took care of that this afternoon,” Hosanna said.

As a fire crackled in the fireplace, Hutch, sporting a small band-aid on his cheek, said, “That was quite an introduction earlier, but, for the others, how would you describe yourself?”

Hosanna glanced at Eleanor, the man she now knew to be Ronald Snopes, and two other students. “Where should I begin?”

Dr. Eldridge suggested, “Why don’t you tell them a little about themselves?”

Hosanna nodded, she looked at one of the men. He was dressed in expensive casual clothes. “Here, they know you as Thomas. But, under other names, you are wanted for fraud in two states. In Colorado it involves the estate of Carol Gorham, who originally employed you as a gardener. You collected two million from the estate until some of the more legitimate heirs had someone look at the documents.”

The man kept his cool until she said, “A divinity degree from this institution would lift you to a new level, it would . . .,”

He stood and interrupted, “You’d better be careful making allegations like that.”

Hosanna shrugged. “You thought your new identify was clean. But do you remember Emily, the blonde you picked up the night before you left Denver? It’s a long story, but she took something out of your wallet when you were in the bathroom. One of the new business cards you’d printed up, ‘Thomas Farr –Theologian’.

“Emily’s shrink thinks taking little things like that is really significant, calls it a trophy fetish. But, sticking to the essential details, Emily got caught shoplifting and the police got the card.” Hosanna pointed to the phone. “In about three minutes there is going to be a call from a Detective Morris. He’s a real jerk -- totally anal. But he is really good at what he does. And what he does best of all is see through bullshit.”

Hutch, who had been watching the man’s face intently, cleared his throat to get their attention. He took a long, somewhat theatrical, look at the phone before asking, “Want to say anything before it rings, Thomas? If that really is your name.”

The man replied immediately, “Yes. Actually I do. It begins and ends with the notion of doing God’s work. That’s why I’m here. The same goes for you, Sir.” He paused and nodded, indicating Hosanna, “I don’t think that’s why she’s here. Besides, I don’t think the phone is going to ring. It’s an old trick.”

“I agree with him,” Hosanna replied, “at least some parts. When it’s a bluff it is an old trick. Also, I don’t think that God’s plan is for Bev and Bill Gorman to have that additional two million dollars. They’ve got enough. But, on the other hand, I doubt that the Reverend Robin Hood is quite what She’s after either.”

She turned to Thomas, “Now. Quick, before the call comes through, a test of your faith. Are you, Thomas, willing to forfeit to God all that is left of your ill-gotten gains?”

Thomas shook his head, “There is a fine line between deep spirituality and lunacy I’m afraid.”

The phone rang.

Everyone, except Hosanna, started.

Reaching for the handset with slow deliberation, Hutch picked it up in the midst of

the third ring. "Detective Morris, perhaps?"

Upon hearing the answer he pushed a button and activated the speaker phone. The detective's voice came from a little box on the desk, saying, "of the Denver Police Department Frauds Unit. How did you know that?"

Hutch smiled. "Mysterious ways - wonders to behold, and all that. How may I help you?"

Thomas pulled a checkbook out of his coat pocket. He quickly opened it and, leaning over the desk, signed the top check. Tearing it off, he handed it to Hosanna.

Hutch took notice and arched his eyebrows.

The detective's voice came from the speaker, "This is a long shot, but I'm looking for a man who may be enrolled there under the name Thomas Farr. It's an alias."

After waiting a couple of seconds Hutch answered, "We have a very strict procedure regarding the confidentiality of our students. What has this man supposedly done?"

"We want to talk to him about an inheritance and the way he came about becoming an heir."

Hutch nodded, "I see. Let me take your number and I will have someone get back to you directly."

There was long moment of silence after he cut the call. Hutch turned to the man sitting behind Hosanna, "Josh, your paper last semester tackled the idea of God being a remote presence in today's world and the challenges that imposes on the ministry. How does what you've just seen change that?"

Before Josh could come up with an answer, Thomas asked, "What did you mean

when you asked about a forfeit?" He pointed to the check Hosanna was holding.

"I asked if you were willing." She waved her hand, causing the check to flutter. "It seems like you might be, though you have most of the money in an account at Vanguard."

"And if I give that too?"

Hosanna smiled and, cocking her head to the side, said, "That would make it a test of faith, wouldn't it?"

Thomas took a breath. Hosanna held up her hand to stop him before he spoke. "Then there's the issue of whether this experience would be enough to, shall we say, unwarp some of your thought processes – especially those concerning other people's money. Somehow, I don't think so." She turned to Hutch. "We already had one demon wrastling bout here today. What do you think? Should he have a chance to fight for redemption?"

Hutch took a long look at the young man. "What if he fails?"

Hosanna glanced at the floor, "Probably would stain the rug."

She turned back to Thomas. "Fair disclosure, we are not talking a merciful God here. Your demons are strong. They might kill you rather than release you. And, if you do win, you will become a person just like all those you secretly mock." She looked him in the eye, "Your choice."

Before he could answer, she turned to Eldridge. "If our reason for coming here was to stir things up a little, I think I've pretty much done that. We probably should be going so as not to wear out our welcome."

Placing the check on the desk, she stood. Thomas extended his fingers, slowly

reaching to reclaim it.

Hosanna looked down, and sighed. “Bad move.”

Hutch’s demon had been scruffy. Thomas’ were elegant with strong curved muscular legs like a puma, the tri-tipped tails of a wyvern, the lithe body of a greyhound, a long neck and the enigmatic head of an oversized cobra. There were three of them, each with a different color scheme.

Thomas let the check slip out of his fingers. Hosanna passed it across the desk to Hutch, “There should be enough to replace the rug.”

Stopping on her way out, Hosanna reached out and petted one of the demons. It closed its eyes, seeming to enjoy the touch. “This one has a venom that will make you incapable of ever telling a lie.” She waved her hand indicating the other two. “But those, they are not so benign. They are your lies come back to bite you on the butt.”

Dr. Eldridge waited until they were out of town before commenting, “I suspect they’ll be talking about this evening for a while. What happened to him?”

Hosanna said, “Thomas was too smart for his own good. I’m afraid he ended up being a rather powerful object lesson.”

“Does that bother you?”

She shook her head. “No, It would have bothered me if he’d become a tele-evangelist. But I’m not sure I wasn’t operating a bit outside my job specifications.”

“That brings up the obvious question. What are they?”

“That is the critical issue isn’t it? Up to now I’ve tried to be low key. I’d like to keep it that way. That’s one reason I don’t do healings, it’s a sure way to gather a mob

around you. I'd rather be anonymous."

The professor shook his head, "That's not going to last. Not from what I've just seen."

"What if I simply walk away from it?" Hosanna realized she was talking about things she had never discussed before.

"Can you do that?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure there is much of a plan. Free will and all that. Actually, I'd like to think that I'm not that different from a lot of people. You know -- we're all children of God?"

Eldridge laughed, "That's the stuff of a thousand mediocre senior theses. I don't think we should let ourselves get diverted here. The question, for me, is how we accept or reject a person who has an extraordinary connection to God?"

After a moment he continued, "In some places busloads of the faithful gather around statues that allegedly shed tears. People keep on coming even after they are proven to be fakes. Compared to you – that's small potatoes."

He went on, "I, for one, have to accept it as real." He raised a hand from the steering wheel and swept his arm towards the windshield. "That allows a wide spectrum of possibilities which runs from visitations – all the way to another Messiah. And, if you are a Messiah, are you a herald of Judgment Day?" He shook his head, "That would make you real popular among some of the Apoplectic Sects. You know, the folks with the "Armageddon out of here," tee shirts. No, I don't think this can be anything small."

After a moment Hosanna spoke. "Can't claim to be an expert on the scriptures, but I have read enough to realize I'm in a ticklish spot. First, there is the notion that a

human who talks with God is somehow holy in his or her own right. That's why I had to get out of there. They were starting to think exactly that. A couple of them were about to start praying to me."

Hosanna pointed her finger as she continued, "And right here is one of the confusions I was talking about at dinner. We've got a rather unambiguous statement, '*You shall have no other Gods before Me.*' Yet people start worshiping prophets or Saints even before you can say, "Pass the collection plate." One thing I know is – this is not my style at all – or if you prefer, my calling. I've got this strong impulse to avoid mobs of followers."

She paused, "So where does this leave me?" Taking a deep breath she continued, "I've never talked about this to anyone except my mom and only a little it kinda freaks her out, and it feels good and very scary at the same time. If I am to believe that I am talking to God, and She to me. And further to make whatever I will out of the statement – *You are My daughter.*" Hosanna stopped and looked at him. When he nodded, indicating that he was still with her, she went on. "Then I've got a problem – if I were to allow anyone to worship me – am not I putting them, and possibly myself, in great jeopardy? Exodus and Leviticus both are disturbingly explicit."

Eldridge nodded rapidly in agreement, "That they are."

Hosanna continued, "Some times I've wondered if this was in some way connected to the big J's bad end. "Why have you forsaken me?" Certainly not what I would want as a possible choice for my last words. Lots of ways to interpret that one. For you it is academic, but I sure don't want to take any chances.

"Got to remember the Lord of the Old Testament is not a cuddly God. Not the

kind of immediate supervisor I would choose if I had a choice. Even Kim the owner of the nail place was better than that. I'll tell you about that in a minute."

Turning to him, she asked, "You've studied this all your life. So tell me how much of the Holy Scriptures – are real and how much could have been inserted by the religious establishment of the time to secure and maintain power and control?"

When Eldridge did not immediately respond, Hosanna went on, "Is it any wonder that I am confused? I spent five years after high school running from this. I did not want to have to deal with it. I did not answer the phone so to speak. I got myself a series of jobs and ended up doing nails in a storefront next to a takeout Chinese Restaurant. I wanted to be just like every one else."

She paused, "It didn't work. Immigration agents raided the strip mall one day. They arrested most of the women in the shop I worked in, half of the people next door. They took me in too, but let me go. As I was trying to figure out how to get back to my car, the voice I had been trying to ignore spoke. "*You have more to learn.*"

"There was a community college next to the police station. It was the last day of registration. Sometimes you can't fight it." Hosanna shrugged. She pointed at the road behind them. "A part of me wanted to find another refuge back there. Sort of an ultra high class nail shop."

Eldridge didn't laugh. Hosanna turned to him. "If you'd ever worked in one of those places you would think that was pretty funny." She bit her lip, "It would probably be good if everybody could, for one day, do nails. It's a little like washing feet, but with glitter, gloss, and gossip." She stopped and looked out the window.

After a couple of miles passed silently, Eldridge spoke, "What do you think God wants of you?"

"That's the problem. She hasn't been all that specific. Jesus was too nice, that much I know – or maybe that's my bias. Freewill is an interesting concept, and another thousand Masters' Theses; how much free will did Jesus have?"

Hosanna waved her hand back and forth, "Not answering the question, am I? I get diverted easily. What I know - or think I do. Healing and Forgiveness are not my direction. You saw that back there. Instead I put people in touch with their demons. I can show people the error of their ways, but doing it like that is kind of labor intensive. If my calling is to get the message to more than just a few people, I may have to come up with some sort of a demonstration. Something dramatic I think. Jesus was kind of low key and look where it got him."

Eldridge asked, "Demonstration? What do you mean?"

"I don't have anything specific figured out. I have to figure out what my powers are and how to use them. But remember the God of the Flood. This is the God who invented Plate Tectonics. If I've got any of that..." Her voice trailed away.

"Whatever you do - stay away from the San Andreas Fault."

Chapter 11

The “Princeton Gospel”

When the demons were finished with Thomas, they licked their chops, belched, and then, after briefly eyeing the remaining humans, vanished.

As Hosanna predicted, they left the rug a mess. Besides some rips made by sharp claws, there was enough blood and gore that the carpet was a write-off. Scattered on it was debris that included Thomas’s shoes, wallet, and some tattered fragments of clothing.

No one wanted to be the first to speak. Finally Hutch suggested, “Perhaps a prayer would be appropriate.” He paused, then spoke in his Sunday voice, “Lord, having just been reminded of Thy Power and Thy Glory, we affirm that we are but Your humble servants.” After a couple of seconds he said, “Amen.”

Ronald looked at the rug, then back to the professor. “What do we do now?”

Hutch sat back in his chair and reverted to professorial, “That’s a good question. One that someone in the crowd at Calvary must have asked. I suspect we can call the Detective and say with a clear conscience that Thomas Farr seems to have departed.” The joke elicited no laughs.

Eleanor took two steps to the edge of the carpet and gingerly reached down to retrieve the wallet. From inside she pulled a card, ““Thomas Farr, Theologian.”” She read, “That’s a bit much, if I do say so.”

Hutch rubbed his hands together. “Done in by his own vanity. There is *such* a wealth of material here. Immediately, before the memory fades, each of us *must* put our recollections of the evening onto paper. Later I will recount to you my own

experience of this afternoon, which was equally astounding, but which, I am happy to say, had a more fortunate ending.

“Once we have the facts recorded, we can begin to look into the implications. Until then I think that we should perhaps keep discussion of these events among ourselves. I certainly do not want to find my picture on the front page of one of those tabloids you find at the supermarket checkout.” As the students rose and started towards the door, he reiterated. “Write it tonight. Do not try and edit. Every detail you can remember must be captured. Send me your drafts and I will work at compiling them. I doubt that any of us will be able to sleep, so please return here tomorrow morning - early. I will have food services supply a breakfast.”

The next morning the group was more animated. Each of the scholars brought a number of pages. Each had the slightly gaunt appearance that comes with a night of no sleep, though all except Ronald had showered and changed clothes. They entered the room slowly looking for confirmation of the impossible events which had been replaying in their heads all night. Furniture had been moved and replaced, the rug rolled up and set in the corner. And, in a whimsical move, Hutch had placed Thomas’ shoes in front of the chair in which he had been sitting.

Eleanor was the first to notice. She extended her arm briefly pointing her finger as her eyes met Hutch’s, “A relic,” she asked?

“Perhaps.” He glanced down, “Certainly too important to discard.” He nodded his head indicating the side of the room. “The rug also, after all, it was the scene of two profoundly amazing battles. Though I must admit its condition makes its conservation a

bit problematic”

“Two?” Ronald sounded puzzled.

“Yes, but the details on that will have to wait,” Hutch answered, “We have much to do. Help yourselves to coffee and whatever,” he waved indicating the platter of bagels, Danish, and fruit that sat on a sideboard. They took coffee, but left the food untouched.

“Josh, as I mentioned yesterday, this exhibition has to change the thinking you postulated in your paper. The first question is - what was it?”

“What do you mean sir?”

“The events of last evening. A collective hallucination? A visit from a psychic? Or . . .”

“I have to accept it on face value,” Eleanor said, interrupting. “In my conversations with her, Hosanna made mention that she believed herself to be the Daughter of God. She certainly exhibited a number of proofs.”

“So you believe?” Hutch nodded, cutting her off. “Anyone else?”

Ronald and Josh looked at each other.

“Damn it, you two. You were here; find the courage to have an opinion.”

Ronald swallowed then answered. “I was here. I saw it. I also spoke with Hosanna at dinner and she revealed a secret about me that I never told anyone. Her psychic powers are not in dispute. She possesses other abilities I have no words to describe. However, her divinity is another matter.”

He was about to say more, but Hutch sprang the trap. “Ah, but we haven’t gotten

to the question of divinity yet. I was first asking if you believed your senses, particularly what you saw and heard.”

Josh said, “That I believe. Yes.”

“Even though much of it was clearly impossible?”

Josh pointed down at the shoes. “The impossible would have been for Thomas to be wearing those this morning.”

In silence each read the others’ accounts. There were few disputes as to the events, though their remembrances as to the exact wording of some of Hosanna’s utterances differed. When they finished, Hutch collected the papers and held them in his hand. “These shall become the Princeton Gospel. I have already done some work to assemble the accounts into a single work.”

He regarded Ronald and asked, “Should we include the references to kitty litter?”

Ronald looked at the others before answering, “Is this a demonstration to show how we must consider the original Gospels - what has been edited out?”

“It is that, but there is also a more practical side. When this is published, can you live with this knowledge being broadcast far and wide?”

Bobbing his head rapidly, Ronald said, “I see. Yesterday I would have said no. I would have fought vigorously to prevent it. But there is one thing I did not include in the account I gave you earlier. It happened later - last night. I have compiled it in a separate account.” He took another sheet of paper from his briefcase. “May I read it?”

“Certainly.”

Clearing his throat, Ronald began, “As I was recording the events of the

extraordinary evening just past and was searching for words to describe the moment when Thomas stood facing his demons - I heard a voice, Hosanna's.

"It easily could have been you. Your demons are closing in."

He looked up from the paper, and then turned his head so that he glanced for a second at the section of the room where Thomas had been so violently dispatched. Reading again, he continued, "With the memory of the claws and fangs so recent, I knelt without hesitation.

"The voice got louder, 'Do not kneel to me. Attend instead to being less of an asshole.'"

Ronald lowered the paper and looked up. "Look, I don't know what to say. She's not the first person to say that about me. But this somehow makes it official, if that's the right word. Denial is no longer possible."

He took a deep breath before continuing, "I have been an asshole. I am not sure how to change. I probably have many amends to make. I don't know where to begin, but I will."

Pointing to the empty shoes he said, "I have to." His voice quavering a bit, he continued, "I am afraid. I asked Hosanna for help, her voice was faint but I heard, 'That's your job.'" Ronald looked at the professor, "Sir, I certainly believe, and I have been told not to worship her. That's what I meant when I spoke of her divinity earlier."

Hutch nodded and said, "Thank you, that is a very important insight. Your experience gives us a handle of sorts on what is a slippery situation. Hosanna, though clearly possessing powers not seen since the Old Testament, disavows divinity and forbids worship. That supports the Arian beliefs. It is something we can explore later."

He paused and picked up another few sheets of paper.

"I imagine that now is the appropriate time to relate that I too had an encounter with Hosanna's demons. I wrote this out last night. It is what Hosanna referred to when she mentioned a previous wrestling match. Like yours," he pointed to Ronald then turned his finger towards himself, "mine is personal, painful, embarrassing, something I had denied and assumed was a secret. I would rather it not go into the record, but now understand that it must."

Eleanor broke into the silence that followed, "Each of us has been touched by her visit. With your permission I should like to pursue the elements of humor that Hosanna spoke of at dinner and which are evident in her conversations with us. At dinner she said that perhaps God was having a bit of fun with us. I wonder how the events of last night. . ."

"I doubt that Thomas appreciates the humor, where-ever he may be," Josh interrupted. "It's a little strange to be sitting here holding an academic discussion and divvying up areas of research and publication, while the man's blood is so recently spilled."

Hutch answered, "I believe that Thomas died as a means to ensure that we take Hosanna seriously." He pointed to the shoes, "Without those we might question how real our memories are. A pair of empty wingtips effectively prevent us from dismissing Hosanna as some sort of hallucination or wandering off into metaphysics. Instead, a room full of scholars trained to question have accepted the impossible. As for Thomas, his sins doomed him. It clearly was an object lesson," the professor paused, "As for the academic aspects of this, that is who we are, what we do. If Hosanna had not wanted

this to be examined she would have chosen a different audience. She might have revealed herself in a supermarket.

“Instead she chose us. For that I am very thankful. In more than twenty-five years as a scholar, I can not think of an event as rich in areas of inquiry as this encounter. It surpasses the Council of Nicea which has always fascinated me. We have to go back to that hallowed morn when Jesus rose to find something to surpass. If this does not excite you, then you are misplaced in your avocation. And, I dare say, we have not seen the last of Hosanna. Ours will be the initial account. We must hasten to publish since we will be referenced by all who follow.”

Chapter 12

The Gospel of Dr. Eldridge

For all that has been written about the dark side of Hosanna, and there certainly was one, there were times when she displayed a sense of humor and the flash of a generous spirit.

When we first met, I was teaching a selection of courses that were, for the most part, enrolled only because they allowed students to fulfill some core requirements with a minimum of effort. I was a sour spirit knowing that in three years I would be retired with nothing to show for the thousands of lectures I had once carefully crafted. I was married to an equally sour woman who some twenty years before had moved to a separate bedroom and installed a solid lock on the door. The love I had once felt for the subject matter I taught was as lost as the romance in my marriage.

That semester I had a teaching assistant assigned to me. Judy a rather plain girl on a scholarship had not been snapped up by any of the other professors with more influence or pull. She was shy and her self-esteem was such that she took few efforts to improve her appearance. Her hair often needed brushing. Her blouses were large and wrinkled effectively concealing her body. Judy spoke so softly that I missed about a quarter of what she said – but I did not ever ask her to repeat herself because I was sure it was not important.

But she was a worker. She rearranged my office, created a filing system out of years of chaos, made class lists intelligible and otherwise straightened up a cluttered life. She came from the home of a minister, and while still a virgin in many respects,

she had such a vivid fantasy life she was afraid to even start to live. So I was to learn later.

Hosanna could see inside you, revealing all your secrets as though your thoughts were painted bright colors inside a glass box. She at once knew about my life and having seen Judy, Hosanna knew her also.

On the trip back from Princeton after talking of the amazing things that had taken place and speculating about her role, Hosanna turned to me, and said. "You have a destiny."

I remember thinking – 'Oh my God.' Then she said. "But first you have to forget everything you have ever learned. Your knowledge stands in the way of your understanding. The only way to do this is for you to go to her – profess your needs and then make love until you are close to death. Then you will gather your breath and do it again for so long as it takes to restore you."

It was fortunate that we were stopped at a traffic light. I tried to reply but could only fumble for words as I stumbled through the multiple layers of shock her statement caused me. I started to tell her about Marge, but she interrupted, "Not that bitter old woman who falsely calls herself your wife. I am speaking of Judy. She is in her apartment - awaiting."

The intersection was near campus. Hosanna got out of the car and, before closing the door, bent down and looked into my eyes. "I am not joking. Judy has a bottle of wine in the refrigerator. You will be doing her as much good as she will do you. You don't have to say anything. In fact, it is better if you do not speak at all. Knock and she will let you in." With that Hosanna shut the door, the light changed and I drove off.

I did not know where Judy lived. I am sixty and hadn't had sex in longer than I care to admit. At the next light I tried to make the right turn that would take me home, but the car went straight. After three or four blocks I somehow knew I was there. A car pulled out of a parking space as I drove up.

It was a rather dreary building, typical of where the cheap apartments students require are. The hall was dark. I could see no names on the mailboxes, but I knew to go up two flights. On the landing I paused. I started to turn to go back down the stairs. But I heard Hosanna's voice saying, "God is good – the proof is on the other side of that door."

Never has a man had such a rationale for having an affair. And, as strange and frightening as this was, compared to the demons I had witnessed earlier - it was nothing. Almost as though I was an observer; I watched as I straightened my tie, patted my hair, and then, having nothing else to do with my hand, knocked.

Time changed in the two seconds before I heard her footsteps coming towards the door. I wanted to run, but I have never been so rooted either.

It was bright in the apartment and the light dazzled my eyes which were used to the dark hall. She opened the door wide and smiled.

Judy was not wearing the shapeless blouses and skirts that were her uniform at school. Instead a leotard top and a tight pair of jeans showed a body worth revealing. Her nipples were erect. I ceased thinking. She took my hand and drew me inside. I opened my mouth even though I had no idea what I would say. Her other hand rose and she gently touched my lips with a finger.

I admit to being on the far fringe of middle age. I may not have had much practice

with women lately, but I am no fool. Behind me the door closed, and the lock clicked. Still holding my hand Judy gently pulled me into the living room. She turned down some lights as we passed, then reached up to remove my tie.

It was Judy's fantasy, I let her direct it. There were times that night and the next day when I thought I might die, and I would not have minded in the least. We did not speak words until the next afternoon. It was then that she told me that Hosanna had come to her and said to make herself ready.

There has been much talk of miracles and lessons, but those two days and three nights more than qualify. There was joy for a lifetime. It was a spiritual uplifting which cleansed the bitterness from my soul.

The next time I met Hosanna she asked if I had shed the preconceptions that held me back. I told her that was the least of it. She smiled and said that I would be seeing her again – after some journeys she had to make. She also gave me the number of a woman closer to my own age. "Those young girls will be the death of you." She smiled and then she was gone.

It was not until some time later that our paths would cross again.

In that period I began a study of the "lost" and otherwise discredited or unaccepted Gospels. I learned that all I had known had been but a sliver of the truth. For truth is too large and complicated to be easily stated.

Just as I was finishing a paper postulating this thesis, I was presented with a vision. It was of a dewdrop hanging on the end of a blade of grass. Sunlight struck it casting a prismatic sparkle. I heard Hosanna's voice. There was a chuckle as she said, "Try again. Not complicated – instead it's simple like this. If you must use words,

‘Ahhhhh! God is good.’ Everything else is a diversion.”

I placed the printout in the recycle bin, then knelt and prayed with an understanding as I never had before. The prayer was simply that I retain this awareness and acknowledging the joy it brought me. I arose knowing I had been forgiven decades of verbose pomposity. Grace.

Chapter 12

Martha has some Enemies

Coffee hour was held in the church's finished basement after the service. The room was the result of a weekend of work and prayer by a team of amateur volunteers with materials purchased in the bargain bin section of the local lumber yard. Peter Smith clutched his paper cup and said to Tim, "I knew the world was full of lies and liars a long time ago. The thing I like about our pastor is that he doesn't worry about being politically correct. I'm glad he tells it like it is."

Tim nodded and worked on the powdered donut he was holding in a paper napkin. "Yeah," he mumbled.

Peter went on, "Like when he told us about that New York publisher who's bringing out that book about a daughter of God – saying it's Christ's sister. Can you believe that? I mean we're talking about something that goes so against God that I'd be worried about being struck by lightning on a clear day if I so much as looked in the window of a bookstore that had it."

Tim nodded vigorously as he swallowed the last of the donut. Then he said, "And you know they rushed the publication to get it in the stores in time for Christmas. I saw that somewhere. I'm going to write a letter like the reverend suggested."

Peter shook his head, "Waste of paper. I'm going down to Princeton."

"What for, buy a sweatshirt so you can look like a brainiac?"

"No. There's going to be a lecture and a reception for the heathen bitch who wrote it. I am going to ask some interesting questions. And let them know that there are a lot of people who think it's a sin to make money off of a sacrilege."

“You’re not going to get carried away are you? Like at the abortion clinic?”

Peter stiffened and looked around quickly. He hissed, “I told you not to talk about that! No, if it will make you feel better, I’m simply going to utilize my first amendment rights.” Peter paused, he’d wanted to ask Tim if he could borrow his car, but it would mean more questions. It would be easier to use his own car which was covered with bumper stickers – a rolling fundamental slogan-fest. In the past it had given his opponents warning. That had been the start of the trouble at the clinic. He’d just have to park farther away, he thought.

The parking lot at the Motel 6 was crowded, some cars as battered as his, but none so festooned. A woman stood watching him as Peter walked towards his room.

“Jesus loves you,” she said.

“Yes he does. I guess you saw my car.” He looked around wondering if she could be some sort of set up.

“It’s hard to miss. My name is Mary. I wonder if I might speak to you about something of importance to those who are believers.”

He looked at her more closely. She was somewhat attractive, but that was not why he was here. Besides, he favored sinners as there usually were more things to repent for later.

“Sure, but I’m already pretty well saved,” he replied.

“Oh no. I guessed that to be the case. No. I need help someone with strong faith and the conviction to defend it.”

It was chilly. “We need go some place,” he said, “I’m not dressed for this weather.”

She nodded, “My room is upstairs. Unless you’d rather go to the lounge...”

Adding the stress of meeting a woman to his already tightly wound emotions, made Peter

want a drink. But combining alcohol and women had sometimes been a problem in the past.

“Let’s skip the bar,” he said.

Once they got inside her room, Mary got right to the point. “Tomorrow there is going to be a reading from a sacrilegious book which will be followed by a lecture and a panel discussion by some so-called religious scholars.”

He nodded, “I know about it.”

She smiled, “I thought you might. It’s terrible because they are trying to make the whole thing legitimate. In fact, there is a whole undercurrent that is saying that the book is divinely inspired, that the woman who wrote it was hearing the voice of God.”

“I read that, but she was in a mental hospital! They are very arrogant. I am going to ask some questions about that and other things.”

“So, you are planning on attending?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a ticket?”

The sinking sensation Peter knew all too well surged through his lower stomach. He shook his head.

Mary walked over to where her suitcase lay on the dresser. She grinned as she held up two square pieces of card stock. “God provides.” She picked up a Bible that had been nestled amongst her clothes, “I am trying to find someone who will proclaim their faith.”

“I was intending to do that.”

“Yes, but I think that we might make a stronger point if we acted together.”

This was getting interesting, and Mary, he now saw, was quite attractive especially with

the glint that had come into her eyes. Peter asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“I believe that this woman, the author, is an agent of Satan. If we are strong and proclaim our faith I believe we can force her to admit this.”

His voice was confident, the certainty coming from experience, “In the lecture hall? They’ll throw us out pretty fast.”

“No, not in the lecture hall. I want to wait until later. I want her guard to be down then...” She proceeded to tell Peter of her plans.

As they waited for the reading to begin, Martha was not nearly as nervous as Jeanne, or Carole, the assistant her agent had sent. This was, they kept saying, a risky strategy. There had been several contentious meetings between her agent and the publisher before a strategy had been agreed on. If this worked it could get a lot of publicity and move her book towards the bestseller lists. If it failed, well, one person had summed it up, “How do you spell crackpot?”

Sally had sent pre-publication copies to the faculty and administration at the divinity school. A substantial donation had secured the university’s agreement to host the reading and to provide a lecturer and panel to discuss the book. It was made clear that the content of the lecture would be up to the scholar giving it. All it would take to make the evening fail would be for the lecturer to say, “I don’t read fiction. It does not concern me in the slightest.” and then go on to give a paper on whatever subject he had been researching.

Martha was not worried because she believed in what she had written.

“Remember, I am Hosanna,” she had said to the two of them on the drive down. The statement had not seemed to help relieve their anxiety.

“You’re not going to talk about that are you?”

“I’m not going to wear it on a pin. It’s not mentioned in those papers we sent them. But if there is a question, I will certainly tell the truth.” Martha paused, “It’s okay if there are those who think I am a fake. There will always be non believers. In fact the more noise they make, the louder my voice will become.”

The young man in charge the event came to the door of the classroom where they were waiting. Martha followed him into the large wood paneled hall with a high vaulted ceiling. The room was full. There were people standing along the walls and against the back wall. A video camera was set up in the center of the audience. It had been decided there would be no introduction. Martha took a deep breath and walked to the lectern. She read.

“*Hosanna*’. Even though it was not the first time it had happened, she was startled to hear her name when she was sure she was alone. She turned around and confirmed the room was empty. She turned the other way, pivoting on her left foot, just to make sure. She wanted to ignore the voice, but answered knowing that she would be called until she did answer. “Who else did you expect?”

“Is that how you speak to your Lord?”

“If you’re God, how come you’re so touchy? Besides, I’ve decided that the simple answer is that I’m crazy. You are just an hallucination.”

A ball of flame rose from the far corner of the room.

“Not bad. Watch out for the smoke alarm.”

“Your brother, Jesus, obeyed the law to honor his father.”

“Yeah, and look where it got him. We’ve had this discussion before. And you

agreed that a moody teenage girl is about the right response to the way things are going. You sent a goody two sandals and they crucified him. Not quite what you had in mind. I didn't ask for this and I'm sure not going to follow his example. Maybe you need another Noah, I could be the entertainment director; organize shuffleboard games between the zebras and the..."

The flame in the corner burned brighter then pulsed a couple of times before going out. *"You can not believe that you have all the answers."*

"Why not? If what you say is true, then Daughter of God gives me a certain veracity. See, I did study the lame vocabulary list last night."

"Hosanna, if you could just get over this resentment you have against me..."

"You? A resentment? I can't ever have a normal life, but no I don't mind. I can't go out on a date because I can see into his mind and its no fun watching him try to figure out how big my breasts are and how to get his hands on them. I can't have a real friend because if I tell her about how I've got this parent who does this long distance visitation thing and expects me to be perfect - she'll think I'm nuts. So I go to school where I spend the days being bored and feeling like a freak..." She took a breath.

"Are you through?"

"Through? No. But I might as well be. Won't do me any good. So what do you want?"

"I think it's time for us to put some of your anger to work."

Martha took a quick peek at the silent audience. She had hoped for a laugh by now.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I will leave the details up to you, but you can't go wrong giving people lessons in

humility.”

Hosanna spent half an hour thinking up schemes and the rejecting them because they all were too lame. The best she came up with was a plague of zits, then, as she was putting on her coat, she realized that there was one good way. ‘Ok, I’ve got it.’

‘And now you need me?’

‘Remember what I told you about needing a manual? This one is more complicated than passing my hand over a glass and filling it with lemonade. What we’ve got to do is resurvey the SAT results down - way down.’ She paused, ‘except for the bottom twenty percent – them we jack up. They’re due out next week.’

‘S-A-T? There are many prayers about them. I pay no attention.’

‘Don’t sweat the details. It’s a good one.’”

“A week later when the test results arrived, the teachers took a look and saw Ivy League hopes dashed like a marina full of boats following a hurricane. They called the testing company.

ETS had, in response to a deluge of calls, examined a sampling of the tests and came up with identical results. Hosanna’s scores had tumbled too, but she was not planning on going to college, at least not yet. She got some satisfaction watching the rest of the students who acted as though this was the end of the world.”

Martha looked up again. The audience still wasn’t laughing. She shook her head. “You don’t get it, do you? You take yourselves far too seriously.” Pointing in the general direction of the center of the audience she swept her hand to the left. The audience it pointed to all squirmed and the burbling sound of a hundred farts filled the room.

She liked the effect. Pointing to the front row she slowly raised her hand gesturing progressively to the rear. Again the sound advanced as a narrow band of people shifted in their seats. An uneasy laugh followed.

“That was one of the tricks Hosanna used in grade school when she got bored in class.” Martha paused. “Do I have your attention now?”

A number of heads nodded.

“You were sitting here, uptight, trying not to react. Waiting for someone else to laugh first. Not sure how you were supposed to feel.” She stopped and held a silence for a full five seconds. “One point of the book is that man is inherently a ridiculous, often stupid, sometimes funny creature. We have not evolved to the point where our excrement doesn’t smell. We fart. We belch. We take ourselves far too seriously. The truth is that, even in this room that is crowded with more than its share of overeducated people, we really don’t know diddly.”

She felt the silence deepen. This was not going as she had hoped; she tried another tack, “How many of you think that I’m just a batty old lady?”

A couple of hands went up.

“You are being too polite. But I applaud the honesty of those who raised their hands.”

“How many of you think you can explain that wave of flatulence that just swept the room?”

No hands went up.

“How about the MIRACLE that it did not smell?” That, at last, got a laugh.

She turned to the first row where Jeanne, Carole and Sally were sitting. “Up to now only a few knew my secret. They are sitting uneasy because they suspect that I am about to share it with you.”

“But first, I have to re-enforce the statement I made earlier. That despite all that we think we know – we don’t know diddly. And remember, I include myself in that ‘we’.”

Pointing to herself, she continued. “I spent many years locked in a back ward of a mental hospital. I spent as many more years locked in the attic of a garage. This is no secret – it’s in the packet you were given.”

Martha stopped and took a look at the audience.

“If I was a Buddhist who had spent thirty-five years in a remote cave and I came to you dressed in a red robe claiming a mystical experience - who would doubt that something had happened? Admittedly, some would dismiss me because I did not believe in your brand of God and was not saved by your dogmatic standards. But many of you are smart enough to know that you don’t have all the answers.”

After a short pause she smiled and said, “And now for the secret. I am Hosanna. I am a daughter of God.”

She held up her hand to still the murmur that was rising. “Am I any more the Daughter of God than the rest of you are the Children of God?” She shrugged. “I do know that life can sometimes be pretty strange. I don’t pretend to be better than anybody. But I am sure that God speaks to me. I know that there are times that I have abilities that I can not explain.” She pointed her finger again and as the audience squirmed, she smiled, “just fooling.”

This time they laughed. She knew she had the audience on her side now.

“I know that God was with me when I wrote this book. Does this make it a Holy book?” She paused. “I hope not, because that would make my life much more difficult. I greatly value the fact I can be wrong. Being human gives me that license – in fact, requires it. So I leave you with the final point. That everything I have just said could be wrong. But then again - maybe

not.”

She nodded and stepped back from the podium.

* * *

Peter sat through the reading. Initially he'd wanted to stand up and shout her down, but he'd resisted as she seemed to dig herself into a hole. Then he watched as she demonstrated that she had to be allied with Satan. He was glad he had not reacted earlier and been thrown out as he had initially planned. Now he saw that Mary was right. It would take a bold stroke to set the devil back in his place. He was ready.

* * *

The panel discussion started with the Dean standing. “Originally I declined to be on this panel. I saw this whole evening as a minefield. On one hand I was thought it might be a diversion which would get some of us out of our lairs. On the other I resented the commercial and publicity driven aspects of this event. Accordingly I went to some lengths to make sure in no way would any of what happens here be seen as an endorsement.”

He looked at Martha who was now sitting next to Jeanne, “I put off reading the book. That was easy as I do not read much fiction. But out of obligation, and not wanting to look the fool, I picked it up on Monday night. Secretly I was hoping to find it so bad I could put it down and say it did not hold my interest, but instead it engrossed me. I read late into the night. I slept fitfully and started reading again early the next morning.”

He continued to look at Martha and, speaking to her, said, “You are right. I do not know diddly.” He looked up at the rest of the audience. “I am a scholar, and have been for most of my life. I can not remember the last time I used that particular turn of phrase, certainly, not about myself.” A couple of people laughed quietly. “I don't know how this book will affect others. I

do not know how it will affect me when I read it again. I know that I will probably laugh more, because I have been given license.”

He turned to the table behind which sat the members of the panel. “Appropriately, Doctor Tomas is going to start off by telling us about many of the self-styled messengers of God through the ages.”

The man rose and walked to the podium, “In the Old Testament it is not uncommon for God to speak to men. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Job. Usually He did not bring good news. Having such a mystical experience elevated these men – to some degree and depending upon the sects involved they are viewed as holy. In more recent times visions were seen as proof that the seer was exalted. Sometimes it got them into trouble. Joan d’Arc comes to mind. It was not until even more recent times that those who claimed such things were locked away and given drugs to stop the voices.

“We have just heard a woman claim that God has spoken to her. It is something that we have a tendency to recoil against. It cannot be true. She must be a fake!

“Why do we immediately think that?” He raised his forefinger. “For one thing, it goes outside our experience. And it has elements in it that are very frightening.” He touched and resettled his glasses, which had slid slightly on his nose. “And there are two other factors. We in this institution have known many devout men and women. Some of them, perhaps, even holy. We consider ourselves to be good. Many of us could make a case that we have devoted our lives to God. So why is it she and not one of us?” This got a few quiet laughs. “And then there is the final point that Martha made so succinctly. I should add I found refreshing her eloquent lack of crudity.

“However you say it, this is disturbing. At the risk of seeming immodest, I have two master’s degrees, one earned doctorate, another honorary. I have published two books and numerous papers, and my curriculum vitae makes me look as though I should be able to explain what has gone on tonight.” He shrugged and spread his arms. “I can’t. I can only be reminded that it is mysteries that make the universe such a wondrous place. Tonight we have witnessed a one of them.”

When Martha and Jeanne left the sounds of the reception echoed in the corridor as they descended the stone stairs and headed to the parking lot. Jeanne hurried a little trying to outrun the chill of the fall evening. Martha fell a couple steps behind. “You know I never imagined it would be like this.” Jeanne turned as they were blinded by the lights a car. With a screech of tires it came from behind and stopped inches from Martha.

A man surged out of the passenger side and took Martha by the arm. “Come with me.”

Martha tried to pull her arm free of his grasp but could not. “Who are you?”

“We are true believers, and will rid you of the devil that has taken you.”

Jeanne screamed, “Let her go.”

The man said, “This is God’s work. Jesus be praised! She will be released once the devil is gone.” Then he added, “If you scream, she will be hurt.”

Martha said, “You know, this might be interesting.”

Jeanne rushed towards Martha as the man was pulling her towards the car. A group of men and women gathered on the steps to the building. The man pulled out a knife. He said to Martha, “Get in the car before your friend gets herself hurt.”

Martha complied. “Don’t worry dear. It will take some time, but they will see the light.”

The man pushed her into the car. As he got in behind Martha, Jeanne heard her say. “In three hours, look for a very bright light.”

The door slammed shut and the car sped off.

Chapter 13

Don't Mess with Martha

Jeanne ran up to the group on the steps. "They took her."

Several people fumbled for cell phones as they watched the taillights disappear behind a building.

"He had a knife," she said to no one in particular.

* * *

Mary had to concentrate on driving. She had to keep track of the speed limit and other signs. It would be bad if they got pulled over for something stupid. She heard Peter telling the woman not to scream.

Martha took a moment to compose herself. "You know this is a mistake. If you stop and release me, you will not be caught. You will be able to keep your backward beliefs."

"Be silent Satan!" Peter yelled. In the confined space of the car it was too loud and they all winced.

Martha replied, "You are the ones who are possessed, though I think it is stupidity rather than the devil."

He put his hand on her face, across her mouth. "Shut up!"

Martha quieted. There would be time once they got where they were going and it would be dangerous to make things too crazy in a moving vehicle.

Peter and Mary had moved from the Super 8 to the Whispering Pines Motel and Cabins a few miles out on route 206. It was out of the way, always less than half full, and the other

residents were mainly concerned with not being seen themselves. No-one paid any attention to what went on in the cabin at the end of the row.

Inside were two cramped bedrooms with knotty pine walls. A bathroom was sandwiched between. Martha was pushed into the larger of the two rooms which had twin beds covered with lime green spreads. She stumbled. The mattress sagged and springs squealed as she sprawled across a bed. Peter said, “We’re sorry.”

The woman cut him off. “No we are not. We have done this to see that the devil is denied his plan. May Jesus give us strength.”

Martha replied, “Do you really think that Jesus will have anything to do with this? This is not His way. He did not advocate kidnapping ladies who are old enough to be your grandmother.”

Mary moved closer. “Do not presume to tell us about Jesus. You are a non-believer.”

“Since when? Who told you what I believe?”

“That book told us. It is heresy.”

“Have you read it?”

“We don’t need to – the idea of a sister for Jesus is wrong.”

You think so?” Martha tried to look inside their minds, but was unable to get past a swirling rage. “You know, it’s not a new idea. Jesus had brothers and sisters in his lifetime. Mark 6:3 is the passage that comes to mind.”

“That’s false, a bad translation.”

Martha spoke the verse in Greek. “And how do you translate it? Pretty specific, names and all.”

“It says Jesus is the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary.”

Their minds were closed. Martha saw that there was not going to be an understanding arising out of reasonable arguments. “So you think I am possessed by the devil do you?”

“Possessed by - or the incarnation of. Same thing.”

Martha nodded, “I’m of a mind to let you meet him. But actually there is no need because he resides in the hate that has tainted your souls.”

“We’ll see who has the tainted soul.” With that Mary left the room.

Martha watched her go. She was beginning to sense something about the woman. There was a core pain, a central trauma from long ago. She filed it away and turned her attention to the man. Though he was not the leader, he was, she gauged, the more dangerous of the two. He too was ruled by fear. Not such a dramatic hurt, instead it was thousands of smaller fears that added up and compounded to make him so weak that he clung to the rigidity of his faith. There had been many like him in the hospital. Often so frustrated they would slip into violence with almost no provocation. She reconsidered her situation. It was going to take a while to disarm his rage.

Martha spoke again, “You think that when this is over you are going to be hailed as heroes. You will go on the religious shows on TV and Radio and will recount how you overcame the devil. I’ll bet you can hear the applause already. Maybe they’ll want you to write your own book.”

The accusation stung him, but he shook his head, “I am doing this to save the faith. I seek nothing for myself. It is simply an act of devotion to my Savior.”

Martha smiled, “When I was young they used to say, ‘Tell the truth and shame the Devil.’ I know you’ve been fantasizing about being a Christian hero for the last few nights as you are going to sleep. I also know that you need to find a better way to release your anger.

You realize that kidnapping is a crime that can send you to prison for years?”

He shook his head. “Jesus will protect me.”

“Like he did when you were twelve and in the foster home where Donald used to beat you for masturbating?”

He started to say something then stopped. “How do you,” then he stopped again “It’s Satan. He told you about that. There is no way else you could know.”

“Unless I’ve got another source.”

He sputtered for a minute. She pressed him, “If you are a Christian, why do you allow yourself to do so many things that are contrary to His teachings?”

“I live a Christian life. I may fall into sin now and again, but I am forgiven.”

“Convenient. I was referring to the hate in your heart. That you steal and are seriously lusting over Mary.”

“That’s not true. None of it.”

“You are such a poor liar.” Martha shook her head. “The hate you have towards me is just one part of your soiled soul. The stealing - you don’t call it that - but we can start with the unemployment checks and the jobs you don’t tell them about. There’s the false lawsuit when you saw the floor was wet and deliberately fell in that restaurant. And Mary, you went along with her plan because you thought it might get you somewhere with her. Though you prefer mixed-up young women who you call whores and sometimes slap around after they sleep with you. You tell them that you are trying to help them.”

His face turned red, he moved towards her. His hand rose. She spoke quickly, “If you are a Christian, have you forgiven the boy in the other foster-home? Frank was his name, the bully who made you...”

He took another step towards her and dropped his hand. Mary had come back into the room. “How do you know these things,” he asked?

Martha looked up at him, “Why would I not know them? And the fact that you consider them secrets is what gives them the power they have over you.”

She turned towards the woman, “You have such secrets too, Mary. They’ve kept you a prisoner in a very dark and scary place, much like the closet you used to hide in when your stepfather was looking for you.” Martha looked at Peter. “It is no accident that the two of you came together. You were each brutalized in very much the same way. The trouble is you took the fear and held it inside yourselves. If only you can find a way to see beyond the words of your religion and to let faith in - all the way in – it could free you of those fears and angers.”

* * *

The local and state police responded quickly as did a van from Channel Four News that had been listening to the police radio. The FBI, Jeanne was told, were en-route. Jeanne was taken into the Dean’s office where she repeated everything she remembered several times. “Yes. He said, ‘This is Gods Work,’ I don’t know who was driving – it might have been a woman I have that sense, but the lights were on me and I just couldn’t see.”

She grew impatient at the repetition. “Why are you asking me this again? Go find her.” She listened as the Dean tried to explain why this was an extraordinary event.

Eventually the police went away. Jeanne had not told them about looking for a bright light in three hours. It would have been enough to push them from skeptical to well beyond incredulous. She did mention it to the Dean though.

He shook his head, “I suppose it’s fitting that things be a bit confused. In another era that would have been considered a prophesy. I guess we should write it down. Just in case.”

* * *

Dinner was lukewarm McDonalds. As she opened the container Martha said, “We could use a minor miracle here.”

Peter and Mary looked up from their own meals. Martha put the open box on the small desk next to her chair. She looked up at the stained ceiling. “Father forgive them for they do not know what real food is - and know not how to cook.”

Mary started to say something, but before she could speak there was a clank and a large plate appeared on the desk where the quarter-pounder had been. A clinking followed and utensils bounced lightly. Martha peered at the plate. “Eggplant parmesan. Thanks. Just what I wanted.”

Peter stood and took a step towards her.

Martha pointed the fork at him. “You want an upgrade, you pray for your own.”

He stopped. “How...”

Mary shouted, “It’s the devil.”

Martha cut a piece, chewed and swallowed. “You are so damned predictable.” Indicating the container in Mary’s lap, she said, “Now *that* could be argued to be the work of the devil. Do you know what they feed the cattle? How they treat them?” She cut another piece of her eggplant and ate it.

From one of her suitcases Mary extracted a large brass cross. It was a foot long and six inches wide. One of her blouses became caught on it and needed to be freed. She advanced towards Martha holding the cross erect in front of her like an actress in a bad vampire movie.

Martha looked up at her and, with her voice unconcerned, said, “Do you know that during the inquisition Christians used to put hot coals in the hands of people? They claimed that

if the victims were faithful they would not be burned.” Martha ate another bite. After chewing and swallowing she continued, “It was a convenient way to ensure that their enemies would be convicted. They didn’t, so far as I know, demonstrate how their own faith could protect them.”

She took a sip from the glass of wine that appeared a moment before. “Now I’m not saying that you don’t have faith – if anything I think you believe too much. At least in some directions. What you don’t have is any of the compassion and acceptance that Jesus preached.”

Mary had stopped two feet away holding the cross with both hands. Martha paid her no mind. She took another bite and chewed slowly.

Peter moved to the door. “Maybe we made a mistake.”

Mary turned and gave him a dirty look, “Don’t listen to her. Don’t let her words corrupt your faith.”

Martha said, “I don’t think it was a mistake. I think that you may have been sent to test me - or perhaps, to become believers.”

Mary shouted “Blasphemer!” and swung the cross at Martha.

Martha jerked back and it missed. Her voice lost its humorous edge as she said, “*That* is taking things too far. How do you think your Savior would feel about you using the symbol of His sacrifice as a weapon? He was forgiving; at least parts of your Gospels tell you that. But this would not have pleased him.”

She pushed her chair back and rose. “I am not so tolerant. I’ve restrained myself because I was curious about what this was all about - and because I just gave a lecture in which I told people to lighten up. But you know, I think I am about to change tactics.”

For a moment nothing happened, then the cross began to glow. It got brighter and, after a few seconds, Mary dropped it. “Owww!”

Martha said, “Jesus would understand your pain. He would heal you of your memories. He would forgive you and tell you to go and sin no more.” She pointed to herself, “Me, it’s not my place to forgive. It’s not my job to heal. My purpose is far simpler - just to point out wrong. If I can get you to see that, you might make the leap to understand it is a good idea to mend your ways. Then you can deal with God and Jesus about forgiveness and all the rest.”

Mary was cradling her hand unable to take her eyes from the rising red blisters. Short quick breaths whistled slightly as they passed between her clenched teeth.

Peter took a step towards her. “Is she hurt bad? Should I?”

“What you should do is comfort her. But first, make sure the rug doesn’t catch fire.” She sat in the chair again and picked up her fork. “Me, I’m going to finish dinner and then I’m going see if I can find something to light up the sky with.”

The Whispering Pines was across the road from a GM Dealer. A gap appeared in the traffic, Martha crossed the four lanes and walked up the drive. In front of the building was a large black SUV proudly standing on top of some boulders.

“Now that’s a false idol if I ever saw one.” Like the cross, it began to glow. Dull at first, then brighter, becoming first a cherry red, turning yellow and finally a blue-white that lit the lot brighter than day.

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Jeanne and the Dean decided that driving around looking for a bright light was as good a plan as any. Staying in his office, ducking the TV reporters and waiting for the phone to ring would have driven the Dean to drink, and Jeanne probably would have joined him. He had just turned around in a gas station when she saw the beam off to their right. “Look, over there.”

He stopped the car and got out for a second. “Probably just a spotlight for a sale or something, but we might as well check. Looks like that might be over on 206. We can cut across Hamilton Fields Road.” He drove faster than she thought a Dean should, or could. The road crossed a rural patch and as they crested a hill and emerged from a patch of woods they saw the beam closer and ahead of them.

With her finger Martha inscribed the words “Golden Calf” in the largest boulder. Then, confident that someone would show up sooner or later, she walked around the corner of the building where the light was not so harsh.

At first the cars on 206 continued by unseeing, but one and then another stopped as their drivers tried to figure out how the dealer was doing this effect. As they watched the car slowly began to melt like a candle, with little rivulets of metal running down the boulder filling the letters Martha had incised. Someone thought to call the fire department and in five minutes an engine appeared. The firemen attached hoses and turned them on the car. The water arced towards it but, twenty feet short, the streams exploded into light creating a pulsing rainbow.

Jeanne noticed the increased brightness as they turned onto the bigger road. In a mile they had to weave around slow or stopped cars. The Dean pulled up fifty yards behind the fire truck and Jeanne jumped out. Making her way through the few onlookers who had approached, she saw Martha standing next to the service bay. Jeanne suppressed an impulse to cry out and run, but instead walked quickly towards her.

“Oh, you heard me when I said, ‘bright light’. I was afraid you hadn’t.”

Jeanne walked Martha back to the car only to find that the Dean had joined the onlookers. The fire department, realizing there were no flames, had stopped spraying and the

light was diminished slightly but was still painfully bright. Unwilling to leave Martha, Jeanne took her back up the drive to join the dean. A policeman had arrived and was trying to bring order by saying, “Nothing to see here, move along.” It wasn’t working. The dean was trying to maintain his academic composure, but was having a hard time keeping his mouth from hanging open. He turned his attention to Martha and then suggested that they tell the policeman that she had been found.

“I’m not sure we want to do that.” Martha paused, “This should be an anonymous miracle. And he’s,” she gestured to the strutting cop, “stupid enough he might arrest me for vandalism.”

As they pulled away the light began to diminish and by the time they got back to campus the metal had cooled into a Dali-esq sculpture that would, in coming days, produce more questions than answers.

They were too keyed up to go to bed so they sat in the dean’s office and talked. The dean asked, “In your lecture you compared being in the hospital to a monastic experience. Can you amplify that a little?”

Martha answered, “You’ll find amazing people everywhere. The world is filled with miracles and miracle workers. But don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to make it sound like everybody in the loony bin was spiritual, it certainly was not the case, many of them were very ill, but you have to remember that the term ‘touched’ has been used for the mentally ill. Touched by whom or what? I sometimes used to wonder.

“Sometimes it wasn’t all that clear. Anyway, there was this man, Harold. Not Harry - Harold. He was tall, white, kind of pudgy, had glasses with thick lenses and black frames that

were repaired with duct tape. Harold had several theories. One was that duct tape was a gift from God and should be treated as a sacred object. That was what got him committed in the first place; he kept setting up pyramids made of rolls of tape in Home Depot. He called them shrines and threatened anybody who tried to defile them.

“But at the hospital he was working on a different theory - that everything was numbers and that numbers were everything. Someone had given him one of those little calculators, you know the ones they give away and are about the size of a playing card? He had that and a yellow pad of paper and he was always working on his figures. He had pages and pages of them in really neat rows. He would work on the calculator for a while, refer back to the pages, and then do some more calculations. Every so often he would write another number on the pad. Then he would go on to the next. I asked him about it once and he said, “Actually I’m working on several problems. When I get stuck on one I go on to the next, then when I come back to the one I had trouble with, I sometimes know what to do next.” Some of what he told me I didn’t understand, even though he tried to explain, but there were other things I kind of understood.

“He was interested in prime numbers, you know, can only be divided by themselves or one. Well he was looking for what he called the ‘super prime’, a number that could not be divided by its-self. He was also deeply interested in the number three.”

“Three?” Jeanne asked.

“Yes, he said that it was a critical number. He thought that it might be the key to something, he just didn’t know what.” Martha paused for a second, “The wonderful thing was the love he got from doing it. Whenever he got a new number, he’d say, “Look at that! Amazing.” If anyone was near he’d try to show it to them. Didn’t matter if they were catatonic. Then he’d go back to his problem.

“He was harmless, so they used to let him out on day passes if he promised not to go into a hardware store. Usually he wouldn’t go anywhere; there was a bench at the bus stop in front of the hospital. He’d sit there. It was at the very end of the bus route and some of the drivers would get friendly with the patients who hung around that bench. One of the drivers would let them ride on the bus if it was raining, or he wanted some company. It wasn’t a real crowded bus route except at shift change when the aides took it. Sometimes Harold would go for rides. One time when his calculator broke the bus driver took him to a Radio Shack store, parked the bus and took Harold inside. It was an act of great goodness.

“Now Harold would talk about how numbers liked other numbers. How one number could make another number do things. I don’t know about that, but I do know people and sometimes when there is a good thing happening, other good things happen just because they do.

“Anyway the guy in the store, he was young, but when he saw Harold, he saw himself in a way – so what he does is he gets the biggest most powerful calculator in the store and tries to give it to Harold. But Harold doesn’t want it. He doesn’t need to graph curves. He just needs to add, subtract, multiply and divide. The man in the store gets a little offended, but Harold says. “Simple is best. It’s just numbers.” And the guy understands. So he gives Harold a different calculator and Harold gives him one of his pads.

“Most people would have thrown it out. It had been sitting around a loony bin for months. There were coffee stains on it, but this guy he’s going to college part time and he puts it in his bag. That night he’s at school and he shows it to his professor. This guy was a lot like Dr. Eldridge; he was tired. He took a quick look at it, and started to hand it back, but as he did he noticed something about the numbers, and he looked at it again.

“One day about a week later, Harold’s got visitors. Visitors were a big thing; they didn’t

happen all that often on the back wards. There are these four men and one woman, and they all look like Harold; glasses, uncombed hair, shirt tails hanging out, that kind of thing. They've got his pad and the professor has some questions for him.

“Harold was in heaven. Finally someone understood.

“There was this doctor, nobody liked him. About all he would say was, ‘You mustn’t disturb the patients.’ He comes in the room and sees Harold standing up talking real loud and gesturing. It was something to see, he was about six foot three and with long arms and when he got excited he would kind of spit as he talked. So everybody was standing back a little. Well the doctor decides that Harold has gone off and he calls the aides and orders a hypodermic and is about to call a code green when one of the professors starts talking the same way, ‘Yes Yes! I see. Elegant . . .’ he goes on and on and the doctor decides that it might be contagious and he’s ready to call for a lockdown.

“Then the woman who was with them says, ‘What about the potential?’ and it was like a switch had been turned off. They all went quiet. Most of them pulled out calculators and started punching in numbers. A couple huddled together. Then the leader says, ‘We must write a program.’ And they all head for the door. They get halfway across the room when they see Harold isn’t with them. The man stops, turns and says, “Come with us.”

“Harold stands and starts towards them.

“The psychiatrist gets all huffy says, ‘I’m a doctor, he can’t leave.’”

“The professor puffs up right back at him. ‘I too am a doctor, so are my colleagues, and we say he’s coming with us.’

“Two minutes later they walked out of the building, got in their cars and left.”

“A month later Harold came back, but only for a visit. He brought us some bags of cookies and other stuff we never got inside. And he gave the bus driver a piece of paper with six numbers on it.”

She was quiet, as though that was the end of the story. Jeanne asked, “Well?”

“Well what?”

“The numbers, were they for the lottery? Did he win?”

“Maybe it was a phone number.”

“Martha! Tell us.”

She smiled, “No. They were the right numbers, but not for this state. Maybe if he’d been in Oregon he would have won. I don’t know exactly, there were a lot of rumors. But I’ll tell you one thing; those six numbers will get the driver to the head of the line when it comes to judgment day or the reception room at regional reincarnation – whatever – whichever.”

Chapter 14

Hosanna Begins Her Journey

Hosanna broke her rule about not performing healings when she bought a used car. It now ran without need for gas, oil or periodic maintenance. Not tempted to spend her spring break amid drunken foolishness in warmer places, she headed west intending to see the Grand Canyon where she imagined she might be able to put things into some perspective. Although she gained a better sense of her abilities, the trip to Princeton had not brought her a better grasp of self or purpose.

About the only things Hosanna was sure of were that God said she was about to go into an active phase. And that she had more powers than she knew how to use.

The car had come with a plastic Jesus epoxied to the dashboard and Hosanna added a little Buddha to keep him company. She spoke to them as she drove, “Hey guys, if you have any idea as to what this is about, I’d really appreciate a heads-up.”

Jesus told which button would get national public radio, but was otherwise silent.

The green and white sign read, *Columbus 252*, she said, “Come on guys, it’s going to be a long trip. Let’s start with an easy one, like free will.”

Buddha laughed.

“I’m serious, what if I’d decided to go to Cancun with the alcoholic contingent?”

God answered directly, “*But you didn’t – and if you had that’s where you would have started your ministry.*”

“So that’s what it is, a ministry?”

“It is what you make it. Be patient, you will know.”

That evening in her motel room Hosanna watched a preview for a silly TV show about some very vapid characters supposedly living in Southern California. The thirty seconds of drivel made her angry. She was, she realized, prejudiced against Los Angeles. It was, she decided, a magnified case in point of what was wrong with society. Hosanna had little tolerance of Greed, Pride and Lust. Though, she thought, some of her issues with lust were because she felt deprived. After all, who would want to have a relationship with a woman who could turn you into a pillar of salt when an argument went wrong?

Hosanna rarely went into bars, but an evening at the Holiday Inn offered three choices. More TV, which she avoided when she could, a small exercise room that was beyond crowded by a sweaty salesman talking loudly on a cell phone as he used the treadmill, and an entertainer named Magical Mick appearing in the lounge.

It was a slow night. Besides the bartender there were three other people in the room when she entered, a couple at a booth in the corner and a man seated halfway down the bar. The couple were trying to be discrete, but were clearly well into foreplay. Each was, Hosanna noted, married to someone else. And, so far as she could tell, they deserved the repercussions this stolen evening was going to produce.

The man sitting at the bar turned out to be Magical Mick. As soon as she settled into her seat, he moved towards her producing a pack of cards. "Might I have the pleasure of mystifying you?"

She smiled and said, "Sure, but when you're done I get to return the favor."

“You’re a practitioner of the arts?”

“Later. Show me something.”

He ran through a couple of slick card tricks, did some slight of hand with coins and then produced a length of rope. Mick had a nice patter, seemed rather harmless, and he was cute. Hosanna watched as he did a couple of interesting moves with the rope.

Handing the rope to her for inspection, Hosanna, in a moment of playfulness, transformed it into a garter snake and returned it to him.

He had a good stage manner and did not allow his surprise to show, at least not too much, but he gave her a look that said that he was impressed.

He made as though he was finished with the trick and put the snake into his jacket’s spacious side pocket. As he reached for another prop, some gauzy scarves, the snake stuck its head out. Hosanna reached for it, and as it emerged, changed it into a king snake with vertical rather than longitudinal stripes.

Mick put the scarves down. “I guess it’s your turn.”

Hosanna smiled and the snake smoothly slid up her arm and across her shoulder. As it passed behind her head, it sprouted legs and a lizard scurried down her other arm. She cupped it in her hand. When she opened her fingers there sat a tiny humming bird, brilliant even in the subdued lighting of the bar. With a quick flutter it jumped to her shoulder. She pointed to his pocket. The bird darted once around them, circling so close the wind from its wings tousled their hair, and then dove inside.

Gingerly Mick reached into the pocket and, after a second, pulled out the piece of rope. His eyes were locked on hers. It took him a moment to speak, “I won’t ask how

you did that, but it's the most amazing illusion I've ever seen."

"Maybe it wasn't an illusion."

He nodded, willing to believe almost anything. His eyes were still locked on hers, as he asked, "Who are you?"

"Hosanna. You might say I'm in the process of working up an act."

Mick raised his eyebrows, "I'd say you're getting there." He paused, "I'm almost afraid to ask what else you have in your repertoire."

"That's exactly the problem. I can do all these tricks, and pretty well, if I do say so."

He nodded vigorously.

She continued, "But I don't have a theme to tie them together. And just doing one trick after another just isn't going to cut it."

Mick pulled himself up onto the seat next to hers. Signaling the bartender for a drink, he sighed. "Yeah, don't I know it. That's why I'm playing Tuesday night in a Holiday Inn with an audience of two lovebirds who may not need to rent a room after all, and a mysterious woman who shows me a trick that would confound Houdini." He sipped at his drink. "What are you trying to do with your act?"

"I've been thinking about that." She held up a finger.

"The first and probably the central point is that people should not take themselves so seriously. Then they can take on things like pride, greed," she nodded her head towards the couple in the booth, "and gratuitous lust that can harm others."

He interrupted, "As opposed to gratuitous lust that doesn't hurt others?"

Hosanna gave him a look that shut him up, but then shook her head and smiled.

“I needed that, thanks. Got to practice what I preach. I was taking myself too seriously for a moment there.”

She reached for her glass and took a sip. “This is lousy wine.” She tapped the glass with her fingernail.

“The house wine comes out of a box, I should have warned you.” He said. After a moment he continued, “You just said something about preaching. If you don’t mind my saying so, that’s what it sounds like your act is trying to do. People are looking to be entertained. They aren’t looking to be preached to.”

“That’s a good point. I like it when someone listens. Trouble is that my job specifications seem to call for a bit more preaching than entertaining.”

He took a sip of his wine, swallowed, and then took another. Pointing to the glass he asked, “Is this another of your illusions?”

Hosanna smiled and nodded slightly.

He started to say something, but held back. He’d already asked who she was. After a second he said, “Getting back to the point I was trying to make - maybe the way to do your – whatever is to teach the lesson in an entertaining and amusing way. The best teachers I had in school were the ones who livened things up some.”

“Oh, I’m going to liven things up. I want to make this fun if I can. I’m looking for the right ways to shake things up so they turn off the damned TVs and come out of their little worlds and pay attention.”

She felt him thinking that she was attractive, but maybe a little too spooky. From behind them there was the clank of a glass being knocked over as the under the table foreplay moved into high gear. Hosanna looked at Mick, “Tell me about loneliness.”

It took him a second to shift gears. “Are we talking universal loneliness and how we are all ultimately alone? Or are you asking about me, Mick the Magical, who has times when the rabbit starts to look attractive?”

She laughed. “The latter, but spare me too much detail.”

He nodded, “Ok, I was an only child, so I know about being alone. Good parents, or at least they tried, but they had what today are called issues. So they were kind of remote and for some reason I always felt different. For a while I tried to blame it on them, but I later realized it was my problem, whatever the cause... Anyway ... So, when it came time to have relationships with girls and then women, I tried too hard. I wanted too much. That scared a lot of women off. And those who stayed for a while - well, let’s just say they were too needy themselves - in a wonderful array of ways.” He shook his head and chuckled softly, “None of which meshed with my needs and or abilities to give.” He paused and took another sip, “Another thing, I was really shy, that’s why I took up Magic.” He looked at her, “What about you?”

She thought for a minute, “Not really lonely as in being alone, in fact getting away from my parents is a bit of a trick. But feeling different? Absolutely. And that made me feel very much alone. As for relationships, does your rabbit have a brother?”

She felt him looking at her differently, wondering if he had a chance of taking this somewhere else, specifically, to his place. Hosanna wondered if she could allow herself to be that human. It would, she told herself, be a step away from taking herself too seriously. But then again, she was a little afraid. Bad things had happened to her previous boyfriends – Especially Kevin Lacey, the boy who had been the first to talk himself into her pants. He’d ended up being a shit so she wasn’t too disturbed when he

had been stricken with dreams. Wild tormented dreams in which he was told that he would never have sex again. That, no matter how beautiful the woman, he would never be aroused. Six months later Hosanna heard that he'd been sighted in New York as a transvestite wearing a big blond wig and a hunky man on his arm.

Now that she knew how to summon demons she would have handled it differently. Thinking about it, she realized it probably had been wise for God to withhold that knowledge until now. It would have made high school a very dangerous place.

She wanted to explain this to Mick, but she knew that his penis had already hijacked his brain. She wondered what he would say if offered the choice between learning how to turn a rope into a snake and a one night stand. Trouble was it wasn't a trick she could teach anyone.

He leaned closer, "Usually I have to stay till eleven, but it is so slow tonight I could get off soon..."

"There are some things you ought to know."

"I'm sure, but you were saying something about not taking yourself too seriously?"

She smiled, "Tell you what. Let me ask for guidance while I go to the ladies room. If you haven't been turned into a toad by the time I get back I'll take that as a good sign."

He frowned, not quite understanding, but nodded.

Hosanna waited until the bathroom door shut behind her before asking, "So are You going to make him an amphibian?"

"It is tempting."

"Sometimes I think You get off on this Good God / Bad God routine."

"Which is the one who turns him into a toad?"

"As opposed to a mushroom? Look, I don't want You doing to him what happened to Kevin and the others."

"Kevin manipulated you. He deserved it. Besides you helped, you were the one who suggested he should decide that the shower room was a good place to tell all his buddies he was gay."

"I'm not proud of that. Besides, this one is different. Mick doesn't deserve it. And he's not married, I checked, besides, I can take care of my-self now."

"He's not to be trusted. He is not a worthy husband for you."

"Is anyone? I'm not looking for a husband. All I want is not to feel so alone. Just for tonight. That's all he wants too."

"You don't want to feel alone? If you'd perform your miracles in places where they could be seen, you could have a multitude..."

"I don't want a damned multitude. You know that. I just want someone to tell me I'm pretty. To tell me they like me..."

"You know why he will tell you those things – it's not because..."

"Give me a break! I was watching his fantasy, and you know something? It's one I wouldn't mind being a part of."

"It would have been easier to send another flood."

"I'll tell you what. If he does anything I don't like I'll make him wish there was a flood."

“Like what?”

“Like turn him into a rabbit owned by a drunken second-rate magician who grabs him by the balls when he lifts him out of the hat.”

“And you’ll be the one to do it. It’s time for you to start using your power.”

Mick’s apartment, four rooms set above a hardware store in the rundown center of Clarkston, had the look, feel and scent of bachelor. The view out the bedroom window was of the brick county courthouse. Mick apologized for the mess while quickly tossing dirty clothes into a corner. Hosanna saw he was nervous, and knew he hadn’t really expected her to accept his offer to go “meet the rabbit.”

Hosanna knew divine intervention was called for. She reached out and touched Mick on the cheek, sliding her hand up to his temple. “You will remember none of this so sit back and enjoy.”

With a flick of her fingers Hosanna produced the miracle of the clean sheets, followed by placement of a hundred candles and an invisible band of angels playing Mozart. Mick’s attention wavered for a moment, but focused again when Hosanna moved close and whispered, “Kiss me.”

His touch became sure as she pressed against him. His lips explored the side of her neck.

The bed sagged, and springs squealed as they lay upon it. This will not do, thought Hosanna.

The new bed had an ebony headboard with mother-of-pearl inlay. The castle was high on a mountain and the stone balcony on which the bed was set overlooked a

wooded ravine through which a small river fell. No sense in going half measures, she thought, as the moon became full and shooting stars punctuated the night. A warm breeze caressed them as buttons, clasps and zippers were released.

He was endowed with sonnets murmured between kisses which floated over the hills and valleys of her body. Mick seemed to know exactly what to do and where she needed his touch. But it was the awe she felt in his mind that touched Hosanna most deeply. Her body was a temple; his offerings resonated like a choir at full voice. He became an instrument of God as their world shrank and the sky filled with Aurora. She took him deep inside and bestowed blessings.

He liked to cuddle, Hosanna lay there staring into the depths of the universe as his strong arms and large hands gently grasped her. She wished the fantasy could be real. A part of her would even settle for the crowded rooms above Hal's Hardware. That was impossible, but she wondered if she could find a way to make him a disciple. He would, she was certain, follow her anywhere.

As dawn colored the sky behind the mountain's shoulder, Mick stirred and, following his bladder's imperative, got out of bed. Taking three steps he came to the stone parapet that kept him from falling two thousand feet into the ravine. Hosanna stirred and pointed towards the French doors leading into the castle. "In there, to the right."

Mick nodded and hurried off. When he returned he burrowed in beneath the covers. He kissed her, "We're not in Kansas anymore. And I'm giving up magic."

“Don’t do that.” Hosanna reached down and gently gripped his penis. “There is magic in this wand. Let me show you some tricks.”

Later, when he woke in his apartment, Mick found a trunk in his living room. Opening it, he discovered it filled with knowledge and a presence which would allow him to amaze and mystify.

Chapter 15

Hosanna Learns: What is not Her Style

Three days later Hosanna parked her car at the edge of a deserted road. The land was dry and rough, its red brown color muted by the pale blue light of early dawn. Here the plants that survived were tough and woody, often bearing thorns. Under foot it was rocky and beneath that she could feel tension as the earth ground hard against itself. The pressure was so strong it almost hummed. She kicked at a small stone and dislodged it.

After watching the rock tumble down a small slope she took a step back and asked, "You sure this is where I am supposed to be? It doesn't feel right. Not like it's my style. By the way, who was Saint Andreas, and why would a fault be named after him?"

'You are the epicenter. Wake them up.'

"Right." Still not fully believing, Hosanna pointed at the cliff with her index finger, her thumb held high. She brought her thumb down and said, "Pow."

For a second nothing happened, then the tension she had been feeling began to surge. A small cloud of dust rose and it felt like an elevator as it started down. The land on her side of the cliff dropped a couple of inches. She stumbled and fell landing on her hip. There were three strong lurches and then things got quiet.

"Sweet Jesus!"

'Not exactly. Again, but from up on top of the cliff this time.'

"Duh. Like don't sit on the branch when you are cutting it off. This is exactly what I mean by needing a handbook." She stood, brushing the dirt off her pants.

It took Hosanna a few minutes to make her way to a safer spot. Again she made the pistol sign with her hand and pointed. *'Not there, a little more to the left.'*

"You want to give me a burning bush to aim for?"

'Funny. I should have you use a staff, like Moses.'

"Get real will you?" She shifted her aim towards a section of cliff on the other side of the two lane road. "Pow!" This time she said it louder.

The result was immediate. A crack appeared in the earth as the westward side dropped and twisted slightly. Even though she had braced herself, Hosanna was dumped on her ass again. She stayed down, watching the dust rise around her.

That night the newscasts credited the first light tremor as serving as a warning so people were in safe areas when the second more destructive quake came. Damage was mostly confined to a couple of freeways.

There was some loss of life, and it followed a pattern that was quickly noted and commented upon. One of the few structures to collapse contained a whorehouse and after-hours bar which catered to a particularly nasty clientele.

Two men killed by a falling underpass turned out to have stolen the car a few minutes before. There were other instances, but the one that captured the press's attention was when the pavement opened under an accused pedophile priest and swallowed him up to his neck.

A TV crew captured his final minutes as the ground refused to release him despite the best efforts of onlookers with shovels. It made great drama when his pleas for escape turned to entreaties. Eloquent in his appeal to God, the priest's final

confession was lead story on the six, ten and eleven o'clock news.

Hosanna watched it from her room in Las Vegas. She kept wondering about her role in all of this. God clearly didn't need her; certainly not to go "pow" and make the earth quiver. If the victims had been targeted, God had to have been the one to do it. Hosanna did not feel responsible for the deaths, but the magnitude of it all was sobering. In one of her brief walks outside the hotel in Vegas Hosanna tried a quick shot aimed at one of the monster signs outside a casino. Nothing had happened. But then again, her heart had not been in it.

It just didn't feel right being the vehicle of a vengeful God. She had her own issues. If she was going to wreak havoc she wanted it to be on her lesson plan. A trip through the casino had reminded her how much people worshiped little pieces of paper with green ink on them. Hosanna put money and greed down on her list of things to do.

* * *

Martha was fully in author mode as she swung into the answer for a question she'd been asked before. "The chapter after the Earthquake in which Hosanna has something of a spiritual headache was a difficult one to write because it has to show transition. She has gone from little acts – usually directed at individuals and only one of them fatal, and that was his own doing – to realizing that her power can be measured in megatons – and that it can, and will, kill. She also realizes that she is in tutorial mode with God having a hand in the specific carnage that was wreaked. After the initial excitement she is left even more confused.

"Hosanna realizes she has to define her mission. And that she's only one who can do that. And she knows that going around and claiming responsibility for an Earthquake will get her crucified if it were believed and committed if doubted. It is clearly not the start she wants on this

new path. Besides, she feels there is something a bit too dramatic about earthquakes – so she retreats to Los Vegas where she tries to figure some things out amid the impossible alternative reality there.”

The interviewer said, “We’re almost out of time, but one last question. One about you. At some point you must have had the opportunity to escape from the hospital or later from the attic?”

“Good question. I am afraid it has a complicated answer though. The short version is that I was exactly where I needed to be - to do the things I had to do. One of those was to write the story of Hosanna. Where we end up is at the end of a long path. If I had gotten out earlier, would I have finished the book? Would I have been able to get it published?”

The announcer concluded, “Things to think about. Thank you, Martha Scott, for being here with us today.”

Chapter 16

Hosanna meets another disciple - Princess Alexandra

As Hosanna was emerging from the buffet, having barely resisted the urge to Lazarusize the lobsters and send them skittering onto the casino floor, she met a tall black woman who was wearing sunglasses and a flowing dress that looked like a choir robe except it was a rainbow of reds centered around maroon.

Turning to her, the woman said, "Go in Peace, Holy One."

Hosanna stopped instantly. "You can't mean me."

"No one else here."

Hosanna looked around, the corridor was empty. "How? No, who are you?" She was wondering if she had run into a sister or a cousin.

The woman smiled, "I am Princess Alexandra. I see all. Perhaps you have watched my show on channel 11?"

"No, can't say I have. Do you...."

The woman smiled then ticked off the answers on her fingers.

"Know what you are wondering? - Am I for real? - Yes I am."

"Do I know who you are? I just told you." She raised another finger.

"Do I know that you are feeling alone and bewildered; uncertain as to your course? Of course." She beckoned with her fingers, "Come with me. We'll get a drink and I'll put your mind at ease."

Hosanna followed the woman into a large though virtually empty cocktail lounge where they found a table in a dimly lit corner. By the time she was seated Hosanna was

thinking that God seemed to have regained Her sense of humor.

The waitress knew this woman calling her, 'Princess' and seemed impressed by her. Hosanna glanced at the too opulent surroundings and said, "God works in mysterious ways."

"Mysterious?" Alexandra answered, "That word only scratches the surface. I could tell you stories. But the truth is you are about the biggest baffling I've ever seen."

Hosanna nodded, "That describes me just about right. And I don't have a clue. Since you've got the answers, could we start with why I'm here and what exactly I'm supposed to be doing?" Her voice grew a little tight as she concluded, "I'd really like it if you could explain it to me."

"That was a puzzle when I first saw you. The long range is still a bit muddy. But then I realized that tonight is the night that you're going to be the Guest Star on my show."

"Your show? Me? I don't think so."

"Don't fight it, Princess Alexandra sees all." As the waitress approached with their drinks, she said, "I'll demonstrate."

After the woman placed the drinks on the table Alexandra reached out and touched her hand. "Helene – you'd better sit."

The woman answered nervously, "I can't. They ..."

"No one will see." Alexandra's words were soothing.

The woman looked to see if her boss was watching then perched on the edge of a chair.

"You have a man named Wayne. Maybe you can forgive him his drinking and

the occasional slap he gives you, but right now he is consorting with another woman and is contracting a disease you don't want to die from."

The waitress did not respond. She just sat there. After a couple of moments she started to shake her head and say something, but she stopped. A second later she had the words and spoke through clenched teeth, "That lying son of a bitch! You know, he said he was going... I didn't think. Damn! I believed him." She balled her hands into tight fists, "I should have seen this coming."

Touching the woman's hand again to get her attention, Alexandra said, "When you get back to the bar your boss is going to suggest that you leave early because it's so slow. Say yes, go back to your place, pack a bag and go check into the Desert View Hotel. Tell them I sent you."

The woman didn't say anything, she just sat there, obviously stunned and looking as though she wanted to cry.

"Do as I say. This is your one chance - you let Wayne into your bed and you are as good as dead." Alexandra pulled a card from a pocket in her robe and tapped the woman's hand with it. After a second Helene opened her fingers and took it. "Give this to the man behind the desk at the Desert View. He'll give you the Princess Alex refugee rate. And, listen to me, this is important, when you are packing - look inside his boots. The old ones in the back of the closet. Pull out a sock and you'll find some of the money that he took from your tip stash."

The waitress just sat there, her breathing was getting faster, her face angry.

Alexandra pressed her, "Go now. You've got time to clear out before he comes home with a bunch of flowers, some old lies, and a brand new virus."

Helene took a deep breath, nodded and got to her feet. Hosanna watched as she walked back to the bar, and was called aside by the manager.

Hosanna grinned and said, "I'm impressed. Though you missed some money. One of the cans of beer in the refrigerator is a fake, that's where he's got a lot more cash. It's ok though, she'll find it when she empties the other cans into the sink. I'm still waiting for some advice for me."

"Like I said, come on my show. At first no one is going to believe you. And that is part of the plan. But tonight you are going to put some things on the record. And when they come true you are going to be believed."

Hosanna had known this day was coming, but had not imagined it taking place in a deserted cocktail lounge in Las Vegas. She knew she could no longer avoid it. At least she seemed to have an ally. And it made more sense than standing in the desert saying, "pow."

The Sermon of the Cocktail Lounge

The Princess Alexandra Hour of Forthcoming was televised, but was also a live show at one of the lesser hotels off the strip. Alexandra explained, "That's what makes it so easy. This is where the truly degenerate gamblers wind up on their second or third bounce after hitting the wall. It's a place where the universe seems to have drawn the unfortunate, the desperate and the utterly lonely. Telling fortunes where the future holds, 'a promotion to vice president in two years, or a fender bender involving your Porsche and a Mercedes' – doesn't get you the ratings – even at two in the morning.

"Last night I told a man that his girlfriend's husband was looking for them and that he had a gun. That was kind of fun because the guy didn't realize she was married

even though she was wearing a ring. It's amazing what men don't see." She pointed to her breasts saying, "I call them blinders."

Hosanna was trying to keep from thinking about the show so she asked, "Tell me about your talent."

"Like - is it for real?"

"No. I don't doubt it. How could I? Especially me, Queen of the Strange and Impossible. Actually, I'm hoping that you'll tell me about how God speaks to you so I won't feel like such a freak."

"You want me to be your older sister and take the heat off of you? Well, you don't win that big, but I do know you for what you are, and I have no doubts. I also can help with the seating arrangements so you're not next to Judas at dinner."

Hosanna smiled, noting that there were still fifteen minutes before the show. "Thanks, I guess I can tell you that I got a promise that I wasn't going to come to the same end as the big J."

"Good thing. Crucifixion was a bad way to go. Of course you're still going to have to take precautions. Staying out of Wal-Mart during the frenzy buying periods is probably a good plan." Alexandra glanced at the clock. "Let me tell you how the show works. I start off with a short piece on anything that happened today that I foretold. Then I usually look into the audience and say – 'Let's see if there is anything interesting going on out here.' Today I'll do that for a while then I'm going to turn to where you are standing off stage and I'm going ask you come out. There will be no script; it's easier that way. Follow my lead. Before you know it – it will be over."

The spotlight made Alexandra seem taller and more majestic. On stage she was animated, raising her arms so the sleeves of her robe billowed. "Tonight I met someone who is going to change the way people think about a lot of things. Events like this are difficult to accept when they are first happening, and I don't expect you to believe. Not yet." Sweeping her arm in an arc pointing to the members of the audience she went on, "But believe you will, each and every one of you because you are lucky enough to be here to see her." She paused and took a breath, "This woman makes what powers I have seem puny." Alexandra stopped and looked out at the third table, "But first, there is a bit of business out here." She locked eyes with a puffy overweight man, much too large to be wearing a checked shirt, "Hope you have cab fare because the repo men have found your car." This got a laugh as the man shot to his feet, knocking his chair over in his haste. He took two steps towards the door.

"Stop!" Her voice was commanding.

He did and looked back at her, "You'd be better off staying and seeing the show than chasing after a lost cause. Unless you've got," Alexandra paused and looked up briefly before speaking again, "Seven thousand, three hundred twenty two dollars, cash, in your pocket. That's what you owe on the car, and they won't take any less now they've got it on the flatbed." The man took another step towards the door then turned and slunk back to his seat.

As the audience laughed and applauded, Alexandra turned to the curtain and motioned. "This is Hosanna. Her name means 'praise the Lord in the highest.' She has something to say to you."

The applause continued, but trailed off as Hosanna emerged blinking at the

brightness of the lights.

Then there was silence. She waited for Alexandra to say something, but the woman only smiled. Hosanna knew she had been sandbagged.

She said the first thing that came to her mind, "God sent Jesus. You know the story. It didn't go too well." She realized she was speaking with her mind as well as her mouth. She sensed that she was breaking through all the barriers these people had in place to keep from really listening. "God sent some others and they were ignored, burned at the stake or put in mental institutions. Now, this was not especially pleasing to the Lord, so She decided to try something different."

A buzz passed through the room.

"Does the word, She, threaten you? Get over it - because that's the good news." Hosanna paused. She looked down at the man who had just lost his car. "Remember last week when the repo man called. You didn't answer the phone, but you listened as he left the message on your machine. Said he'd work with you, rather get some money than have to take the car back?" The guy nodded.

"You could have done it. If you'd given him what you had - he would have backed off for a while. Trouble was, you had already planned to spend that money on this trip. You had already invited Julie and you really wanted to come here because you figured you'd get laid. So you ignored the good advice the man was giving you.

The amazing thing was you actually thought that you could win enough to pay for the trip and and make the payments when you got home."

Hosanna smiled and shook her head before continuing. "You've got a lot of faith. Trouble is – it's not aimed in the right direction. If you had that much faith in God, you'd

be able to walk on water but . . . ,” she held her hand up, “Don’t go trying it - not if it’s over six inches deep.”

Hosanna paused to let the short nervous laugh pass. When she spoke again she increased the power of her voice, “I guess in some ways you could call me Jehovah’s repo man. This is *the* call you should listen to.

“You are behind on your payments. ALL OF YOU.” She swept her gaze across the audience. For a fraction of a second each person felt her look penetrate. “And you’d better think about making a payment plan.”

“Good news for some of you though - don’t look in your wallets. No collection plates will be passed. God does not take Cash, Checks, MasterCard or Visa. Never has.

“Instead - look in your hearts. Then take a look at your egos. Which is bigger? She pointed to one man’s chest, “Your heart should be at least as big as your ego. Bigger even. If you really look at yourselves; I don’t think you are going to like what you see.”

She turned to the large man in the checked shirt, “But, just like you, nobody is going to make the spiritual payment unless they really think somebody *really* is going to come and do something, like take the car back.”

“Us repo guys and gals are not as dumb as you would like to think. Just as the one outside knew you were going to park in the back, I know where you have parked your greed and your pride. So the question is, what am I going to do to show you that I’m not just another late-night lunatic?”

She was holding their attention, but knew she had to get to the point, “Back when

things were simpler – a burning bush was a really big thing. But today it wouldn't get a second glance. Except somebody might call the fire department if they had their cell phone handy.

“So I think that the way to get your attention is to put out the burning bush, so to speak.” She paused for long enough for people to get a bit restless.

“Fifteen minutes from now television is not going to work. Not here, not in New York, nowhere in this country. Cable too. They'll say it's interference from sun spots or something like that.”

She waved her hand, “Whatever. I think a couple of days without television will likely do you a lot of good. Maybe it will provide time to think. It wasn't going to get Princess Alexandra the national exposure she wants, at least not right away, but then again she's going to be busy keeping the Department of Homeland Security from deciding I'm some sort of terrorist.” She looked at her watch, “I would guess you probably want to wrap things up Alexandra.”

Hosanna turned and walked off the stage leaving a very quiet room behind. There was no applause.

Twelve minutes later the backstage monitors dissolved into static then blue screens. A minute after that Alexandra came through the curtain, moving fast. “Holy Girlfriend, we might want to make a quick exit. People are going to get pretty confused in the short term.”

As they headed out of town past the miles of strip malls, restaurants and gas

stations, Hosanna said. “You sand-bagged me. ‘Follow my lead,’ you said. I felt like an idiot out there.”

“You did good. Better than that actually – it was the real thing and if you had had time to try and think about what to say and rehearse it – it would have looked it. When TV comes on again and they replay the tape of the show...”

“They won’t,” Hosanna said.

“Hey, I’m the one who’s supposed to be psychic.”

“You know they won’t. Joe didn’t bother setting up the tape. He had a good hand in a game down the street, didn’t show up for work. They wouldn’t even if they had it - you don’t have to use your talent to see it. And that’s ok. I’m beginning to think that God has been making a mistake sending men and women as messengers. What you need is something that really commands respect. King Kong or, even better, Godzilla.”

“You want to turn the second coming into a B grade movie?”

Hosanna laughed. “Kind of fitting – look at it this way. Think really big. Let’s imagine the universe is filled with solar systems like this one. Each with its own God. Now imagine we are sort of mid-term exam for all the Gods. What kind of grade do you think Earth would get?”

Alexandra did not answer for a while. Then as they passed a Toys R Us she said, “The part - plays well with others - would say, ‘needs improvement’. That’s for sure.”

A minute later Alexandra spoke again and asked, “So when did you figure out that you were whatever it is that you are?”

Hosanna answered, “I still haven’t figured it out, but when I was in kindergarten

there was this boy, Billy Johns, and he liked to tease girls. I watched him torment the other girls and then one day he starts in on me. I was getting ready to cry. But then there was a soft voice inside my head. *'You are my daughter. Show him.'* So I turned and looked into his eyes. At first he smirked, but then I put the image of his piggy face into his mind. Then like a cartoon I showed it puffing up like a balloon until it burst. In a second he was crying. The teacher came over thinking I'd hit him with a block or something, but I showed her how ugly he was. She just told him to get into the corner and keep quiet.

"I was a very lonely kid. My mother was working and I was in this after school center. Long story, but I had a window I would sit at and look out onto the back yard. There was a tree there. And I used to talk to it, tell it things and then it started to answer me back. Now I knew enough to keep this friendship to myself. It was a very important part of my life. The after school place was a dump. The woman who ran it was a real screamer, but she left me alone. And I learned a lot from the tree. Learned more there than I did at school. I was really upset when my mom told me I was going to a different program, but as I was walking down the street, I found that I could talk with any tree. Somewhere along there I heard someone say that 'God is Everywhere', it wasn't church. My mom didn't go. Anyway, I not only believed it – I knew it from personal experience." Hosanna paused, "Your turn, when did you discover your talents?"

Alexandra thought for a moment before answering, "I was about the same age. My mother had this boyfriend who was a real loser. This guy was worse than the rest, and she had the ability to pick some true winners." The Princess shook her head at the memory. "This one, Dwayne would get drunk, come home and hit anything that came

within arm's length. I still remember the first time he whupped me. There was this combination of hurt and fear that kind of took me out of my body. Later, I learned how to go there on my own. I got so I would sense when he left the bar and that gave me time to hide myself and my brothers. The feeling became stronger and I got so I could see inside his mind some. That's how I knew that he had another woman and some other kids.

"He wasn't my father, Thank You God! That's what got me through it when he did manage to catch me and start whoopin. I'd say, 'at least he's not my father'. I still say that sometimes when I'm having a bad day. Number one on my gratitude list."

She paused to let that thought roll away, "Anyway, I told my mother about the other woman, but she was too scared, too beaten, and too depressed to do anything." She looked at Hosanna. "Are you sure you want to hear all this? It's not a pretty story."

Hosanna replied, "On Page 14 in the manual they give to God's offspring, it says that you should get to know your disciples."

"Is that what I am? I was wondering. Can you tell me about the benefit package?"

"You will get all this information when you go to disciple orientation. But first finish the story."

Alexandra laughed and, after a second, continued, "Like I said, Dwayne was a real sleaze bag. He was greedy, lazy and not so smart. That's a particularly dangerous mix especially when you added alcohol which made him mean. He decided to rip off the drug dealer who lived downstairs. I got this from looking into his mind – which I tried not to do too much. But I wanted to know when he was going to be home. Anyway, the

guy who lived downstairs wasn't a whole lot better, nice guys don't end up dealing crack, but he'd always been okay to me. He'd give me and the others a dollar for soda or candy now and then. So I whispered to him that he should keep an eye on the old elevator shaft. That was how Dwayne was going to get into the apartment. That night Dwayne doesn't go out drinking like he always does. He has some to drink but he doesn't get really drunk. Then, after we went to bed, I hear him opening up the old shaft. It had been a dumbwaiter a long time before when the building had a better class of tenants.

"A little later we hear the blast of a shotgun. Knew it was a shotgun. Kids in the suburbs know what kind of bird it is from the sound they make. We was the same way with guns. Then it got quiet, like it always did after gunshots. I went and closed the little door he left open. Two days later Dwayne hadn't shown up - there was a knock on the door. It was two big guys carrying about twenty bags of groceries. There was steak and all sorts of stuff. More ice cream than could fit in the freezer, we had to eat some right then even though it was only an hour till dinner. They didn't say anything, just that it was a gift. The drug dealer moved a couple of weeks later. By that time my mother had hooked up with another loser. This one was better though, he fell asleep when he got drunk."

Hosanna nodded. "Darwin was right. The species is better off when the most stupid are killed off."

"You don't think what I did was wrong? I was a little nervous telling you. I knew he would get blown away. Bad as he was ..."

Hosanna interrupted, "Seems like the perfect response to a bad situation. If we're

going to work together, you're going to have to get over this thing about me being the daughter of God. Not something I had anything to do with. Just like you didn't pick your parents. And you've got to understand that Judgment Day is not my responsibility. Don't know how that works, I'm not even sure there is one. Not my message at all. I think God is more pissed off that Her creation is trashing the planet, and generally acting stupid - that makes Her look bad."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Good question. I'm still hoping you'll have some of those answers."

The next morning Alexandra, who had changed from her robes to jeans and a shirt, and Hosanna were sitting in a Denny's, reading a paper trying to be inconspicuous. Alexandra finished the lead article then spoke, "This says that the nationwide TV blackout is not the result of terrorism. They say they are working at ways to avoid the interference from the sun spots." She lowered the paper and said, "Nothing about you. Or me. I hate to say it, but the truth is that nobody much was watching my show. And if they were, they aren't believing it."

Hosanna looked up from her plate. "I guess I've got to take this as a lesson. If I want to be recognized, it doesn't help to shut down the media." She paused and ate a piece of her omelet. After swallowing she said, "I've got some ideas, but I've got to get people to listen to me. They're not going to want to hear what I have to say. So that means I am going to have to get their attention first."

Alexandra shook her head, "I don't have a good feeling about this."

"What happened to - 'I see the future and the road is clear.'"

"I never said that! Most people you look at them and something stands out. You know, this guy looks like the kind of guy who would find a way to take some cash out of the accounts at work. Then I look a little closer and I see whatever it is that I see."

"And?"

"And Hosanna, first thing I saw was that you were this super holy person. There was a light around you, they call it an aura and yours is so much brighter than any I've ever seen. That's what I still see. Trouble is it's so bright I can't see much else."

"How about you? Can you see where we are going to be?"

"My sight has never been all that good regarding myself. When I first started my show I thought I was going to be taking over late night television. I was going to be syndicated coast to coast. It didn't happen. Letterman and Leno weren't ready to be pushed aside. I guess psychic can't see through wishful thinking."

Alexandra was quiet for a while then asked, "There's some things I gotta know."

"Like does God really talk to me?"

"No. That I believe. What I want to know is how God let it come to this. I mean where has He or She been for the past two thousand years? The courses I liked best in school were history and some serious shit went down between then and now."

"I've wondered about that myself. Almost as though God only uses this place on weekends. Except the weeks are hundreds of years long to us. Whatever. God's time is different from our time, that's for sure. It says things like that in the Bible. Not that I trust the version that has been translated and twisted for thousands of years. And remember, it was originally written by a bunch of people who were trying to convince others to toe the line."

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When the FBI's urgent response team was on 'stand down' Phillip tended to a bottomless in-basket, attended trainings and exercises, and was in rotation to get reports of unusual happenings that possibly might be terrorist connected. He called this, "goose chase duty". In the past he'd raided a secret room behind a bar in Newark that turned out to be a storeroom where an aging prostitute was conducting business. She had been a little thrilled to be busted by eighteen agents with two helicopters hovering overhead. They were still doing paperwork three days after she was back out on the street. Another time Phillip checked out suspicious air-freight which turned out to be dogs being sent to breeders in Boston. The Malloy's, a family that hadn't had contact with the police except when an officer had been sent for traffic control at their daughter's wedding, were less than thrilled having their kennel searched for evidence of weapons of mass destruction. The agents doing the searching were not happy either.

The disruption to TV kicked things into high gear, so Phillip was not surprised when a folder ended up on his desk. He put on his official voice as he spoke to his team members, "We've got a live one here guys."

Holding up a page he read, "The Princess Alexandra Hour of Forthcoming, Channel Eleven in Las Vegas, weeknights at 12:30, had a guest who they say claimed to be a daughter of God. This person supposedly said she was going to turn off TV just before it happened. Unfortunately, tape of the show is unavailable. Seems like the station didn't think it was worth taping. But a witnesses the local office talked to said that this woman, possibly named Hosanna, said she was going to do it as a lesson."

Joe Carlson, an eager young agent asked, "When do we leave?"

Phillip smiled. "Do I hear a volunteer?" One of the agents snickered.

Joe looked around, "What?"

"First, the report goes on to say that the witnesses were a bit squirrely. We're talking drunks at a free act in a rundown hotel. Tried to give no names and then false names. One was a guy on a *business trip* with his secretary. They lost all their money the first night in town. The agent reports she said the guy was lousy in bed - that's why they were at the show. You really want to go two thousand miles to interview her?

"Second, we did an investigation on Princess Alexandra once before when she reported that there were some experiments with aliens going on at one of the bases out there. She tried to take a camera crew onto one of the restricted areas. Seems that she had been told that the Vice President was getting rejuvenated by having sex with aliens." He paused, "Do you want a third reason?"

Joe looked around at the grins, "I guess not. This sex thing with aliens," he asked, "do you think it worked?"

* * *

Later that day Hosanna and Alexandra were sitting in Hosanna's car running the air conditioning against the heat.

Hosanna said, "I've been thinking, you know the story about how Jesus turned water into wine? He saved the day at a wedding when they ran out. Well, what would happen if we went to California and turned gasoline into wine. Wouldn't that be a hoot? Cars rolling to a stop. And people finding out that their tanks are half full of a pretty good merlot? There would be lines of people with jugs at gas stations."

"God Girl, you are too much. And I'm not sure that's got "we" written anywhere on

it.”

“Do you think they’ll let me back on your show after the TVs come back?”

“I suspect we’ll have some pretty nervous sponsors.”

Three days after television started working again, Hosanna stood on stage at Princess Alexandra’s show. The producer allowed her on after she had promised not to repeat the dead TV stunt again and Alexandra had told him that one of the waitresses in the room found him attractive.

“Sunspots. That’s what it was. Right. Should be interesting to see how they explain the next one. I’ll even give them time to work on it. In two days and fourteen hours - at two twenty this coming Friday afternoon it would be a good idea not to be driving your car in Los Angeles. Because one minute later it will not work. You’ll have to walk home. This applies only to gasoline powered cars. Fire trucks and ambulances will run fine.”

After the show Alexandra asked, “What exactly is your message?”

Hosanna answered, “I am here to throw shit into the fan.” With that she rose and left the cocktail lounge that served as the studio. She walked through the casino to the roulette wheel. When she got there the players parted to give her space at the rail. Producing bills out of thin air, she said, “Let those who believe, put their faith on One. For that is the number of the Lord.”

A couple of players put chips next to hers.

The wheel spun and one was the winner. The table workers moved chips

towards her. The other players reached to collect their winnings. She spoke again, “Do not doubt that there is one and only one.” There was sufficient power in Hosanna’s tone for the other players to withdraw their hands and let the bets ride. The wheel spun again and the ball fell into the same slot. This time the piles of chips were very large. There was a cheer then a hush. The workers summoned the bosses. She did not move towards the chips. Looking at the other players she said, “I believe. Do you?”

The workers looked to the boss who nodded and allowed the bets. The crowd around the table was silent as the ball rolled and bounced and rattled before finally falling into the predetermined slot.

A shout went up. Hosanna pointed to the double zero. “God’s wisdom is infinite.” She pushed her winnings there. The others followed. Security men surrounded the table to keep onlookers back and to prevent new bettors.

Calls were made and the Tuxedo’d men allowed a final roll.

The croupier made sure the ball spun and bounced and bounded before it fell into the newly foretold slot.

As piles of high denomination chips were put on trays in front of the winners Hosanna said, “If you value your lives, you will now place this money on the poor. For these riches are the Lord’s and you are just an instrument to deliver them.”

Excited babble stopped and they all turned and looked at her. She continued, “Tell the casino to wire your winnings to Action Against Hunger – or Doctors without Borders.”

“You got to be kidding lady. They say charity begins at home.” The speaker, a

man who was wearing a shirt that was a wrong shade of green, picked up his tray and with a security guard leading the way, started towards the cashier.

He got about four steps before he faltered. He handed the tray to his wife and grabbed his arm. Then his knees bent and he slowly collapsed.

The wife watched him sink and then spoke to Hosanna. "You don't understand."

"Oh but I do. He wasn't going to pay off the credit card bills. He was not going to put it in the college fund for your children. He was going to spend it on a car, a boat, and a woman named Gina."

The woman looked down at him. "You bastard." She drew back her foot to kick him, but Hosanna stopped her. "Better not, you've got just about enough to cover the bypass surgery, not sure you should be adding dental work to it."

Beside Hosanna another woman was staring at her pile of chips. She separated one small pile. "I'll give these."

Hosanna shook her head, "That's between you and God, but I'd rethink that offer. And there is a cancer in your left breast."

The remaining man pushed his pile towards her. "Give it away – all of it. Just let me live."

She smiled at him, "What about the chips you put in your pocket?"

He went pale. His hand darted into his jacket pocket and removed them. They clattered as he dropped them on the table. Slowly, he backed away. Hosanna pointed her finger at him and he stopped. "You have much to atone for. Expect no credit for this act. It was simply a wake up call that the dollar you have worshipped is a false idol."

A manager approached, "Perhaps it would be best if we concluded this somewhere else," he began.

Hosanna agreed, the crowd was not smiling. People who had not been at the table were clutching their chips tightly. Alexandra steered her out into the parking lot and said to Hosanna, "Wrong audience in the wrong venue, God Girl. If they had lions they'd feed you to them."

As Hosanna got into her car she asked, "You sure you don't want to come for a ride? It will be interesting."

Slowly shaking her head Alexandra smiled, "I've already got interesting. Besides, I have the feeling that you're going to need a disciple who can help pick up the pieces. I'll see you then."

* * *

As she was driving west through the desert Hosanna asked, "Got a question for you, O Holy one."

There was no response.

"So do I take this silence as a sign of consent that all the ideas that have been coming to me are divinely inspired and I have license to go forth and stir things up?"

Again there was silence. "Or do I take this silence to mean that I am no longer divinely connected and am free to get on with living my life? Oh boy."

"Not so fast. You have a destiny to fulfill."

'So you say, but you know sometimes I find the lack of a clear path a little ... I don't know, unsettling. I have the feeling Alexandra may be right about picking up the pieces.'

‘When I give direction – what do you say? ‘Get off my case’ and other choice phrases... I’ve learned my lesson. Besides, it is more interesting this way.’

Chapter 17

Hosanna Delivers Her First Lesson

Patrolman Ron Walker, who was given to theatrical gestures, looked at his partner and slowly shook his head. He swept his arm indicating the empty pavement of the decidedly un-scenic overlook with its view down on the six levels of ramps where two freeways met. To him it looked like an orgy of copulating snakes, but remembering the sexual harassment sensitivity training he had attended two days ago, he kept that to himself. Instead he said, "What did we do to get stuck with this one?"

She mimicked his scowl. "Hey, it's not so bad. At least it's a nice day."

"That's about all that's good. You get assigned to protect someone important - sometimes you get something out of it. One of the candidates has his staff give out sandwiches. And the Governor, he's got tickets to shows and once I even got one to a ball game, but no, we get this religious kook."

"I guess someone at headquarters don't think she's a kook."

"Headquarters! They think the Earth is flat. Lot of people think they are Napoleon." He pointed to his head making circles with his finger as he said, "Just like them, this one belongs in the back pasture at the funny farm."

She broke into his discourse saying, "Look sharp. The TV camera is swinging this way."

The only other people at the overlook were a TV crew clustered alongside an oversized van. Walker moved closer to them. The reporter was kind of cute and maybe,

he hoped, was one of those women who had a thing for cops.

He was about ten feet away when she raised the microphone and, as the lights came on, started to speak. "I'm going to do the intro two ways. If it turns out she's a crank we can use it in the Loony Tunes section. If somehow she's for real I don't want to be caught being irreverent. Here goes the first version." She stood a little straighter and smiled at the camera for three seconds before saying, "Good afternoon. This is Marsha Whitley reporting from the hills where we have been summoned to see yet another California prophet. This one calls herself Hosanna. Just Hosanna, like a super model or a rock star. She claims she has come here to show all of California how they have taken God for granted and she will demonstrate that the Lord is displeased. She says it will be a dramatic reminder of who is in control. We'll have to see about that. In these parts you don't get to be a one name star just because you think you are divinely inspired. If that were the case the phone book would be much thinner."

She made a cutting gesture with her hand then, after touching her hair, she said, "Here is the second version." She nodded to the camera, "Who is Hosanna? She claims to be speaking and acting for the Lord. She says that God is displeased with us and is going to demonstrate in a simple act just how much we are subject to His control. We don't send a crew out for every prophet who faxes us a press release, but this woman comes with some references."

A minute later, Hosanna, dressed in jeans and a dark blue blouse and carrying a canvas bag, appeared at the edge of the overlook. The camera swung towards her and recorded her approach.

When Hosanna got to the announcer she spoke, “Good afternoon. Two thousand years ago a man named Jesus changed water to wine. It was a demonstration of His power – of God’s power. I think it’s time to repeat the lesson, but this time there will be a different result.” She noted Marsha was fidgeting. “I know I’m taking too long because the universal attention deficit disorder says it has to be twelve seconds or less. Ok. Pay attention now, I am about to change something else into wine.” Hosanna raised her hands and slowly spread them. “If you would aim your camera on the freeways below – you’ll see something interesting.”

There were snickers, but the cameraman obeyed then zoomed in as something seemed to be happening. On each strand of the tangled web below cars slowed and, in a minute, coasted to a stop. Trucks kept moving, weaving through the stalled cars. After a moment Hosanna continued, “If you care to, you can check the cars down there. You’ll find they have tanks filled with a pretty good red wine. I did not change diesel as I did not want to disable fire trucks and other emergency vehicles.” She reached into the bag and pulled out a long piece of clear plastic tubing with a little squeeze pump attached to one end. “Anyone?”

Patrolman Walker saw a chance to get himself on the news. He stepped forward and took the tubing. A car had stalled on the street just past the overlook. The driver was lifting the hood. As Walker crossed the lot he was careful not to outpace the cameraman. “Sir, can I take a sample from your gas tank?”

The man nodded and moved to reach inside the car and release the gas cap.

As he started to pump, Walker realized he had nothing to collect the liquid in. “Anyone have a cup?” One of the TV crew poured out the two inches remaining in a

bottle of spring water and handed it to him. After a few strokes a liquid came up the tube. It was red. When the bottle was three quarters full Walker stopped pumping and held it up. "Doesn't look like gasoline." He brought the bottle to his nose and sniffed, "It smells like wine." He thought about taking a sip, but realized he was on duty and in uniform and if any of the tight asses at headquarters saw it... Instead, he handed it to the reporter. Looking a bit wary, a frown straining against Botox, Marsha tipped the bottle so a couple of drops rested on her finger. After smelling it she tentatively touched it to her tongue. The camera was focused on her face. It took a moment before the worried look was replaced with a smile. "It's wine." She raised the bottle, took a sip and swallowed. "It's good," she announced, "very good. Last night I paid sixty dollars for a bottle not nearly this good."

The container was passed around. The TV soundman, having appropriated the hose, started pumping into a gallon jug somebody had come up with until the car's owner objected. He then walked off looking for another car.

The reporter didn't know what to do with the story. She had the camera pan out onto the freeways which were still immobilized, then back to the bottle she again held in her hand. There were less than two inches of liquid in it. She signaled the cameraman and as the lights came on again she said, "I'm not sure what to call this. The drivers stranded below aren't going to be calling it a miracle, and while it is possible that this is a big hoax, I do not see how it could be." She stopped and looked around frantically, "We will be interviewing Hosanna as soon as we can locate her." She made a cutting motion with her hand, and then craned her head looking once more for the missing prophet.

It took Marsha a while to get through to the news director. Since it had been a fluff piece they had not bothered setting up the link that would transmit the interview back to the station. Tape was soon enough for a piece that would likely get cut anyway.

“I’ve got it! I’m telling you! The nut job you sent me out to do – well she did it.”

There was a pause, and then she said, “The traffic jam, that’s what! Check out a car and you’ll find that she filled the tank with wine.”

Listening for only a second, she interrupted, “I know it’s crazy. Don’t ask me. She said she would do it. I saw the cars all stop. It’s on tape! She had a little pump and we sucked some out of a car that stalled right here. I know it’s crazy. It’s impossible, but we’ve got the story.”

“I’m sending the segment back. I’m having the guys set the uplink now. Take a look at it. You’ll see. And check out a car.”

Hosanna was on a bicycle moving quickly down a slope on her way back to the hotel. The ride up had been harrowing with drivers giving her very little room. This was not a problem now.

* * *

Twelve minutes previously - Becky Rains, a very ambitious real estate agent, had been thinking today was going to be the day when it gloriously all came together. This made her smile as she pushed her car through the traffic that always seemed to conspire against her. It didn’t matter how much extra time she gave herself – all it took was one jerk and the congestion went from bad to impossible. Her car that had all the

latest traffic avoidance toys, two cell phones, and a gps system hooked into an online program that monitored traffic flow - and she was still going to get to the house on Crestlawn ten minutes late.

There she was meeting Bill and Sherrie Stevens who were just about ready to nail down the deal. One more look to assure Sherrie there was enough closet space and Bill would say, "Let's do it." Becky's laptop had the forms ready to print. She could do an electronic bank transfer from the kitchen table and tie it up. Two times previously she'd taken them to the brink only to have them outbid or balk at some little detail. Today would be different, and, God knew, she needed it to be. This car which spoke so brilliantly of her success had a payment due tomorrow. Her plumber had just told her that the house she was trying to fix-up and flip needed another twenty thousand before she could show it. If she could pull that off she would make the move to the next level. In two years she should have her own firm then it would be clear sailing. She'd still have to kiss ass till her lips were callused, but at least she'd get the whole commission.

She pushed on the accelerator and smiled as she was pressed back into the leather seat – the pretty monster, her name for the Porsche Cayenne Turbo, a high performance sports SUV, slid through a gap most would be afraid to try. She loved the car even if it meant another two hundred a month. It ran - it ran very well. You had to be ready to spend real money to get a machine this good. Ahead of her a car slowed, she twitched the wheel moving into the next lane, but as she touched the pedal to move up, the purr gurgled, sputtered and the car jerked as it lost power. Shifting into neutral she pumped the gas as she coasted towards another slowing car. "Shit. Shit. Shit!"

She swerved around two cars that were fully stopped, the steering difficult as the engine no longer assisted. While angling into the breakdown lane Becky activated a phone. No one was passing her, she noted, as she used the voice dial feature. "Client Stevens." She saw the traffic grid screen showed a large red blob centered over the little yellow triangle indicating her position.

The call rang once before she lost signal as every driver within twenty miles hit the send button.

She looked up through the moon-roof at the sky, "Don't you know I *need* this sale? Jesus!" Trying to restart the car, she turned the ignition off and then on again. The engine turned over reluctantly, without a sign of life. All around people were emerging from their cars. Some were looking under the hoods. She knew better than to try, her mechanic told her that he didn't touch the engine until he had hooked up the computer to the data readout terminals. She turned the key silencing the two buzzers that told her that she wasn't going anywhere. Even though both phones were showing no signal she tried again. The laptop was not going to be able to e-mail her office either, she thought.

Slowly Becky looked around and saw that she was not alone. For as far as she could see every car was stopped, but, strangely, trucks seemed to be moving. Sliding her laptop into her briefcase she grabbed the phones and stepped out. Taking a couple of bills out of her wallet, she waved them at a truck that was approaching. She wasn't going to lose the sale. *Still moving forward when everyone else is stopped*, that sounded good. It would be the slogan when she opened her own office, she decided.

The trucker grinned and the rig shuddered to a stop just past her. As she climbed up into the cab Becky said, "Two hundred to get me to Los Medas, and another two hundred if you take a little detour. But that'll have to be a check."

He plucked the bills from her hand and stuffed them in his shirt pocket. "Let's see how it goes." Then lifting the straw cowboy hat from his head he nodded at her. "Billy Bob at your service."

The height of the cab afforded a view. Becky could see cars stalled for a mile or more. Fortunately traffic had been light enough there was a path through the stranded cars. "Damnedest thing," Billy Bob said, "it's like every car on the road ran out of gas at the same time. I've seen three cars still moving and they all were diesel." He looked at her, "So where are you going that is four hundred dollar important?"

"Got to meet a client, they are ready to sign on a house."

"You think they're going to get there?"

He had a point. She pulled out her phone and found it had a signal. As she dialed she took note of where she was. It was going to be a while before a tow truck could get out to her car. Becky was glad she hadn't changed out of her running shoes - it looked like she might be doing some serious walking before the day was out. The Stevens phone did not answer, so she called her office and told Cindy to relay the message that she was stuck but trying to get there. As the freeway passed over some local streets it became evident that things were snarled down below. Billy Bob nodded, pointing with a nose that looked as though it had been broken a time or two, and said, "Take a look at that. Hate to pass up another bonus, but this load has got to be a long way from here before that mess is going to clear."

Becky nodded, regretting that she hadn't grabbed a couple of twenties. But she felt good knowing that she wasn't just sitting on the side of the road. She smiled smugly at the other stranded drivers. If she could only get through to the Stevens' she might be able to pull it off.

Billy Bob left her off at the top of an exit ramp. As Becky walked down the slope, she wondered where she should go next. Maybe she could rent a diesel car or truck somewhere. What was going on? How could this have happened to her? She redid the math and found that without this commission she was going to have to juggle like never before.

As she got to the street where the stoplights were telling immobile cars they could go, go, go -- she saw a woman on a bicycle coming towards her. Becky shouted, "Hey, what do you want for that bike?"

The woman slowed, Becky went on, "You are just the miracle I needed."

That brought a smile to the woman's face and she braked. "Miracle?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't believe."

Fully stopped, the woman put her foot down for balance and said, "I've been known to believe in pretty strange things, try me."

"I've got to get someplace. Very important, meeting a client there."

"I don't think so. You are following the wrong God."

Becky frowned, what was this woman talking about? This sale was worth a thirty thousand dollar commission. "Look, you can't know. I'll give you a check for seven hundred for the bike."

Hosanna's look was penetrating, after a moment she said, "You can't cover the check. And even if you could, it wouldn't do you any good. The house on Crestwood isn't going to be sold by you. Your clients are going to take another look at a condo and are going to use an in-house broker."

"That's impossible. How can you know – who are you?"

"You were right about the miracle. If you'd sold the house you might have become so successful there would be no hope for you."

"What?" Becky replied, "If I don't make the sale there is no hope!"

"This may sound trite, but you've got a chance to decide if you really want to devote your life to worshipping wealth."

"I wouldn't put it that way." Becky kept the defensiveness out of her voice as she said, "I earn it. I work hard because I want a piece of the pie."

Hosanna put her foot on the pedal ready to move off, "Yeah. But how big a piece?"

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"I need that bike. You don't understand."

"Oh, but I do. And you don't. Call them again. They'll tell you about the condo, and then, think about the pie."

Becky reached out and gripped Hosanna's arm. "That's crazy."

Hosanna frowned as she looked down at the fingers holding her. "Do you really want wealth that badly?"

The look in Becky's eyes was sufficient answer; a moment later her hand

released Hosanna's sleeve as she was jerked to the side. There was a thud as something heavy hit the pavement. Looking down, she saw gleaming metal. Her briefcase had turned to gold. Adding to the sparkle there were large rubies, emeralds and the odd sapphire embedded in it. Becky pulled on the handle and could not lift it.

With the practiced boredom of a tour-guide Hosanna said, "It's every dollar you ever dreamed of, with enough extra to satisfy the IRS. Thing about gold is that it's very heavy. A good example of why you should be careful what you wish for." She pointed at the briefcase, "It weighs about two-hundred eighty pounds, too heavy to carry. Dragging it will ruin the gems so you're going to need a hand truck or a dolly to get it home."

Becky knelt down and was running her hands over the case. Her fingers lingered on an emerald five times the size of her thumb nail. Hosanna continued, "Problem is you are going to have to leave it here in order to get something with wheels." She gestured towards the commercial stretch ahead. "The auto parts store is where I would go first. But that might not be such a good idea. Cause another thing about gold is it stands out and somebody else might take it." That got Becky's attention. She looked around to see if anyone was looking at them and hunched over to shield the case from view.

Hosanna continued, "But, just to make things interesting, and to show you that life is full of choices," she turned and pointed to a homeless woman, her belongings in a grocery cart, who was camped under the nearby overpass. "If you make that woman your partner. In everything. Houses, car, golden bejeweled briefcase, business - everything. And you ask her nicely, maybe she will help you. When you tip her cart on

its side, the two of you should be able to get the case into it. She could stay in your spare bedroom. She is proud though, I would suggest humility when you approach her.”

Becky turned towards the woman and scowled.

Hosanna prepared to move on, “Oh, and there’s one final condition. The first dishonest thing you do to that woman will make *you* her partner – right here under the bridge.”

“Who are you? Are you somebody important?”

Hosanna paused for a moment, “Good question. Probably not. Certainly not as important to you as that woman is.” Having said that she put her weight on a pedal and rolled away.

* * *

It was later determined the effects of Hosanna's lesson extended for twenty miles from the overlook - all cars driving into that area for the next two hours suffered the same fate. Once a car was towed, had its tank pumped dry and refilled with gasoline, it ran at least as well as it did before tasting the fruit of the vine. One Exxon station had been getting a delivery and now had approximately 8000 gallons of merlot in its underground tanks.

Once the word had spread about the contents of cars’ tanks there had been a run on hoses, pumps and containers. Already vials of “Miracle Wine” were being auctioned on Ebay. Some TV and Radio stations tried to ignore it and resumed regularly scheduled programming. Other stations focused on the event, bringing in panels of clergy. Court TV focused on the legal implications. A civil lawyer suggested

that Hosanna was liable for massive costs incurred by those who missed appointments because of the stunt. There was also some discussion on some of the right wing radio stations as to whether this should be called a terrorist act.

Hosanna, who had decided to take her lesson to heart and give up her car, booked a flight out for the next morning and walked to a local restaurant for dinner. While waiting for the hostess to seat her, she was recognized by a woman in line behind her who muttered, "Oh my God." This was not said particularly loudly, but it caught a lull in conversation and further quieted people.

Hosanna fought an instinct to turn and head back out the door. "No I'm not," she replied with just enough volume so the woman could hear.

"It's her!" Another woman said, "You're the one who made me late for my..." Her comment was cut off as she regarded an image of herself weighing an additional eighty pounds as the result of dinner. She turned and left.

Then a man spoke, "Can you do Riesling, I'm having fish?" That got a laugh and defused the situation.

"A quiet table in the back?"

Hosanna nodded to the hostess and followed her through the room. It was strange to be so watched. "You'd better get used to it," she told herself.

The waiter said, "I'm Anton and I have to say I was impressed." Then he smiled, "Would you like to see a wine list?"

Hosanna sat back and laughed loudly. "Very good." She shook her head, "No,

but let's play with them a bit. Bring me a carafe of water."

He grinned and hurried off.

As soon as Hosanna was finished looking at the menu, a woman approached her table. She spoke hesitantly, "Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you, but I really want to know if this means Armageddon is coming?"

Hosanna shook her head. She pointed to the other side of the table where the settings had been removed, "No. I'm eating alone."

It took the woman a second to get it. Then she laughed, a high nervous bray which carried across the room. Embarrassed, she turned and left. Hosanna watched as her response was relayed first to the woman's table and then was passed from one group to another. She was slightly disappointed at seeing only a few laugh.

The waiter reappeared with the carafe of water and said, "The cook says to stay away from the swordfish and that he's not happy with the veal tonight." She ordered seafood pasta.

A couple of minutes later a distinguished looking man, dressed more formally than the rest of the diners, stood and made his way towards her table. "Forgive the intrusion. I am Ronald Fulhamn, a professor of contemporary culture at Berkeley and I was wondering..."

"A lot of things I'll bet." Hosanna said, "Your tenure is safe. There will be many more people signed up for your classes next semester. It will make up for the rather sparse attendance you are currently experiencing. I might be interested in doing a guest lecture if asked."

He hesitated then said, “I am sorry, I have to admit I am nervous, you said you want to come speak?”

“Yes,” she answered, “A couple of conditions though – a small room, just big enough for your serious students. And - you tell your wife about the affair you’re having with your teaching assistant.”

The blood drained from his face. He reached out and steadied himself by holding the back of the chair opposite her. “Jesus.” He said it softly, more an exhalation than a statement.

“Nope, not even close.”

After taking a deep breath he said, “You don’t understand. I can’t tell her.”

“I could turn your penis into a serpent.”

He took a step back. She beckoned him with a finger wave. “You are allowed to be human, and lust is human. But you *are* liable for your lies. And I was only joking about your penis. But it gives me an idea.” She smiled and made a dismissive motion with her hand.

He moved quickly away, stumbling slightly in a narrow gap between two tables. His face was still pale, his expression one of a man sentenced to a harsh punishment.

Nobody else approached her table.

As he cleared her plate the waiter asked, “What did you say to that guy? He’s totally freaked.”

“Sometimes I scare people. Comes with the territory.”

The next morning Hosanna called the TV reporter from the airport. Marsha was

frantic, “Where are you? We need to talk to you. I’ll ...”

Hosanna cut her off, saying, “I’m leaving town in a few minutes, but I’ve got another story for you. Are you recording this?”

“Wait... Yes.”

“Starting tomorrow any man who cheats on his wife – and by that I mean any committed or live-in relationship – that man will bear on his penis markings that will make it look like a serpent. These marks will remain for two months after his contact with another. This will happen in all of North America.” She paused before saying, “I am Hosanna. Consider this fair warning.” With that she ended the call.

* * *

During the flight Hosanna, unrecognized because she had realized a disguise was called for, spent some time thinking about what had gone wrong with the gas to wine lesson. For one thing, though she did not consider it subtle, most people missed the point. For another, there were practical problems, without cars many people would not be able to get to stores to purchase food or other essentials. Sucking the planet dry was an issue that needed be resolved, but this stroke had missed the mark. *On the job training*, she thought, had its disadvantages.

This next lesson was simpler and far more direct in its message. She was looking forward to the reactions it would bring.

After landing as Hosanna walked through the terminal she saw that her threat had been reported. At the newsstand, large headlines proclaimed, *Prophet Warns Men*.

* * *

There was an emotional reaction. Even though it was difficult for men to make a

good case for having affairs, many tried. Talk shows were filled with self-righteous bluster. One television news crew was sent to a 'No-Tell' Motel where for three hours before the deadline they chased couples in unsuccessful attempts to get an interview.

Shortly after midnight the first reports came in. One news station interviewed a man who was at an emergency room with burns on his penis. The doctors said he'd tried to remove the marks with kerosene. Several women's groups issued press releases which voiced qualified approval. Though this was tempered by a false rumor that women would be somehow be marked if they strayed. (Hosanna had considered this, but had rejected it as un-necessary.) Such a marking, they claimed, would put women in danger. No mention was made of the danger marked men faced when returning home.

The second day it became evident that in certain quarters it was considered a status symbol to have the snake. Hosanna did not greet this news with a chuckle. "Boys will be boys, will they?" She raised her hands. "The serpent, when aroused, will bite the hand that strokes it." She thought of calling the reporter but decided against it. This truth would become self evident.

Her credit card was in the name of H. Reed. Staying in nondescript motels she enjoyed walking around un-recognized listening to people talking about the things she'd done. The story was growing with the press making connections to her trip to Princeton. She watched a brief interview in which Hutch announced they would be publishing an account, "directly." A reporter who questioned him further was told that since any answers would be out of context, they would have to await the complete

document.

There were shows devoted to discussions of her intent, and connecting her with everything from Biblical references to Nostradamus. There also were reports of threats being made. There was a report that the Department of Homeland Security wanted a word with her.

* * *

Phillip knew he'd effectively scuttled his career because he'd passed on investigating Hosanna when they got the first report from Las Vegas. 20/20 hindsight was nothing; the deputy directors used binoculars. He also knew they were giving him prime responsibility for the case because he was now expendable. This situation had them baffled. If there was no good way to handle it their solution was to let someone they didn't care about catch the blame. He would be happy to go after her – if only they could figure out where she was.

Chapter 18

Hosanna goes to church

On a Sunday Hosanna went to a service at an Episcopal church in the small town in Rhode Island where she'd come to rest at a pleasant bed and breakfast. The minister started his sermon by remarking that there were more in attendance than he would have expected on such a beautiful day. "But I can also understand that the events of the recent past may have kindled an urge to reconnect with God." That got a subdued chuckle from the parishioners.

"I've been getting a lot of calls. They tend to be similar. By far the most frequent question is, 'Is she real – what does it mean?' There, however, have been a few that say, 'Um, Reverend, I... You know that thing she did, it's got to be a mistake...'"

This got a short laugh. He cut it short by putting up his hand. "Now, upon further questioning I have determined that none of these callers were truly innocent, despite some extensive rationalizations to the contrary. However, some were more guilty than others. At the low end, one had the misfortune to go into a strip joint where a passing dancer gave him what has to be called a grope, 'I didn't have sex, I swear it,' he said. I guess that Hosanna's definition of unfaithful extends to visits to strip joints. Even though he says he was there only to use the facilities.

"For a woman's view I consulted my fair wife on this issue, leaving all reference to the man in question out of it. She did not buy the use the facilities excuse. Beyond that she seemed to think it was a judgment call, but that he was certainly asking for

trouble.”

The minister paused, giving a bit of dramatic emphasis, “What Hosanna may be saying to us is that we have been asking for trouble. And she is here to provide it.

“I see some good news here. It has been a while since God has displayed His sense of humor. Kangaroos and penguins are early examples, but Moses will not ever be considered for mention as a comedian. Hosanna does seem to be avoiding Old Testament punishments in favor of those which get the point across without the finality of say, becoming a pillar of salt.”

The Reverend looked down at the congregation; his eyes paused on a couple of families. “Our children are a product of our society. I often get called upon to discuss angry and contrary youngsters. ‘What did we do wrong?’ the parents ask. I usually am at a loss to answer the question, because they are but members of a society that is doing many things wrong. That is too complicated an answer so instead I council patience and understanding. Now God, it seems, has seen fit to unleash an angry opinionated young woman upon us. Can we truly say we do not deserve it?

“We drive our behemoth SUVs sucking precious resources from the earth. She turns gasoline to wine.

“We have a relaxed attitude towards fidelity and...” He shook his head. “It has got to be painful and embarrassing to those who got caught, but you have to admit - it is effective. I can only wonder what she will come up with next.” He let that hang for a beat.

“Getting back to those questions I am asked. When I answer the *what does it mean* part of the question, I usually say I see no indication that Hosanna means for us

to renounce all our worldly goods and join a religious order. But she is saying that we have gotten a little loose. Our bellies are a bit big. We probably could all stand to do some sit-ups both physical and spiritual. We could stand to eat a little less and give a little more.” He paused, “For those who may have missed it, I have been saying those things for some time now. And I should add that I am glad for the backup.” He paused, the laugh was more subdued than he would have liked.

“One reaction that many people have is fear. How many of you would describe yourselves as more fearful as a result of Hosanna’s appearance?”

From her seat towards the back, Hosanna watched as a few and then many more hands were raised. The pastor nodded. “That was my initial response too. But then I realized that while God may be displeased, He is not about to wipe the slate clean as he could. This is not forty days and nights of rain. If the seas are rising, it is our own fault. In some ways it shows that God still cares about his creation. From what I gather from seeing interviews of those who have spoken with Hosanna – she is not claiming divinity; actually she rebuffs it, which is refreshing in this age of prestige and self-importance. But she does say she is a messenger. And that her message is not about forgiveness. She has made it clear that she has not come to cleanse our sins. But it does look like she might want to make us consider doing some repenting of our own.

“Now that is not a bad thing, at least from my point of view. If I had just invested a bundle in a strip joint I might disagree. The best analogy I can come up with is to imagine that we have slipped and fallen on some ice. Along comes a tough looking guy dressed in a leather jacket. He stops and puts his hand out to help us get up. We have

to get over our fears and take the hand. We have to not worry that things will change, but rather to embrace the new way.”

Although Hosanna had not planned on attending the coffee hour after the service, she went because she wanted to hear what people thought of the sermon. She also wanted to speak with the pastor, though she had not decided if she would reveal herself to him.

“I haven’t seen you here before. Are you visiting?” Hosanna turned to the man who was speaking to her.

She nodded.

“I’m Jerry, and I’m one of those the Reverend was talking about when he mentioned faces he didn’t see often.”

Hosanna took a quick look inside his mind; Jerry attended several churches with the twin aims of picking up women and making contacts for selling cars. His penis was unmarked because he wasn’t committed enough to any woman to have cheated. Also, he did not succeed very often. She smiled as she said, “It’s been causing me some problems lately, but I’m named Hosanna.”

“I can only guess how awkward that has to be.” He stopped and looked at her closely. “But you don’t look like the other one.” Then he asked, “So what are you doing here in Westerly?”

“I’m just visiting. Do you live here?”

He nodded. “I work at the Ford dealership out on 94. If you need a car look for me, I can get you a good deal.”

Spurred by the Reverend's musings on what she had planned next, Hosanna had pretty much decided to follow the serpent theme by issuing forked tongues to liars. This guy was going to get one of the first ones, she thought. But this was too public a setting for a test run. Seeing the Reverend was alone, she made an excuse and walked over to him.

"Hello, I am Hosanna. I liked your sermon"

He smiled, "Sure you are." The smile faded as he turned his attention to her and understood. His mouth opened and shut a couple of times, but no words came out.

"I can have that effect on people," she said.

He did not respond and stood as though he'd been pole-axed. "James, you'd better breathe."

He took a deep breath. Finally, he found some words, "What can I do for you?"

"Can we go somewhere and talk? I want to ask your opinion on something."

He nodded then swallowed before speaking. "The door in the kitchen leads out to the backyard of the rectory. I will follow you in a minute. I need a word with a couple of people first."

It was a beautiful day. She stood under a large oak reveling in its magnificence. After a couple of minutes she heard hurried footsteps behind her. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I had to..."

"Not a problem." She reached out and touched the tree. "It gave me time to admire this. It puts a perspective on things. I need to make sure that I'm seeing things clearly. Your sermon was a little sobering, made me realize that I've got a sizable

responsibility. It's easy to get caught up in the angry and opinionated young woman thing."

James shook his head rapidly, "I – I hope I didn't offend you."

"Hey, I'm human too; I may need to be brought up short now and then. But no, you did not offend me." She paused, "The part about the sense of humor was good. I need to keep that in mind. I want to get your reaction to what I'm thinking of doing next."

"I am honored."

She took a moment, trying to decide where to start, "I kind of like the serpent theme, though it may not be fair to snakes. They'll get over it though. In any case, I was thinking that the next lesson would be to make liars' tongues forked. It would not last for months like the penis thing - just a few minutes so the person being lied to would definitely know."

He spent a couple of seconds thinking, and then said, "That's amazing. You know how revolutionary this is, don't you?"

She nodded, "Yes. It should shake things up a bit. My question is, how strict do I make the rule? You got me thinking about degrees of guilt when you told the story about the guy in the strip joint. I should be a little more careful this time. And this one may be a little harder to judge.

"Is a little exaggeration allowed? Or a little flattery? Here's an example, the wife is getting ready to go out, she asks her husband, 'How do I look?' He looks at his watch and says, 'You look fine dear.' This is meant as an object lesson, not to be the root cause of a hundred thousand divorces." She stopped and looked at him waiting for an

answer.

The reverend responded, "Give me a minute. I've been fighting a compulsion to fall to my knees."

Hosanna looked him in the eye, "Thank you for resisting. Not appropriate. Not my style at all."

He nodded, and gestured towards the garden. "Could we go over there and sit?"

Hosanna smiled, and started to walk across the grass towards a white wrought iron bench set next to a bed of day lilies.

After a few seconds he spoke, "I think that you have to take a look in the heart of the speaker. 'You look beautiful', to the wife who has stereotypically delayed the husband - is very different from a young man trying to seduce a girl with the same words, even if the young girl is several steps closer to whatever beautiful is."

Having reached the bench, she sat then said, "And then there are those who believe the lies they tell. They need be shown this, but I'm not sure public humiliation is called for."

After settling beside her, he answered, "What if you make the tongue tingle as a warning?"

Hosanna turned to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "That's it! As the lie is thought the tongue will tingle, as it is said, fork city. Great! Thank you."

"I don't believe this is happening," he began.

"Ha! I've had that feeling most of my life. Don't get me started." Changing the subject, she continued, "I've got to find the right pulpit for this next one. I suspect a trip to Washington might be in order." She winked at him as she said, "People will have to

believe you when you tell this story because your tongue will not fork.”

He nodded, opened his mouth and then shut it before saying anything.

“I like your garden.” She stood and wandered up one of the paths.

“Thank you, credit has to go to my wife, Cheryl, she’s the one who does the work – it takes a lot,” said James who had followed her.

Hosanna stopped at a small figure of a troll that was mostly hidden under a hosta. “What do you say we arrange for a little helper?” She pointed.

The troll stirred and snarled. ‘It’s about time. Do you know how it feels...’

She shook her head, “Manners.”

The figure shut up.

Grinning she turned to James, saying, “You were talking about a sense of humor. Got one for you. His name is Eddie and he will answer only to your wife, occasionally you, maybe. When anyone else is here besides you and her - he will revert to statue. And he can’t be photographed moving. He’ll be a secret little miracle. But, just to make it interesting - he’s got an ornery streak; he will give opinions on how best to garden, and most other things. He’ll also demand more food and shelter than he needs. Little sandwiches will probably suffice, and, whatever you do, don’t let him into the house. Once he discovers cable you’ll never get him out.” She pointed to the rear of the garden, “A little pad in the shed should be enough.”

The figure moved around the base of the shrub and kicked Hosanna on the foot. “Hey, I got some other things I need.”

She looked down at him. “Yeah, you want a mate. I’ll do it, but she’s going to be as ornery as you, and you got to limit sex to the shed. No whoopee in the moss. And

she isn't going to look like Barbie."

He thought about it for a minute, "What's wrong with a bimbo?"

"I could make you gay - give you someone a lot like you. With onion breath. You'd be fun as a drag queen on Saturday nights." For a second his overalls were transformed into a tight fitting gown covered with tiny sequins. It showed his gut to good advantage.

He answered quickly, "Don't do that." And Hosanna restored his work clothes.

He paused and shuffled his little boots in the dirt, "Ok, so long as she helps with the work and likes a roll in the hay."

Hosanna pointed to a bush a short distance up the path. In a second some of the branches moved and another little figure pushed her way out. She looked around and then put her hands on her hips. "Don't just stand there. We've got work to do."

Eddie looked up at Hosanna, "Be careful what you wish for, eh?" Then, grumbling under his breath, he moved down the path towards his mate.

Hosanna turned back to the reverend and found him sitting on the bench taking deep breaths. She spoke a little louder, "Her name is April and she'll be a help keeping him in line. Oh, and, *this is important* - don't let him have any whiskey. He's a nasty drunk."

James could only nod. He was so shaken by Hosanna's little prank that he almost missed the fact that she was leaving. "Wait!" He stood and hurried to her.

She turned, "A nice surprise for your wife, don't you think?"

"Hardly the word for it. Look, I don't know what to say except that I am honored..."

She pointed, indicating the two bickering trolls, "You might want to look that gift horse in the mouth."

He reached out, taking her hand, "Could you tell God that some of us are trying. We're..."

"I'll tell her, but I suspect She knows. And some aren't and, so far as I can figure out, that's why I'm here." She shook his hand, "Got to go. Give my regards to Cheryl."

Cheryl was helping a couple of parishioners wash out the large coffeepot and restore the kitchen to some semblance of order. James came in and, glad for the chance to collect his thoughts, helped for a couple of minutes before touching her on the elbow. "Can you come out to the garden? There is something I have to show you."

She hung the dish-towel on a peg over the counter and then, after thanking the others in the room, followed him out the door.

As they passed under the oak tree James could hear the little voices still arguing. It was faint and Cheryl seemed not to notice. He guided her to the bench and sat. After a second she settled beside him, saying, "James, you look pale. Are you OK? What is it?"

He took a deep breath then said, "A few minutes ago a young woman came up to me. Introduced herself as Hosanna." Though he tried to speak calmly there was too much to tell and the words came tumbling rapidly, "It is possible that this is all some psychotic break, but I don't think so. It is impossible. It couldn't be, but it was *her*. She wanted to talk to me." He pointed to his chest with his index finger, "To me." Holding out his hand, he said, "Look, I'm shaking. It was amazing. And so we talked and

towards the end she said something about the remarks I made in the sermon about her sense of humor. Then she said she liked the garden.”

He paused long enough for his wife to ask, “She, Hosanna? Liked the garden? That Hosanna?”

He nodded rapidly three times as he answered, “Yes. About the garden, I said the credit went to you, and that it was a lot of work. So she decided to give you a little help. This is where it gets stranger...”

From off to the left came a small, slightly high voice, “There you are. We’ve got to talk to you!”

Cheryl looked and saw no one. She turned to him.

James pointed down at the two six inch tall figures that were pushing their way through the grass that needed mowing.

Her hand tightened on his until it hurt. He said, “I was just about to explain.”

“You can continue.” Her voice was taut.

“This is Eddie and...,” he paused before remembering, “April. They are your helpers, sort of. According to Hosanna they will answer only to you, but they are ornery and a bit willful, especially Eddie. They’ll live in the shed, which needs to be fixed up for them. And they will need some food, but they are supposed to help with the gardening.”

Eddie spoke, “Yeah, but we’re going to need some tools if you expect us to do anything useful. And about the shed, we took one look and decided that you can do better than that. We’d use the doghouse, except for the fleas.”

“James,” Cheryl said, “I need you to tell me this is a dream.”

“Pretty strange dream honey,” said Eddie. “One to tell your shrink about.”

April said, "Be nice Eddie! She's the one who's going to feed us."

"I told you we have to stand up for ourselves. We aren't slaves, we may be short, but we've got feelings too."

James said, "Oh my God."

"What?" Asked Cheryl, looking around quickly, "What is it?"

"I just realized there are theological implications here. Should we baptize them?"

Eddie took a few steps and kicked him on the toe. "No one else can see us, remember? Let's not get distracted here. First thing we're going to need is a place to stay, unless you want to let us sleep in the house?"

"Hosanna said that was not a good idea."

"And just who is she supposed to be?"

"You'd rather be a statue?" asked James.

"He's right Eddie," said April. She looked at the sky, "We've got a good day to start, but we need some tools. A couple of spoons and forks will do for now. And something to cut with."

Cheryl stood - glad to have a task that would take her mind off what she was seeing. "I'll go get some things. And, James, there is one of those plastic playhouses in the Thrift Store. Mrs. Thomas brought it in last week. We might be able to make it do. Would you go get it and set it up next to the shed?"

The thrift store also gave up a set of doll's dishes and some Barbie outfits that April thought she might be able to make fit with a bit of work. "Ain't built like that."

That evening the four of them had dinner at the picnic table in the yard. James

cooked burgers on the grill and Cheryl provided fruit salad, a part of which she had cut up into very small pieces.

James said grace, "Lord, it's been quite a day. Your mysteries have proven to be larger and wilder than I had ever imagined. We are a little afraid to ask for any more blessings, but want to thank you for those granted." James paused and looked up before continuing, "And on a personal note, if my faith has been at issue, it no longer is. And finally, I'd like to thank you for visiting your daughter on us. Amen."

Chapter 19

Martha goes on a book tour.

“Tell us about your childhood.”

“This is public radio so I assume you don’t want the twenty second version. Do we have a few minutes,” she asked the interviewer?

When the woman nodded, Martha continued, “As any psychiatrist will tell you, it started with my father. He was an incredibly forceful man. Very powerful, but not violent. He didn’t need to be - that’s how strong he was. Let me tell you a quick story about him. He was very particular about the food we ate - particularly meat. They had separate butcher stores back then not just a section in the supermarket. He disdained the local butchers in the small town where I grew up and drove to a nearby town to get his meat. He would walk into the store and, regardless of the customers there ahead of him or what was displayed in the showcase, would walk into the back. I remember the head man would hand his work off to one of the others and would move to the back following Perry. Everyone followed a couple of steps behind Perry. Always.

“In any case, he would go into the meat locker and would pick out a hanging piece of beef. The butcher would take it down and would lug it to a band saw. Then my father would use his finger to show where this man should make his cuts. Afterwards we’d go out, he’d pay and we’d drive back home. He would say very little. I remember the men in the store would say, ‘It’s Perry,’ much the way you would announce the arrival of a thunderstorm. In the cold locker they would do perfunctory how-do’s, but that was it. I didn’t like going there. But that gives you an idea of the man. He got exactly what he wanted and he told everyone how to do their business. And these were men who already knew their business.

“I was young and pretty and thought I knew a lot and had a lot to say. As you might imagine, it was not a house in which I got to say much. I spent a lot of time in my room where he pretty much left me alone. There I read a lot, it was my only escape. I wanted to be a writer and one of my teachers in high school encouraged me. I won an award for a story and my father tore it up, ‘Fiction is a waste of time,’ he said. He was very angry. It was the only time I thought he might hit me.

“I wanted to go to college, but he said I should get married. I tried to fight it. Max was a man he knew from his business, a man much like himself. A man my father thought would amount to something – unlike me.” She paused to collect her thoughts and watched the second hand on the clock jump forward a couple of times before she went on. “It is hard to explain, but there was no fighting him. I figured I would do better to fight the man I was to marry.”

Martha shook her head as she continued, “It didn’t work. You already know the story of how I ended up in the loony bin. We don’t have time for me to tell you how bad that snake pit was.”

The interviewer said, “Thank you for telling us that. I can see how it gave you a perspective that enabled you to share depths of passion that your writing contains. And now we must break for a minute to bring you some messages. This is Sue Rivers on WRFG and I am speaking with Martha Scott, the author of *Hosanna Sings*.”

After the break Sue resumed the interview, “When did you first come up with Hosanna as a character?”

“It was when I was first in the hospital. I kept saying that it wasn’t fair - that if there was a God He wouldn’t do this to me. I fought them. I screamed, I cursed, I told them exactly what I thought of them.” Martha paused, “A free life lesson, when you are someplace where someone

else is completely in control – like a jail or a locked ward – it probably makes sense not to do things that really irk the people who have the keys. They locked me up in a seclusion room and left me there. After a couple of weeks I was meditating and having visions, I was traveling to foreign countries. I spent some time in a monastery in Nepal. And I started talking to God. It wasn't like a big voice coming from nowhere – instead it was like I was sitting next to someone on a train and we started talking. God told she'd sent a lot of others beside Jesus. Some of them never got noticed at all. Some of them were happy, some were nice and forgiving, but others were angry – 'like you', She said.

“That got me to thinking and when they let me out and I could get some paper, I started writing about her. I kept having these conversations and before I knew it I'd written a few chapters. That's a long answer. But I don't write short stories.”

“You mentioned God, are you a Christian?”

“Yes, but I also believe in Buddha, Mohammed, Ra and in you.”

“You? You mean me?”

“Of course. We are all children of God. And God is so big it's impossible to define. That puts limits on it.”

“But Hosanna was special.”

“Yes and no. Most of her being special was that she was able to hear God talk to her and she was able to tap into some of the universal energy that is everywhere.”

“But she was sent...”

“So were you. Maybe she was in the front part of the plane, you know, with the big seats, but a lot of her holiness came from the fact that people put their faith in her. And she had some powers, without them she could have easily been seen as a crackpot.”

“What about them? I don’t know what to call them other than miracles, the things she did?”

Martha responded, “We are all capable of miracles – of some sort or another. She was a show off. God gave her a hand now and then. What of it?” She paused, “And, by the way, she is a fictional character.”

“We get to the crux of the interview. I’m going to ignore my director’s signals to have a break. Are you Hosanna?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes? A one word answer?”

“Sometimes you are Jesus - when you help somebody, or Buddha. Last Saturday you were Kerkie a goat god of a people who once lived in the mountains of Asia Minor.”

Sue took a second to be confused before stammering, “Last Saturday, I...”

“You were with one of the versions of Aphrodite.”

“I was? I mean, yes, I was, how did you know? I...”

“The man on the other side of the window is waving his arms. I guess that means that the interview is over. It has been a pleasure.”

The interviewer followed Martha out of the studio. “I’ve never met anyone like you. I... Can we talk some more?”

“I’m due at a book-signing in half an hour. Come along if you want to.”

The bookstore had an area on the second floor where rows of folding chairs faced a short lectern set on a table. Beside it copies of her book were arranged.

There were about twenty-five people scattered among forty chairs. As Martha came to

the podium there was polite applause. “How many of you have read the book?”

Virtually everyone raised their hands.

“Then I won’t read it to you.” Martha closed the copy she was holding, “I’ve just come from an interesting interview. The questions were much better than they usually are. The interviewer had the guts to ask the question that most want to, but don’t directly ask – Are You Hosanna?”

“I answered, *Sometimes*. This answer confused the woman who asked the question. Our culture can only handle yes or no – this or that. We like things defined and neatly put into the proper boxes. *Sort of* and *maybe* give us trouble.”

“My contention is, like all of us, Hosanna is a child of God. We - each one of us - have the power to act like a child of God when we so choose.” She moved out from behind the table and took a couple of steps towards the audience. “It does take some learning and practice though. There are Miracle Workers sitting here. Not flashy showoffs like Hosanna. Not always do-gooders like Jesus, though there are some here.” She nodded to a man in the third row.

Martha walked alongside the chairs towards the back. She took a seat next to a middle-aged woman who, a little too tightly, filled a size 14 dress. “This woman gave hope to a scared young man at her office yesterday. It was his first day and he’d managed to make a mistake that put page five upside down in the report she’d had him copy. There was no time to fix it before the meeting. She could have made his life miserable; she could have let it make her presentation angry. Instead she turned it into a joke. Yesterday it was appropriate to let it go.”

Looking directly into her eyes Martha continued. “It was *not* appropriate many years ago when you forgave your older brother what he did to you. It made you somehow believe that it was your fault or you deserved it. That is the root of most of what makes you unhappy today.”

There was an absolute hush. Shoppers who were passing stopped to listen.

Looking at the crowd Martha continued, “When I was locked in the seclusion room, I learned that time and space are not quite as rigid and real as we think they are. I want you to bear with me now and, if nothing else, humor me as the ex-mental patient I am.”

She turned back to the woman. “The first time David showed you his privates you should have grabbed them, like this.” Martha reached into open air, clenched her fists and then violently yanked. Next she picked the woman’s hands up, positioning them where hers had been. “You can make up for that – right now.”

The woman moved her hands slightly, her mouth twisted in an expression of hate, as she squeezed her fists. She howled and yanked, pulling from her shoulders. A bellow of pain, a deep male voice, came from air just above them. “Oh God,” it said and then subsided into a groan. The woman pulled again and the scream again grew loud. She raked the air with her nails and the tips of her fingers were bloody. The unseen man wailed.

Rising to her feet, the woman kicked, sending the empty chair in the row ahead of her tumbling. She spat and turned away. She looked down at Martha and then at the blood on her fingers. “I am Hosanna,” she said it softly, but the words carried to everyone.

“Yes you are,” Martha answered. “And I suspect you will have something to tell your therapist this afternoon.”

That provoked a laugh from the stunned crowd, a laugh made louder by the nervousness they all felt. Martha pointed the woman towards the rest rooms. “You should go wash your hands before some fool decides they are religious relics and puts them on Ebay.”

Martha stood and walked back to the lectern. “I would guess that sums up the book.

Thank You.” She turned and walked off to the side.

Sue, from the radio station, who had been sitting in the front row, was the first to approach her.

Martha held up her hand. “If you think about it, I just answered all your questions.”

Chapter 20

Not one of Martha's Fans

There were two entrances to the offices of Praise Jesus Today™. The first took visitors into a drab no frills office where too cheerful workers answered the phones, prepared mailings, and kept the database clean. The other entrance, unmarked and from within the parking garage, led to carpeted halls, paneled rooms, and large offices upstairs where the elders plotted the organization's course through the shoals of IRS regulations, and worked to ensure market share for their television ministry.

Paul Seeley had been blessed to wear the mantle of this ministry for the past six years and he was determined that under his stewardship he would lead it into a place of predominance in the Christian community. He had been an innovative leader who kept their side of the street clean by instituting semi annual lie detector / confession sessions for all new employees. He also installed monitoring systems to keep tab on all the individuals in the organization who might be in a position to embarrass it. He had improved market share by shrewdly buying airtime and by sponsoring and studying constant polls tracking religious sentiment in the country. He liked to tell people that his surveys were so exhaustive that he could tell when a congregation in Iowa was starting to loose members and how long it would be before they started looking for a new pastor.

Hosanna Sings sent waves through his carefully cultivated data sets like a large rock dropped into a Koi pond. At first he studied the author's rise with interest because she was obviously tapping into something. This he tried to identify so they could utilize it too. But when the book rose to number eight on the bestseller list and Martha was featured on the cover of

Newsweek, he became concerned. “That lady has got herself a first rate publicist,” he said as he started the weekly status meeting. “Using Princeton Theological as a launching point was risky but, from what I can tell, she pulled it off. Many people have been advising me to go on the offensive, attack her as sacrilegious or worse.” He held up his hand and shook his head. “If we act too soon, we will simply be giving her some free publicity. We must bide our time. She is so radical that she is going to make mistakes that will alienate people. At the right moment we will use all of our markets to condemn her, but she needs to make a mistake before we can effectively squash her.” He paused and looked at the map on the wall. “I’ve read the scriptures and I believe that they foretell many things. I wonder if this is maybe the first shot in the coming battle of Armageddon. Well, I tell you, I am proud to raise my hand and swear allegiance as a soldier for Christ. I am proud that I can say, “My battalions are at your command, Lord.”

Not all of his meetings took place in the council room with its polished table and leather chairs. Taking exit 135 and turning left leaving the interstate, one came to a café that was not listed in the signs at the foot of the off ramp. The diner was not much to look at, but it was Christian rather than corporate run. It was paid for and it had a small back room that provided absolute privacy. During one of the fund raising drives that had enabled them to build the studios where the shows were so smoothly produced, Sandra, the owner, sometime cook and usual hostess wrote telling that she wanted to enlist in God’s Army. In her letter Sandra had offered title to the place, “free and clear, and with enough food in the freezer to cover the coming week.” A quick check had revealed that it probably would not be worth liquidating, but it occurred to Paul that there might be other uses for this place. He’d written a letter of thanks and made a point of stopping off on his next trip.

Sandra understood when he told her that he needed a place where the spies of Satan could not listen in as he planned the Lord's work. At the time there had been a popular tele-evangelist who had been gaining market share in Chicago and the northern Midwest. Not only was his ministry flawed with theological errors, the man himself was not worthy to call himself a Shepherd of the flock. In addition to some common but nevertheless questionable accounting practices, it was rumored that he was weak of flesh.

As he drove there Paul remembered the first time he used the café for a meeting. Molly had been a fallen woman whom Paul had rescued from the very brink of a plunge into the abyss. His voice had reached her when she had been held hostage by a pimp obsessed by her carnal gifts. She had managed to write a letter which reached his offices.

Paul made it a point to try and read a sampling of all the mail, not only the letters from the major givers. This was during a period when the ministry had a van painted with the logo of Praise Jesus Today and a group of enthusiastic young people he called Christ's Commandos. It was a featured part weekly program to show tapes of them invading dirty book stores, picketing the homes of the owners of girlie bars and harassing the murderers who ran the abortion chambers.

There had been something about her letter that told him that she had potential and he arranged to join with the Commandos on his next visit to New Orleans. It had made a dramatic segment when they had snatched her away from the clutches of her pimp and had cast her filthy garments into the trash after outfitting her in a new more modest outfit. Molly had joined him on stage occasionally to testify to her new life. She also had offered to work to aid his ministry in any way that she could.

Molly was so beautiful that she would have been noticed and remembered had the

meeting taken place in his office. Here she had entered by the back door seen by no-one as she listened to Paul's proposal.

"Our faith is threatened from within as well as from outside. If this man is allowed to rise to prominence with his flaw intact he will inevitably fail in a public way bringing ridicule to the entire movement." Her job would be to see if the rumors of his fallibility were indeed true, and if they were to bring evidence back to Paul who would use it to force the man to mend his ways. Together they prayed and ate Sandra's fried chicken before Molly went off on her mission.

Tonight Paul was not meeting Molly. She had found a carpenter in Minneapolis and was married. The man he was meeting was a bit slippery about his name. He insisted he be called Doug and that all payments be made in cash. He professed to be a Christian, but balked when Paul had suggested that he tithe a quarter of his hefty fee. He had connections that enabled him to provide Paul with inside information on people and issues of importance. These had included leverage on a past commissioner of the IRS, a pesky reporter and a lawyer who somehow thought that the ministry was a pool from which he could dip. Doug had bragged to Paul that he had caused two governors and a senator to resign in the past three years. He had offered tidbits of Hollywood gossip that Paul refused because the information was too expensive. That decision had pained him as he dearly would have loved to use them in his periodic assaults on the Babylon of the West Coast.

As he sat the man said, "Let me guess. You either want to get a provision into the new telecommunication legislation and need something you can use to influence the Chairman of the House committee. Or," he paused and took a sip of his drink before saying, "you would like

some information on Martha Scott, the author of a book that has recently been much featured in the press.”

Paul did not like this man. He disliked his arrogance. He disliked his manners and, most of all, he disliked the shrewd intelligence he showed. It was discomfoting to so transparent. One thing he did like was that this was one man who, once paid, stayed bought. Paul already had something going in the proposed overhaul of the FCC. He wondered if Doug knew about it.

Swallowing his feelings, he nodded. “The second, that woman, though I would enjoy your take on the bill if you can include it in the fee.”

Doug tilted his head slightly to one side as though he was listening for a faint sound. Paul lifted a canvas gym-bag to the table.

The man put his hand on the bag. “You might do better to buy insurance on the bill. From what I can tell there isn’t a whole lot about the woman that she hasn’t revealed in interviews. If it was a secret that she spent seventeen years in a loony bin, it would have value. But she’s using it as an accreditation. I will take the money and I’ll put her life through a small sieve, but on this one I won’t guarantee much.”

Paul had been afraid he would say something like that. He knew there was no way to get the bag back. Once, a couple of years ago Doug had handed him a newspaper clipping a moment after Paul hired him to expose someone. The same person who, as chance would have it, had just been the subject of an extensive article by an investigative reporter. The paper had been published in Seattle, so there was no way that Paul could have seen it, but he felt cheated. That day Paul made the mistake of reaching for the bag. Doug, or whatever his name was, said, “After they release you from the hospital you should have someone read the paper to you, because the article about you will be on the front page.”

After Paul had withdrawn his hand, Doug continued, “Understand I am a businessman and in my business I have an exacting ethical code. It starts and ends with - a deal is a deal. If you call me - you will pay me. And I will deliver all that there is to deliver. No more. No less. I will not frame people. I will not manufacture evidence. However, I will go to interesting lengths to get any evidence that does exist. Often, I might add, at considerable expense. And, as my client, I will protect you. Absolutely. But if you go against me – then you are no longer my client and the protection ends.”

Paul remembered what the man had said about not creating evidence and stopped himself from opening a discussion in that vein. “There has to be something. She can’t be real.” Doug took the bag. “You will get my report in two weeks, sooner if I find something important and timely. But, so you will not feel cheated, I’m going to give you a little bonus.

“You have someone working for you in your data center who has found a way around the safeguards you built into the donation deposit system. This person is skimming somewhere around fifty thou a month. It is going to a bank account in the Cayman Islands.” He stood up. “That was free. For what you lose in one month you get the name of this person. Or...”

Paul echoed the last word, “or?”

“Or for 80% of what is recovered, you get the name and you get back 20% of what money can be brought back from the accounts. This is an expensive task. That is why the percentage is so high. There will be no prosecution of the individual. In any case, you do not want the publicity that would go along with that.”

“And the individual as you call him?”

“The individual will assist in plugging the hole in the computer system and will make total restitution – as far as practical – into that 80/20 split. Some significant amount has already

been spent. After that you will not know.”

Paul nodded. “So at the end of this you actually would give me some money.”

“Twenty percent.”

“How will it be explained?”

“Nothing will be explained. The money will be cash. The person will not come to work and if called at home the phone will have been disconnected. Your computer people will get instructions to rewrite a certain module.”

Paul was tempted to try and investigate this himself. If there was money to be recovered, he wanted it all. But he also knew something about offshore accounts and could not envision being able to manipulate them. Time wasted trying could cost fifty thousand a week – or more. He thought about trying to dicker on the percentage, but knew it would do no good. “Ok do it. Get the money back. Can you tell me the name now?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

The tone the man used made Paul consider his answer. “Yes. I won’t do anything. I’ll let you handle it. I just want to know who has been so deceitful.”

The man smiled, he pushed a few buttons on his cell phone and then said, “Solution one. Retrieve.” After closing the phone he looked at Paul, “Well hold onto your lunch, it’s Alice Dailey. She has taken somewhere over five million over the past two years. Like I said, some of it has been spent and cannot be recovered. It will cost a lot but the bank account will be emptied inside of an hour and you will get your payment in a couple of days.

“Ms Dailey will be dealt with before you get back to your office. She will be gone, her office vacant. She will leave town, movers will empty her apartment this afternoon. She will sign over her car and all other possessions of value to me, including some art. You will get

twenty percent of liquidated value. She will not contact you again. Do not bother sending her a check for her unused vacation time.”

“Alice? No. You’re wrong. She got an inheritance; she told me about it and tithed some of it to the church.”

“That was a brilliant ploy.” It was one of the reasons she was going to be on the plane with Doug, learning the terms of her new job.

Doug walked to the door that led directly to the parking lot. “On that other matter, I’ll start on it tomorrow. If there is anything – you will have it soon.”

Chapter 21

The Shadowy Character

Doug had learned that private jets were the only sensible way to travel. You avoided pesky security regulations, delays and having to deal with the bumlbers who ran the airlines. He had refined it by making it a point to travel only on other people's private jets. This eliminated the costs, the annoyance of having to have pilots on staff and the frustration of having mandated maintenance take the plane out of service when you needed it most. It was simply a part of what he called his retainer.

He'd enjoyed his little trip to play with the Emperor of TV preachers. He'd made a nice profit and snagged a very promising assistant. While he'd let Paul think that there were huge bribes being paid to the offshore bankers to secure the return of the funds, the money actually had gone towards the hiring bonus he'd offered Alice. Overall she lost some money, a little under a million, but it was a small price for the lessons it provided. She would learn what she'd done wrong. It also kept her out of jail and her record clean. That was worth a lot for someone with her bent.

Once aboard the jet she'd signed an employment contract – and had regained title to the still significant, though depleted, account. He had thought of trying for a commission, but decided against it.

Doug had other assistants scanning the data sets looking for anything useful on Martha Scott. Her recently departed husband had been very cheap and less than forthcoming in his

dealings with the IRS. Also, Max had, for a period of years until he got sick, utilized a rather shabby massage parlor / blow-job joint in the nearest large town. The one girl who remained on staff there since his last visit did not remember him fondly. That he was remembered at all was slightly significant, but his death canceled out all need to investigate further.

There was something coincidental, which meant suspicious, about the timing of Max's death and Martha's emergence. But his medical records indicated that he had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.

As Doug had told Paul, if the loony bin had been a secret, it would have been useful information. But she was talking about it on radio and TV. The attendants who had handled her were reluctant to talk because they had been guilty of all the misdeeds involved in running a snake pit. Intriguing were rumors of an incident in which Martha defended a woman who was being preyed on and "did something" that made the aide involved go crazy. If there was a secret that was being hidden, it was about the staff and the things they had done. That was not in the direction Paul was looking for.

Martha's nephew and his wife, who had become her driver and assistant, had some credit problems. The man, Tony, had made some questionable purchases on his credit cards that showed he'd patronized a strip joint a couple of times. There was nothing out of the ordinary there and he would not bother reporting it.

Doug began typing; *I've seen so many phonies that I usually can spot them before they come over the horizon. I also have seen enough strange stuff in my life to know that some of it can't be explained with diagrams of mirrors and sliding boxes. Some scams have all the trappings of a Vegas production, others have got anonymous government agencies spreading*

disinformation.

You also can sometimes get a picture by looking at who is watching the subject. At this moment Martha Scott is under some form of observation or scrutiny by the following: The Vatican, specifically the Office for the Protection of the Faith, Homeland Security, CIA, three Jewish sects and a light involvement by Israeli intelligence. Saudi intelligence has withdrawn for now. In addition, investigative reporters from seven established newspapers and four networks are sniffing at one part of her story or another. Tabloid coverage is too extensive to enumerate. Most significant though, is the fact that a person known only as 'E' has been reported to be investigating her. E is a shadowy figure, he has been hired by corporations as well as governments in the past.

Doug paused and looked over what he'd written. He decided not to say anything more about E and thought about removing the reference. The truth was that he disliked putting anything to do with E in writing. Maybe it should be in his verbal addendum he thought, but never-the-less it was possibly the most significant thing that he had to report.

Historically miracle workers come undone. Never can I recall one that has withstood the intense scrutiny that Martha has attracted. She has been secretly taped and the films have been studied very carefully. In particular, her 'reading' at the bookstore provided a great deal of material. The woman in the audience claims no connection with Martha and there is no sign of a link. The abuse by the brother was later confirmed by the woman who swore that she had only recently revealed it to her therapist, and only in general terms. The brother, whom she had not seen nor communicated with since her mother's funeral six years previously, lives and works in a town fifty miles away and was, remarkably, treated for trauma to his penis and testicles at his local hospital less than ten minutes after the events in the bookstore. The time difference can be

attributed to the time it took him to be able to make his way to the hospital. The hospital reported that the wounds were so fresh that there was little or no clotting.

Later that night, after drinking gin on top of his pain medication, the brother admitted to a friend that he heard a voice when the incident happened. Later he denied this. Incidentally, he was alone in his office at the time, but his staff came running in immediately upon hearing his screams. He was fully clothed when they arrived.

Other happenings have been documented in various press dispatches. This one is included as some of the details above have yet to be released to the public.

I will remain connected to this woman and will continue my observations. At this point I remain unable to determine where truth begins and ends.

Doug decided to take the references to E out of the report. It was important, but until it meant something, there was no need to mention it.

Chapter 22

Hosanna's Third Lesson

'You've got their attention.'

Silently Hosanna replied to God, 'I thought turning the penis into a serpent was a good lesson.'

'Fishing for a complement? It was good. Though reducing it in size might have been more effective. Hard to brag about that.' God laughed causing Mt St. Helens to rumble, *'It is time to follow up on it. The liars' lair is the right place.'*

Hosanna knew just the place and she liked the line, she might just use it.

'About those creatures in the garden. . .'

'Over stepped my role?' She had been vaguely worried about this.

'Maybe, but I like it – especially that they can only be seen by those two. You have amused me, but watch that your imagination doesn't get you in trouble.'

* * *

Sam Reynolds was standing on the steps of the Capitol preparing to do his lead-in to the interview with Senator Towns when he noticed that the cameraman was aiming the camera to his left. "Hey Ed, over here."

"I don't think so." The man answered.

Irritated and curious, Sam turned and saw a woman approaching. She was young and pretty and looked vaguely familiar. Some Senator's press aide, he wondered? He really wished they would let him do the bimbo of the week feature he'd proposed after a long and liquid lunch.

Coming right up to him, Hosanna reached out and took the microphone from Sam's hand. "Hey", he started to protest, his hand reaching out - but he stopped because something told him to listen. It was a something very large.

She turned and faced the cameraman, "I am Hosanna." She paused for a second, "Yeah. That one. Time for another lesson.

"One of God's commandments says that you should not steal. Now there are many different kinds of theft. Today I'm going to focus on lying, which is the stealing of truth. Most people don't think of it that way, but they will soon. And if you didn't know it, truth is something pretty precious. Maybe we will relearn its value as a part of this."

Hosanna took a breath, "Here's the way it's going to work. As of noon, that's two minutes from now, anyone speaking a lie will have his or her tongue become forked like a serpent. Before this happens, there will be a brief warning, a strong tingling to remind the speaker to check the facts. If the lie is spoken the tongue will become forked. This predicament will last for thirty minutes. After five lies it will last longer." She smiled, "Don't make me go there."

She handed the microphone back to the newsman. He was a pro, "This is Sam Reynolds on the steps of the Capitol." He paused, "Where things are going to get very interesting in about three minutes." He turned to a technician, "Did that go out?"

"Not live, they've got the feed at the station."

"Call them - Tell them to send it out. Now! And to get crews down here." He turned back to Hosanna, "Sorry, how long will this continue?"

"For as long as God wants and permits. I'm afraid that some men and women will take a fair amount of teaching. Truth has gotten run over so many times it looks like

old road-kill.” She looked him in the eye, “It’s noon, why don’t you tell us how you got your job?”

It took Sam a second to switch gears, then he started his usual spiel, “I won an award back...” He paused and a strange look came over his face. “In Indiannnah.” His tongue flicked four inches out of his mouth causing him to mumble the last words.

“Hollth Shiths. Youthh reallthh did ithh.” There was no award; it was a fiction that had allowed the boss he’d brown-nosed to promote him over some local talent. He’d even had a plaque made up which allowed him to maintain the fiction.

All around them there were shouts and a few screams.

Hosanna spoke to the other technician. “I suspect this is your chance to get on camera. It should be an interesting story.” With that she headed off down the steps.

All around her there was confusion and clamor. Hosanna realized that a bit more notice might have avoided some of that. At the security barricade two men yelled at each other, their tongues almost meeting in the space between their heads.

Advance warning would have allowed the White House to delay the news conference at least until they had ‘evaluated the threat’. Unfortunately for the President he was being pressured by several interest groups to make an announcement affirming his commitment to the environment while adjusting some of the pesky details in the clean water legislation. The First Tongue turned as he said, “We can achieve these changes with no impact on the environmenthhh.” He looked stricken and two Secret Service agents jumped forward and pulled him to safety. The clip of the conference, which was being filmed by the major networks, was inserted as part of their coverage of “Government in Chaos,” which preempted regular programming for the afternoon.

The footage of Hosanna issuing the lesson was shown repeatedly and was broken down and analyzed. It was immediately determined that she was the same woman who had created the bizarre event in California and seemingly was behind the serpentizing of men's penises. There were interviews with national security experts who wondered if this was some new form of terrorism, since it had obviously created chaos, and fear. Religious experts were varied in their opinions. The networks tended to broadcast the ones that focused on this being the work of the devil, though they had to edit out a few forked tongue episodes.

One enterprising station sent a news crew to Honest Hal's Pre-Owned Vehicle Vault where they were able to get shots of a dozen forked tongues before being ejected from the premises. Almost universally the press offices for the Senators and Representatives issued No commenthhh statements and thereafter refused to return calls. The security level was bumped up to Orange, though those who considered it a possible attack, argued for Red.

At Quantico, the FBI ready response team ran to the waiting helicopters. They were deployed to supervise the search in three states which was looking for the woman who called herself Hosanna. Lead agent Phillip Reed saw the instructions to, 'detain and escort to a secure location,' and once again was amazed at how they could oversimplify. If only it would be that easy. He had a friend who was facing divorce because of the snake thing. Five minutes ago his superior had developed a forked tongue when he had said that he did not know who had issued the orders. Phillip sincerely hoped that he would not experience transformation of any body parts as a part

of this mission.

They were equipped with photos of the woman and not much else. Inquiries had been made after the California incident, but they had no clear idea of who she actually was. For once Phil actively hoped his assignment would fail. From what he'd read, there was, he thought, a significant chance that this woman was something along the lines of what she claimed to be. Though exactly what was subject to some confusion according to the document he had read at the briefing.

Whatever or whoever she was, Phillip was convinced that he was dealing with something much bigger than he.

Phillip scanned the classified document which had been faxed to the helicopter and tried to decide if it had any relevance to his mission. The wheels could turn fast when they were sufficiently greased. But sometimes they overspun throwing enough mud to confuse an otherwise simple picture.

"There are several elements to the story that have not been publicly released.

1. Intensive analysis of the video tape of her announcement found no anomalies or significant findings.
2. Additionally, it has been determined that the serpent's tongue is a very reliable indicator of truthfulness. Some experiments in conjunction with drugs and the latest generation of polygraph / voice analysis systems and found that even subjects who had been trained to beat the polygraph could not fool the tongue.
3. The White House feels that this 'enforced honesty' is a threat to our security. It is felt that it weakens our negotiating policy, threatens military security by elimination of

dis-information as a tactic and provides our enemies with a tool they can use against us. Not stated is the fact that it has already created some very embarrassing moments both for Government and business.

4. Homeland Security also feels that if Hosanna were to fall into the hands of our enemies there would be a significant danger.
5. The FBI has been authorized to relocate Hosanna to a secure facility.
6. Several studies by the Military, as well as by other agencies, have been progressing in an attempt to determine if she is for real. And, if not, to debunk her. Some of these studies are employing faculty of noted seminaries and theological institutions. So far as is known no discrediting information has yet surfaced.
7. Finally, a very preliminary report by RAND has said that there would have to be fundamental societal changes if man lost the ability to lie."

Nothing new, Phillip decided. "Fundamental societal changes if man lost the ability to lie." Wonder how much they paid for those words of wisdom. He made a note to call a friend who worked at the White House after this was all over. She would have an interesting story or two he thought.

After Hosanna left the Capitol steps she took a cab to the National Gallery. It was a place that she had wanted to visit, but had never found the time for. After searching her bag they waved her through. She had a fickle taste in art and absolutely no patience for the rooms of Madonna and baby Jesus depictions. It was hard enough being herself let alone having to deal with sibling issues. She fell in love with other

galleries and spent some time studying the landscapes. Portraits did little for her, though she enjoyed looking at people without knowing what secrets the subjects were hiding behind the pose. With live people she was bombarded with knowing their innermost workings. The amount of time men spent thinking about sex and appraising women was a boring disappointment. Women, as a whole, were better, but a lot of them were consumed by fears, anger and jealousy. Though, every so often, she was amazed at some of the depravities that lurked just below some very poised and polished surfaces. In one of the rooms there was a young man who had obviously making promises to his date, one of them must have gone past the line and it tripped his tongue. Hosanna watched with some amusement as he tried to conceal it and then, with surprise, as his date imagined the man using it for oral sex. For a second Hosanna was upset, but that eased as she realized this was just another example of the wonders of man's mind. "Tell me a lie, then go down on me," she wondered how long it would take for something like that to become a common bedroom line. Hosanna moved on and realized that she should make some plans beyond the afternoon. They were stopping cars, watching buses and trains, hoping to find her. Some people wanted to ask her questions. A part of her thought that might be interesting, but she decided it would be more satisfying to have them search fruitlessly for a while first. She had booked her hotel room through the Internet and gotten a good rate for a luxurious semi-suite. They would not look for her there, she thought, since she had taken the precaution of reversing her coat and assuming a different look.

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"Can I buy you a drink?"

Hosanna was sitting at the bar waiting for a table to open up in what was supposed to be a good restaurant. She turned, he was attractive - compact rather than lanky, a cut above the herd of young up-and-comers who were crowded around,

“Already have one. Thanks.”

He started to turn away, but stopped. “How about a more direct approach? Would you like to talk for a while?”

Hosanna smiled and said, “Sure, how many times did your tongue split today?”

“Isn’t that wild? Amazing.” He did not answer the question.

“Yes, I think it’s going to make things interesting.”

“Not the word for it. There is this lawyer where I work, in an engineering firm. Anyway, she said that it was going to revolutionize things. She said there were going to be very few trials – either civil or criminal because nobody would testify. She said that written documents were going to have to take on new importance in negotiating – or else people would hire people to speak for them, people who do not know the facts so they can’t lie. Then she had us experiment to see what the limits of it were. We wanted to find out what happens when you stretch things just a little. For example, can I tell you that it’s seven o’clock if it’s actually five minutes to?”

“What did you find?”

“It’s hard to say. Motive seems to play a part in it. It seems as though it’s ok to approximate if you aren’t trying to cheat. But if you are trying to go home early from work or something, then it splits. We didn’t get it figured out. One thing that happened though people started saying things like, ‘I’d like to answer that but I’m

afraid that my tongue might give me away.”

“That’s interesting.”

He asked, “What do you do?”

“Do? Oh for a living?” Hosanna realized she didn’t know if the lesson applied to her and she had to tell the truth. She also realized that a job description was difficult. “I guess you could say I’m working for my Mother.” Her tongue did not tingle – either she was exempt or the vagueness was sufficiently inside the bounds of truth.

“What does she do? This being Washington, are you a lobbyist?”

“Not exactly.” She realized that a closer brush with the truth might dissuade him. She hadn’t decided if he was just being friendly or was actively trying to put the make on her, and had resisted looking into his head to find out. “Actually I am spreading God’s word. I am on a mission to show people the folly of their path.”

It took him a second to reply. “You are a preacher? Have to say I’ve never met one like you.”

“Don’t like labels. Preacher seems like it includes shaking your finger at people and threatening hell. Maybe Minister, but Teacher is also good.”

“Teacher? Like in lessons?” He looked at her closely.

Oh oh, she thought. “Yeah I guess so.” She kept the answer vague.

He paused and looked at her again. “We had a TV on at work. They kept playing the tape of Hosanna all afternoon. You know...” He stopped and shook his head, “No, never mind.”

“I think it’s better that way.” She turned as the waiter waved to her indicating that

her table was ready. She wondered if it was a good idea to leave him alone at the bar. She could imagine him saying, “Don’t be obvious, but look at the woman over by the window.”

“Do you want to join me?”

He hesitated, and looked at his watch. Then shrugged. “Why not, it might turn out to be good for my soul.”

Chapter 23

Hosanna and Ray

Hosanna studied the menu and cast glances at the man she'd invited to eat with her. There was something about him that she could not quite pin down. Usually people were an open book, if she chose to look. Sometimes their inner workings were so loud they seemed to call out to her.

He was different. He said his name was Ray, which wasn't a lie, but it was not the whole story. He also had a quality of appearing a little different from every angle. He was large without being huge. He possessed of a power and an assurance that she had rarely encountered. He, she was pretty sure, knew who she was, yet it did not make him hesitant or nervous the way most people were when she revealed herself.

"Who are you," she asked after deciding that she would try the homemade ravioli.

He smiled, "A distant cousin perhaps."

"To know that you have to know who I am."

He nodded. "Good camouflage, but I saw through it."

"Cousin, you said?"

"Distant. We don't have to worry about incest."

Except for Mick the magician, nobody had ever been that familiar with her, not since a couple of memorably bad dates in high school. There was an assurance she found attractive. And a hint of sexual innuendo. Who was he? "Your camouflage is better than mine."

“Discretion was drilled into me from an early age. My family is similar to yours, except it’s sort of the poor relatives but not quite,” he paused. “Analogies don’t work well. Once, a long time ago, my relatives had a lot of power and glory. It has, you might say, faded. So now I have to work my way through grad school.”

She thought about trying to dip into his mind to see if it would reveal anything, but she was pretty sure he would detect it. It was too aggressive a move for the moment. “You are enjoying this aren’t you?”

His smile widened, “Yeah. Got to admit that I am.”

“I am too,” she said. “In a strange way it makes me feel normal.” She did not add that it also was driving her crazy to not know. She sent a message upstairs, ‘So are you going to give many hints to who this guy is?’

‘That would spoil the fun.’

‘He said he’s a cousin.’

“Why don’t you ask him where his family is from?”

“Originally Egypt, but it was much larger then.”

“You can hear it.”

He nodded, “Sometimes. I suspect when it is desired for me to.”

The waitress approached. They ordered, Hosanna specifying a carafe of water.

“This is driving me crazy,” Hosanna admitted.

“I suspect it is a lesson directed at you to help you not lose sight of the fact that there is a lot you don’t know. I’ve had that done to me.”

“So how long are you going to toy with me?”

He waited until the waitress put the carafe on the table before answering, “I’m

almost done. Like I said, my family – more precisely the source of my creation – used to be big. The biggest. He, definitely a he, this was many millennia before political correctness came into being. Anyway he is, I guess you would say mostly retired, but can still occasionally pull off a trick or two.” He smiled for a couple of seconds letting the suspense build. “OK I’ll cut it short, his name was Ra. You have heard of him?”

“Ra – Ray, I get it now.” She looked around, does anyone know?”

“I made the mistake of telling a girlfriend once. Some people can’t handle anything more than two feet out of the ordinary.”

Hosanna laughed, loud enough for people at the next table to notice. “You’ve got that right. I’ll bet telling a girl that you are the son of a God is enough to get you in trouble nine times out of ten.”

“And the tenth?”

“Well – it certainly makes you interesting.”

He pointed to the carafe – Pouilly Fousse perhaps? Would you care to do the honors?”

She looked around. “What happened to discretion?”

“Did you miss the lesson on unseen miracles?”

She nodded, “Must have – She often says I’m being too literal. Come to think about it, nothing says red wine actually has to be red.”

Ray nodded, “Yeah. You see, you’re on a different path. If I tried any of the stunts you’ve pulled all hell would break loose. Not that I could, my fingers don’t have the zap.”

“So when did you find out that you were, what to call it? Different?”

“When I was a kid. Like a lot of kids, I was fascinated with fire. The fires I made were a bit hotter than usual. My mother knew about it and arranged for me to have a steel box to play with it in.”

“I got to ask you this, did your mother ever tell you how she happened to meet your father? The reason I ask is that my mother is a little bit squirrely about the specifics.”

“Yeah, I had to worm it out of her. She grew up in a little town in Oregon. Outside of town there was a commune where the last of the hippies were holed up. Well she was kind of wild in high school. She went out there one day and ended up taking an interesting combination of drugs. Next thing she knows she’s looking up at the sky and a beam of sunlight comes through a small hole in the clouds. Bam all she knows is she’s having multiple orgasms and nine months later she names me Ray.”

Hosanna started laughing and had to muffle it with her hand. “My mother, she was in college. She went out at night and was lying on her back looking up at the stars – trying to be one with the universe. I’m lucky I’m not named Moonbeam.”

As they were approaching her hotel he tightened the grip on her hand. “They are waiting for you.”

She nodded, sensing their presence. “How could they?”

“Credit cards. All they have to do is check for cards that were used where you did the last ones and see if they are being used locally. Takes a big computer, but I’ll bet they’ve got one that big.”

“I guess that answers the, ‘your place or mine’, question.”

* * *

Cheryl said, "James, we need to talk."

The reverend looked up from the computer where he was working on the church bulletin. "Uh oh."

"I hate it when you do that, but in this case, you are right."

"Let me guess, Eddie and April."

"That's too easy. Go on." Cheryl was used to James' indirect way of listening to what she had to say. He would eventually get there, so she played a patient waiting game.

"Let me see, you got a call from the Garden Figures Come to Life Union."

"No. But don't say that too loud."

"They want cable installed in the playhouse."

"You're getting closer."

He frowned, "They need a hot tub."

"Almost. They want a fully functioning bathroom. April says that having to go behind a bush is not dignified. She also says that Eddie could use a hot shower now and then."

"I don't think they make bathroom fixtures to fit six inch tall Garden Figures Come to Life."

"I'm sure you can come up with something."

She took a couple of steps towards the door. "One other thing."

He sighed, "I'm out of guesses."

"This is just a worry, you know they've been having a lot of sex."

“Actually, I didn’t know, and was happy in my ignorance.”

“Well I asked April if she was using birth control, and she said that they were hoping for children.”

He sighed again, clicked the mouse a couple of times and the document blanked off on the computer screen to be replaced by another. “I’ve been working on a ... I guess you would call it a Testament of sorts that records Hosanna’s visit and the lingering aftershocks. The theological implications of her bringing new creatures to life, especially ones that can reason and potentially have souls, it’s immense. The wonderful absolutely cunning condition she imposed that only we can see them – confounds some of this – is it real or is it some bizarre extremely complicated hallucination?”

“Spare me the metaphysics. If you had to listen to them telling me exactly what is wrong with the garden and their living quarters – believe me, they are real.”

* * *

“Having Hosanna consort with the son of another deity?”

The speaker was a woman in the third row. All the bookstore reading rooms looked alike Martha tried to remember what city they were in as she said, “Yes. What is the question?”

“It seems sacrilegious to me. Why does God allow it?”

“Depending on who you ask, Hosanna herself is heresy, so what is a little sacrilegious added to that stew?” And Please, please, remember. - this is fiction. It is a book. That tends to get overlooked a great deal of the time. Hosanna is human, gets lonely, needs a love interest, and you could have a whole book on how hard it is for the daughter of god to have a relationship, but that is not this book.” Martha looked at her watch, this session was going slowly. She was sorry

she had agreed to so large a tour. The sessions had ceased to be fun.

“So are you saying that we should believe none of this?”

“Faith is an interesting subject. And a very personal one. I do not presume to tell anyone what or what not to believe. I will take that farther and say that I think that no one should presume to tell any other person what they should believe. If you are asking what I believe, I’ll make it simple – I believe a lot of things. And the one thing I know is that I know very little. But I believe in a lot of things I do not know. Not too bad a definition of faith is it?”

She paused. There were none of the insights that had amazed and wowed and that people had come to expect. She sensed a disappointment building. “How many of you came here thinking that you might see something like happened in Chicago?”

A couple of hands went up. “It is amazing how reluctant people are to admit to things. How many of you took a shit in the past forty eight hours?” There was an uneasy murmur and only a couple of hands went up. She laughed, “Well if that is true; I know what your problem is.” That got a laugh.

“One of the advantages of having been in a loony bin is that you can get away with things that other people can’t. In the same vein, if you claim to hear the voice of God then people cut you a bit of slack.” She lowered her voice almost to a whisper, “And if you want to know a secret, it is that God, whomever he, she or it is, speaks to each one of you in some way most every day. Usually people don’t listen. They are too wrapped up in their minute to minute lives to see a larger picture.” She increased her volume a little, “Sometimes we call it luck, good or bad. Sometimes it’s a coincidence – some times it is your conscience saying ‘Don’t you dare.’ Other times it is a glorious sunset or the moon rising behind a tree. Other times it may be a lot more dramatic than that. It has been for me now and again. But can I tell you what stock to buy

or sell? No. I will tell you though – do not sell Ra short, he’s the Egyptian Sun God for those of you who missed it. Don’t feel you have to worship him, especially if your faith tells you not to. But if you don’t have that constraint, just remember it is the Sun that keeps us alive.” She stopped and looked down at her notes. “I’m not sure where I am going with this – except to say that the more you allow yourselves to be open – the more you can believe.”

A man stood. “I believe you were sent by Satan. I believe that you are going to roast in hell for eternity.”

Martha nodded. Something clicked and she knew why she was there today. “Your faith must be very strong for you to be so sure that you are right and were justified when set fire to the house owned by those men you thought were homosexuals.”

The man stopped. “They were an abomination. The Lord did not create this world to be poisoned by their kind.”

“So you set the fire and were pleased by your cleverness?”

“They got what they deserved it was a sample of what they will get in hell. It was God’s doing.”

Martha nodded to the off duty policeman who had been provided by the store. “You might want to have Detective Wells talk to this man.”

Her accuser turned and headed for the back of the room. Another man moved to block him.

Someone near her asked in a low voice, “And this is fiction?”

“Sir,” Martha answered, “maybe we could call it a mystery and leave it at that.”

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Waking in an unfamiliar bed was something Hosanna was used to. Waking with a person next to her was not. How, she wondered, was he going to fit in with the day she had not yet begun to plan? Or was it a one night thing, just a way of easing her burden for a day? She needed a sign, but she needed to pee first. As she walked to the bathroom she noticed drawings of solar panels on his desk. He said he studying to be an engineer and clearly Solar Power was his calling. She wanted to find some way to fit it in with her calling, which had suddenly become less defined.

He opened the paper, "Well it's official. You are a wanted woman."

"Wanted or wanton."

"Both actually, it's good to see that you still have your sense of humor."

She was sitting at the kitchen table wearing one of his dress shirts, and nothing else. It was an outfit that she'd wanted to wear ever since she saw someone wearing it in a movie and it had looked incredibly sexy. "You better not rat me out Mugsy. You know what happens..."

He held up his hand, "Listen doll. Like I told you, we are going to make a break for it. Once we get out of this town we're going to use the loot from the heist to buy a little place on one of them back roads. I'll get work as a mechanic and you'll bake pies to sell to the folks who pass through."

"But you won't know a wrench from a trench. And the only pies I bake are the ones that had the file in it so you could break out of the joint."

"It's a pretty good photo of you. You want me to clip it and send it to your mother?"

She grabbed the paper from him. “They say I have paralyzed government. They say that I have am wanted under the anti-terrorism statues. They don’t have a clue what terror is. You want to go in on an unplanned eclipse?”

Ray held his hands up. “Nice of you to ask, but I’ve got a much smaller mission.”

“Whus. Don’t they know what they are dealing with?”

“Actually I suspect they just want to take the attention off of their forked tongues.”

“It’s not like I expected them to say, ‘We’ve seen the light. Praise be to God, we will henceforth lead a virtuous life and will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75% starting tomorrow.’”

He pointed to the paper, “Maybe it’s on an inside page.”

“My half-brother, I guess you could call him, he tried being nice. I’ve got better things to do than add to global deforestation.” She stood. “I guess there’s no way I can talk you into being my moll?”

He reached out and took her hand. “This is not my journey, and I’d strongly suggest that you consider taking a later flight. You are welcome to hide out here for a while.”

Hosanna shook her head, “I know you are right. I know that I should have a plan. I know that you are offering me something I have never even dreamed I could have – at least not really. But, at the same time it’s almost like something is pulling me out the door.” She made a move to get up.

Ray asked, “The question is – how much of this has to do with God, whoever that happens to be in your case? And how much of it has to do with you?”

That stopped her and she settled back into the chair.

He continued, “what would happen if you dropped the ‘I am Hosanna,’ bit and kept on doing whatever you thought you had to do, but without the media coverage.”

“You think I’m doing this just to show off.”

“I don’t think anything. Just playing devil’s advocate perhaps.”

“Hardly the devils advocate. But never mind. Ok, I am Hosanna and I am pissed off and have been given the means and a license to do something about it. Tell me what is wrong with that.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? But you said...”

“It’s not the content I was talking about, its rather the presentation that has me a bit, I don’t know, concerned, might be the right word.”

“Yeah. Well, you got to remember I’m doing this without a manual.”

The Gospel of Ray

And Hosanna said “I am tired of being the bearer of bad news. According to a poll I am the most feared woman in this country. A resounding 84% agree with the statement that I am overdoing it.”

And God spoke to her, “*The message is being delivered and they understand it. It is your path to show them the thorns.*”

“Couldn’t you have at least given me a wonderful childhood to make up for all the crap I have to take now?”

“*What was wrong with your childhood? – You didn’t have a pony? If you really*

want a pony...”

“Wait – don’t do it. I know that tone. I don’t want a pony any more and I never wanted one that would fall from the sky onto me as I suspect you were about to bestow.”

Later the same night Hosanna came out of a restaurant and a woman on the sidewalk confronted her. “Thanks a lot!”

Hosanna chose to ignore the sarcasm, “You are welcome. You are referring to having your husband’s lies displayed I assume.”

“I knew he was lying all along, but so long as he stayed with me I could live with it. He gets caught in a lie and he decides that’s his key to getting out. So here I am alone with the rent due and a house full of hungry kids. Thanks a lot.”

Another passerby, a man said, “Yeah, we didn’t ask for no miracles. We were doing fine without you.”

And Hosanna, who had not particularly enjoyed her dinner, became irate. “Oh you were doing fine were you? Let me tell you about yourself, Tim. You’re doing fine with a credit card balance of fifteen thousand four hundred thirty-six dollars, three kids you have taught to want everything they see advertised on TV, a wife who has to go to three doctors to get enough pills so she can cope and you drinking every night so you don’t have to think about any of this. Your brother isn’t talking to you because you groped his wife at Thanksgiving dinner last year - something you deny because you don’t remember doing it – but you have this funny feeling it might have happened and what makes it worse is she is fat and ugly, and your mother knows you took the two

thousand out of her account. Yeah, your life is fine.”

She stopped and took a breath, “And, one more thing, that woman at work you’ve been hitting on and you think is about ready to give you a blow job? Well, she told her husband about how you’re harassing her. He’s been looking for you. And, guess what? He’s right over here.”

A large man stepped out of the crowd and picked Tim up by the collar.

Hosanna turned away, “A damned soap opera, that’s what these people have taken for a role model.” She turned to her disciple, “What do you suppose would happen if we had a day in which everybody gets what they deserve?”

* * *

Phillip looked at the map of Washington that was displayed on his computer screen. There were dots representing the various checkpoints that should have spotted Hosanna if she were fleeing. He had been slightly amused that the biometrics system that they had paid so much money for and wasted so much time testing had not found her. Instead it produced hundreds of false positives including two grandmothers and a drag queen who was absolutely thrilled that a computer had thought he was a woman. They had almost had to arrest him when he refused to give the handcuffs back.

Phillip had the feeling that all of this was pointless. His gut told him that she was still in the city. He also had the feeling that they would be seeing her again very soon, but it would be on her terms.

The credit card matches were more productive, yielding some interesting leads. The best so far was a woman who ate dinner last night at a restaurant and paid using a

credit card that had been used in southern California the day of the craziness with wine in the gas tanks. Interviews at the restaurant confirmed his knowledge that waiters saw tips first and people second. She might have been with a man, whom they thought had been there before, but no one was willing to commit to more than a maybe on any of it. If he was a local it explained why the same woman had not returned to the hotel room which had been paid with the card. They had used the new anti-terrorism laws to search her room without bothering with a warrant. It hadn't mattered because they turned up nothing the slightest bit out of the ordinary. They had left two agents in the room, a duty he envied as he made arrangements for relief so that he could find a bathroom. He tried to think if he'd ever had a stakeout with a bathroom and decided that maybe the time in the biker bar back when he was undercover could count. Of course the bathroom there was far more dangerous than the bar itself.

Knowing the FBI was waiting in her hotel, Hosanna bought some fresh clothes in a Gap and changed in the restroom of a Starbucks next door. She emerged just as the FBI converged on the street, rushing into the Gap as well as sealing off the surrounding intersections. As the agents began to come through the restaurant using some sort of digital cameras, Hosanna knew it was time to make an exit.

"I am Hosanna," She used her voice as a weapon. Tone and timbre cut through all thoughts of agents and customers alike. "This is holy ground, and you are out of your jurisdiction." The agents reached for their guns and came up holding kittens which mewed and licked at them. Reaching for their radios they found hamsters in their pockets. One agent put his kitten down and moved towards her. The floor under him

turned to mud and she watched as he sank past his knees. He said, "We just want to talk to you," his tongue forked at the lie. Hosanna smiled saying, "I'll talk and you'll listen, but not here." She paused for a second, "On the Ellipse. In half an hour." She turned, opened a door in the wall behind her, and left. Four seconds later two agents slammed into the wall to find there was no door. They screamed at the hamsters as though they were radios and then ran out the door. All the police on the street were staring at the kittens that were gamboling at their feet. Finally got the idea to use a cell phone and called the headquarters. The ellipse was too close to the White House and FBI headquarters for them to allow her to proceed.

As she walked down the street Hosanna was pleased with the kittens for guns concept. She widened the circle of effect and randomly threw in puppies. She kept on walking as cars with flailing sirens streaked past her in random directions though a good number seemed to be heading towards the ellipse. Soon she noticed fewer people coming towards her. She suspected that police were controlling pedestrian access to the streets leading to the mall and suspected they had spotted her and were planning some sort of trap. As Hosanna neared an intersection she felt a presence and then, in only two moments, a hundred policemen were arrayed in a large semicircle around her. There were metro cops and many men in blue wind breakers festooned with a variety of acronyms. None were holding guns. Some appeared to have put the kittens in their jacket pockets. She stopped and turned slightly and saw they had blocked off all avenues of escape – except for the door just to her left. It read Apostolic Nunciature, the Holy See.

Hosanna pulled on the brass handle. The door was locked. She turned the lock

into a piece of cooked spaghetti and opened the door. This should be interesting, she thought. Immediately she bumped into two very large men. They were holding kittens and were not smiling. With their free hands, they gripped her on the upper arms and effortlessly lifted her off the floor. Hosanna added weight until they were straining and her feet touched again. "I think an audience with the Cardinal might be in order." Behind her the door rattled as the police tried to open it. The lock was no longer spaghetti and it held. Neither of her captors made any move to open it, she noted. Not that they could have.

More men appeared and the small vestibule became quite crowded. There were whispered consultations as some of the men moved into the interior of the building. Finally some order prevailed, after being examined with a metal detecting wand and then boxed in by six large men, Hosanna was gently ushered inside the next step of doors.

A priest stood facing her as the row of men in front moved slightly aside. "This is most irregular." He began,

"You have no idea," she responded. "It was not how I envisioned the morning going."

"Why are you here?"

"Because there are no coincidences." She paused and looked at the doors, which had stopped rattling. "You know who I am?"

"There seems to be some debate as to whom or what you are."

"Yeah," she nodded. "There is a lot of that going around. On a good day I think I have a handle on it, then, You-Know-Who throws me a curve... Like this."

The priest smiled. "That curve ball seems to be a popular pitch today." He switched to Latin, "We've had an interest in you and your message for a while."

Hosanna answered in Greek, "I can imagine. But then again there would be those who might be afraid of the answers."

In Greek he replied, "No man should fear the truth."

She reached out and stroked one of the nearby kitties. Reverting to English she said, "Some truths have been pretty strange of late."

One of the guards whispered to the priest and he nodded. "If you would accompany me to another room, where perhaps it will be more comfortable."

The wood panels glowed from rubbed oil; there was an oriental rug on the hardwood floor. Half the walls were taken up with book cases, the other half were covered with renaissance paintings. In the corners there were marble sculptures. With a wave he indicated that she should sit on a couch and she complied.

The crowd of security men thinned. Two stationed themselves at the door as the rest exited. The Priest sat in a wing chair facing her across a coffee table inlaid with onyx. "Why have you come?"

"Because I knew that the FBI or CIA wouldn't be this civilized." Hosanna waved her hand slightly to indicate the surroundings. "And, like I said, there are no coincidences. As much as I like to think I've been operating independently there have been many times when free will is maybe not as cheap as it seems." She held her hand up. "We do not have to debate, or discuss it now, that's what seminars and introductory philosophy courses are for."

He chuckled, "I agree. But I suspect that much of what we have to discuss will take us into theological minefields of some sort or another."

She smiled. "We start off agreeing on something. And to postulate another point of agreement; namely that God is capable of many things that we can not explain and they can come in ways that we do not expect."

He nodded. "The old He works in mysterious ways bit."

It was not the time to get into a discussion of pronouns, Hosanna realized. "Something like that."

He stroked his chin. "We have been uncertain as to exactly what it is that you claim."

"I have been careful to claim very little. I talk with God. I suspect that you do too. Are the responses to me a little louder or more direct?" She shrugged, "I can not speak for your experience - you can not know mine." Hosanna paused, and after he nodded, she continued, "The only proof I can offer is that at times I seem to be endowed with certain abilities, for want of a better word."

"It's a varied list. I never studied Aramaic and I feel like an impostor and a show-off when I start spouting it. I'm a little worried about my affinity or, is it proclivity, for wine? I am not sure at what point self-esteem becomes pride and pride becomes a sin, but I have to tell you that the lesson with the split tongues and the guns into kittens move today, let's just say I'm feeling pretty good. I seem to be getting my point across. That may be why events seem to be headed towards changing the direction of my path. But that takes us back towards the free will area."

"You have said that you are the daughter of God."

She touched her head, “I’d give you a hair for DNA testing, but what could that tell you? I doubt you have anything to compare it with. The voice I take to be God’s has called me daughter. Maybe it’s a stretch, but I’ve used that as license to refer to Jesus as my half-brother. Bet that caused a bit of a stir here. Would have been enough to get me burned at the stake not that many years ago.”

He gave the slightest of nods. She continued, “Do I know for sure? I’ve had some conversations with my mother and she has an interesting story. Could it be real? Yes? Could it be some sort of psychotic manifestation? At various times I thought so. I hoped so. I even prayed for it. And the answer that I got – is that there is no limit to what is possible – especially when God is involved.”

The priest replied, “Again we could get into theological debates, just what constitutes a miracle, or divine intervention? And I personally do not have any answers. However,” he pointed to his collar, “this makes my personal thoughts and opinions irrelevant or immaterial. The Holy See has an interest in this. The institution of the church must not be swayed by the fads of the moment. We take a very long view of things.”

“Let me set this straight,” Hosanna said, “I am not here asking for endorsement. I am not asking for recognition. I may be asking for a very temporary sanctuary, which has de-facto been granted, though I bet there are some intense conversations going on between this building and certain buildings in Rome. I would like a glass of water though.”

He picked up the phone that sat on a small table next to his chair and spoke into it.

As he replaced the handset, she continued, "In fact, if you were to offer me an endorsement I'm not sure I would take it." She waved her hand, "But that is off the topic – regardless of what we are asking or not asking for - we do, I hope you will agree, have some things that we should discuss. Some of them may be things that are perhaps best discussed in camera - is that the term?" She paused, "Though I admit I could have been a bit more discrete about coming here."

He laughed. It was a real, genuine, not a polite titter. It made her feel better towards him. "Hosanna, you do have a talent for understatement." He paused, "and yes we do have things to talk about. That is certainly the third thing that we can say we are in agreement on."

There was a knock on the door and another priest entered carrying a pitcher of water and two glasses. He set it on the table and then left.

Hosanna leaned forward and grasped the pitcher. "Red or white?"

It took him a second, and then he smiled. "How about just the way it is?"

She shook her head as she poured him a glass. "You're no fun. I really enjoy this talent, is that the word? I take pride in making really good wine - which may be my undoing – I think I really pi... um let me revise that given the locale, I think I may have really upset a few powerful people, by my tricks of the last couple of days." She paused, "Are you recording this, Father?"

He started to say something and stopped. "I believe that may be so."

She shrugged, "That's fine with me. You know I never got your name?"

He nodded, "We kind of got swept past introductions didn't we? I am James Dunlee. And I must admit that the 'lesson' as you call it with the tongue does smack of

divine inspiration. The warning tingle is a nice touch as often we can get lost in a maze of half truths until we almost unknowingly step over into a lie.”

“Just like when you were about to say that you know of no such recording, which was true, but only so far as the very words would take it.”

He shifted away from that topic by asking, “There are some questions I must ask.”

She nodded. “Before you begin, I’d like to reserve the right to ignore questions relating to dogma. The church has institutional as well as spiritual beliefs and I am not the person to go into those.”

“Very well. You just referred to yourself as a person. Is that what you consider yourself?”

“What else? We are all created in the likeness of God, or so we have come to believe. I have been told that God had a bit more of a hand in my creation than in some others. Do I completely believe it? Some-times,” she pointed to the pitcher and its contents turned red, “it is a reasonable explanation for some of the things that seem to happen with unusual frequency when I am present. Now for you transubstantiation is a daily occurrence. But as a woman, and clearly not ordained in your faith – it requires an explanation. And maybe this is a bit of pride, but I am willing to bet that this wine is better than what you find in the average parish.”

“But it is not wine that we are serving.”

“Good point – and make a note that at no time have I ever strayed into your turf and claimed that what I make is anything other than wine. Good wine, I might add again, but only wine. The body and blood of Christ, I’ll leave to you.”

He nodded. "So noted. At another time when you were asked if you were a Christian, you answered that you believe in a lot of things. And that Christ is one of them."

"You have done your homework. And here we can too easily get into some of the dogmatic difficulties. I do not see any contradiction in the term Buddhist Christian, or Moslem, Hindu, Taoist, Mormon. God created the universe – God created everything in it. God is so big – all is encompassed - Ra the Egyptian Sun God certainly once was a large part of the universe. Believing in Ra is believing in a segment of the same God you and I believe in. I certainly have not been deputized to say that anyone is wrong in their belief. Now the worship of tiny poodles may strike me as a bit comical, but then again God does have a sense of humor. If we lose track of that – we have lost a large part of ourselves, because it is my firm belief that God had tongue in cheek at least some of the time he spent creating man. One last thing – I have used the male pronoun for God in this conversation. At other times I use the female. I used the male here because I did not want to risk getting diverted over something so elemental."

He nodded. "That is consistent with the answers we have seen you give."

She took another sip of wine. It was early and Hosanna realized that she would need her wits about her today, so she eliminated the alcohol. "I've got a question of my own and I'm not asking you for an answer. Taking a look at the church, as an institution with wealth and power almost immeasurable, do you think that it might be possible that it has gotten away from its initial purpose which was to provide a vehicle for its believers to worship God?" She held her hand up. "Just so we are clear, that is a question from Hosanna the person. I have had no communication with God on this. If He's got a

question I suspect He would ask it directly. I will also tell you I have no lessons planned in that direction.”

Chapter 24

Public Enemy: The Government Reacts

Phillip was, at once, amazed, upset, and confused when his gun turned into a kitten. Hundreds of hours of training which had covered and rehearsed every conceivable situation had not come close to preparing him for this. It was a cute kitten, an exceptionally friendly fur-ball. Some of the agents had put the animals down, for the most part gently, but many were holding on to them. This was because the training had emphasized that, no matter what, you held on to your weapon. If the kittens reverted into the pistols at some latter point – it would be bad if it was not in your possession.

The men and women around him were angry as well as astounded. Taking their weapons was not a gentle slap on the wrist. It was a serious challenge to ego and authority. Phillip had ordered a re-supply of weapons from Quantico. From all reports, the kitten effect was limited to a circle approximately five miles wide. That encompassed a couple of the nastier parts of Washington and he wondered how the gang-bangers were dealing with it.

He was summoned into the command trailer as too many bosses tried to get a handle on a very slippery situation. They too had ordered weapons, though there was a report that the first attempted delivery had failed when the driver opened up the back of the van to find it filled with puppies. Black Labs and Sheep Dogs, it was said. Phillip hid a smile behind his hand as he pretended to cough. He had to give the woman a lot of credit.

The discussion briefly turned as to who to ream for allowing Hosanna to escape

into the Vatican Embassy. Somebody's career had just turned to kitty litter, Phillip thought. With merciful quickness the talk turned to how they could contain her, and about the progress of talks with the Embassy. "The State department has taken over." A groan rose. "I guess we should order cots and blankets." Came a voice from the back of the room. There was a short laugh.

The leader said, "Business. Gentlemen. Business. It is clear that we are not dealing with a situation that we have trained for. The current plan is that when she emerges we will wait for the opportunity and then will drop a blanket over her. At that point she will be placed in a secure prisoner vehicle and will be brought to headquarters where a cell and interrogation facilities await." Philip did not think that they had a chance of carrying this off. He could imagine that if they got her to the Hoover Building she might turn the computers into marshmallows, or something. He was yanked out of his reverie by the sound of his name. "Reed. What is the status of the re-supply of weapons you ordered from Quantico?"

He took a quick look at his assistant who was on the phone. The man shook his head and handed the headset to him. On the other end was a copter pilot named Hansen. "Sorry sir, I have to divert to pick up a couple hundred pounds of kibbles. They are hungry."

He could not resist, it was too good a line to keep to himself. "The pilot reports puppies. He's diverting to get them food and water." Phillip paused then said, "Sir I might point out the obvious, but we may be dealing with something a bit bigger than we are. I'm not sure that force is going to work."

"And what do you suggest, Reed."

He did not like the way the superior had remembered and said his name. “Sir, I would try something different – offbeat.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well it’s a nice day. I would have the people who we want to talk with her standing outside the Embassy with a picnic basket and a blanket. We would get word to her that...”

“A picnic – are you crazy?”

Yes, he thought, I am totally nuts for suggesting it. Phillip knew he was going to hear about it for years. He’d be lucky if they didn’t tag him with the nickname Picnic Phil.

“Probably. But I’m thinking that an absurd situation almost demands an absurd response. She went through a locked door into the embassy. Hell, she made a door in a wall to exit Starbucks, what makes you think we can hold her at the Hoover Building?”

The boss started to say something, and then stopped. “It certainly is outside the box. And if the best the box can do is get us a truck load of puppies, then we’ve got to go outside. There is a catering place over on M street I think. You,” he pointed to an agent near the door. “Go get a basket. The whole works, but don’t bother with the wine.” He turned back to Phillip. “Once you get her, where do you begin?”

He was petting his kitten – he’d named it Magnum. “I guess I’d like to find out what her plans are, and I’d like my weapon back.”

Another agent spoke up. “We’re getting reports that the area that weapons are you know, changed, well it’s expanding. Apparently it now covers the entire East Coast. And in Boston it seems to be bunny rabbits.”

“Rabbits?” The agent in charge shouted. “Has anyone done a security assessment? How vulnerable are we?”

“Assuming that no one else has guns, then we seem to be fairly safe. We are in the process of issuing bats to all guard posts. The secret service has sealed off an area ten blocks around the White House. They have sent out an email seeking any agents who are bow hunters. Their thinking is that they can handle individuals, but a mob might pose problems.”

Another agent added, “The White House has bumped the level up to orange plus. This means that places like nuclear power plants are sealed.

The assistant director looked at Phillip, “And you think that the way out of this is with a picnic?”

Phillip wanted to shrink and disappear. “Force isn’t going to work. From what we know she has something of a sense of humor, warped as it may be.”

“What if we get some people who are skilled in unarmed combat?” Another agent asked.

Beside the priest the phone rang. He had given in and was savoring the glass of wine he was holding. He set it down and picked up the phone.

After listening for a minute, he held the phone away from his head and said, “The FBI called and they are inviting you to a picnic. They say it’s too nice a day for a confrontation.”

Hosanna nodded. “I agree, but remind them that I did not start it.”

He spoke into the phone and then asked, “They are suggesting the mall by the

river.”

“Tell then I feel like a visit to the Zoo, I’ll meet them at the Giraffes.”

Again he conferred, “They say they’ll give you a ride. If you’ll just step outside.”

She stood and walked to him. Taking the phone she said, “I have my own transportation. A picnic at the zoo sounds civilized. I’ll be there soon”

She hung up the phone and looked down at the priest who was still sitting. “I guess we’ll have to finish this another time.”

He nodded, “What do you think will happen?”

“Short term they will try to confine me and I will confound them. I still have some lessons that I want to give. That takes us into next week. After that I’m considering disappearing for a while. It may take a while for people to digest the what I’ve been trying to say.”

He stood and gestured towards the door leading to the hall. She shook her head, “I think I’ll take the side door, the one that leads to the zoo.”

He took in a breath as though he was going to say something, but only nodded as she touched the wall and a doorway opened. He could see sunlight and trees beyond. The trumpet of an elephant came through, faintly. “Do you want to come? It will be fun to watch them arrive and be amazed that I beat them there. Or else you get the job of opening the door and telling them, “Elvis has left the building.”

He nodded, “That will be amusing, but may I take a peek through the door first?” She nodded and stepped through. He stuck his head into what he knew was a solid wall and saw Hosanna walking down an asphalt walk headed for the elephants. As he

withdrew the wall reappeared. He rapped on it with his knuckles and found it to be solid.

Phillip was accompanied by two agents - one male and one female. He was carrying the basket in one hand as he looked for the Hosanna. His instructions were to, "Bring her in. She is a danger out there on the streets."

He was not at all sure that he could get her to go anywhere she did not want to go. The agents with him were equipped with various restraints that he guessed would not work on her. He also was not sure that she was the danger that everyone seemed to think she was.

As they neared the meeting place he saw Hosanna, and recognized several other agents who were posing as tourists. Phillip wondered if he were merely the bait. The basket was heavy. The commanding agent had gone nuts when he'd been told that it had cost three-hundred-twenty-seven dollars. Philip's only succor was that if he was going to be called Picnic Phil for the rest of his career, the poor slob who had gone to get the basket was going to be known as Pate.

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Interim Report from Doug to Paul

"There are some developments concerning the author, Martha Scott that will be of interest. She seems to be growing tired of the interviews, readings and other publicity events. Secondly, her publisher has arranged for a security presence, usually off duty local police, at these events. I can only surmise that she has been getting threats. I would be surprised if she hadn't.

Finally, the name of a well known, very wealthy individual who has in the past quietly sponsored some Christian Activists, has come to light. There are no details; in fact this knowledge is only an extrapolation of patterns that have been observed in the past. However, with unlimited resources it means that many possible scenarios come into possible play.”

Chapter 25

Hosanna is Captured

Phillip had decided he was going to play irreverent and act absolutely unimpressed. “You’ve set some noses out of joint – some noses that are just about glued to some pretty important assholes. And they’re my bosses. So do me a favor, tell me, do you have any more surprises for us?”

Hosanna liked his attitude, this was what made people special. “Surprises? I like the word lesson. I am but a humble teacher.”

“Yeah, and I’m a cub scout on steroids.”

She laughed. “Those bosses who are listening to this conversation have to be wondering why they assigned you.”

He smiled, “because I get what they want.”

“And what do they want?”

“For starters, for you to stop. Then they’d like their guns back.”

“And not have their tongues get all long and forked when they talk to you about promotional opportunities.”

He smiled, “That too.” He looked at her, “Look, we don’t see why there has to be such conflict.”

“I agree entirely. And it seems to me that I am simply exercising my rights of religious freedom. There is something in the constitution about that isn’t there?”

He nodded, “Last time I looked. But this is not a discussion about the

constitution. It's about you and the dangerous disruptions you have caused."

"Now you're starting to sound like them. And I am going to answer your question. There are going to be surprises. I was talking to Jesus the other day and He said that He was upset that his birthday had been turned into a celebration of greed and consumption."

"I thought you talked to God Himself."

Hosanna brushed her hand across her face as though shooing away a fly, "Does it matter? Jesus got on the extension. You have to admit that this culture is a little bit over the top when it comes to material things."

"And you're going to do something about it."

"Yeah I am. I wasn't sure until just now, but you made me realize that sometimes it takes a bit of a shock to get people's attention."

"Like the tongues? Care to give me a preview?"

"I'll give you a hint. How's that?"

He nodded. She continued, "Greed. Having more than you need. And wanting still more." She paused, "And the easiest way to get a handle on it is money."

"You're going to do something to money?"

"Yeah – I'm weighing a couple of options. Tell me what you think. The first is to have it rain gold and diamonds. Everywhere – so much that people will have to shovel them off the sidewalks. Second one, is the one I'm favoring right now which is that all money will turn into caterpillars. That way you can still use it, but it's harder to love and hoarding becomes impractical."

"You mean like?"

“Yeah, all kinds. You open your wallet and they crawl out. Same for credit cards. They open bank vaults and flocks of butterflies emerge.” She was about to say that she was still working on the plan and had some details to work out.

In the command trailer the bosses were listening to this via a transmitter which had been placed in the basket. “That’s it. A definite threat to national security. ” He nodded to another man who spoke a code phrase into a cell phone.

Thirty yards away hidden in some bushes, Sergeant Al Lewis of the Special Forces, on loan to the FBI, an instructor in unconventional warfare who had spent time in the Amazon teaching and training, raised the blow gun to his lips. He waited until a little breeze died, took a deep breath and ...

Hosanna’s hand went to her neck. “You stupid fools, that was a... ” she said as she slowly fell onto her side.

Phillip agreed with her, but there was no time to lose. He wrapped the blanket around her and signaled the men who were assigned to carry her to the specially equipped ambulance that was waiting in the parking lot a hundred yards away.

It was a small room. Dark and silent. The drugs left her feeling two sub-basements below bad. It took Hosanna a minute to remember where she had been. The straps around her wrists and ankles were tight. Hosanna felt sensors taped to her chest and forehead. They probably knew she was awake. She could remove the straps at any moment, but realized that she would need something of a plan because

moving would bring a horde of goons into the room. She was angry and unleashed her lesson on money without bothering with the details, maybe she'd refine it later.

Thinking the first thing in the morning had never been her strong suit. The befuddlement the drugs left behind was not a help. She spoke to God, 'Hey I thought we agreed not to repeat the ending of the Jesus story. And this has some nasty parallels.'

'What can I say, still stupid after all these years.' God's voice was somehow soothing, *'But I suspect you can get yourself out of this one.'*

'I can. But, tell the truth, I'm getting more angry. I was hoping that the lessons would make men feel better towards me – or at least a bit respectful.'

'You scared them.'

'Jerks. Ok, I'm coming up with a plan. But I'd rather I didn't have to ad-lib like this." Hosanna took a deep breath. There were no reporters available so she saw she'd have to tap directly into radio and television frequencies. It was not so hard. Making sure people couldn't turn it off took a second longer.

"I am Hosanna, and I am really pissed off now. At this moment I am a prisoner of your Government in a dark little room somewhere - probably in Washington." She heard someone trying to open the door to the room. It was not budging – the lock could work both ways.

"What we have here is a little dispute between God and some her creations. Somehow I'm in the middle. Not where I want to be, not at all. It is your option to fight it for as long as you care to. But I have to tell you that I think it might be smarter to shut up and listen for a few minutes."

There were muffled shouts on the other side of the door, and the sound of a saw. She made the door into a sheet of diamonds so the saw would not cut. "So – as I was saying, it's your choice, and it's not as bad as you think. If I need to I can make things a whole lot worse." She paused and caused an unscheduled solar eclipse for a few seconds, Then she continued, "But why should it have to come to that? I'm trying to teach an important lesson here. The way I see it – if loving money is no longer such a good option, then maybe it's time to do a little trusting in God instead of Citi Bank.

"This planet is bountiful; there is more than enough food. And if you see to it – everyone will get fed. Look in your cupboards, there is enough for today. And tomorrow. In two days I will check to see if anyone has taken the necessary steps to make sure there is enough food in places like Haiti, Somalia, and North Korea. If the ships and planes are on the way, then you'll find your pantries restocked. But. If you bicker. If you moan. If you worry about politics - then your pantries will start to look like those in the places I just mentioned. On the other hand, the more freely you give – the more you will get. And yes ,I admit that idea is not original with me. But guess what? 2000 years after you started singing His praise, you've still got a lot of hungry people in this world. Anyone wonder why God is a little disappointed?"

The hammering on the outside of the room got very loud. "Do you hear that, first they bolt me in, then they get upset when I keep them out?"

"I've taken money away, because it seems like it was a rather ill advised invention. Maybe if you show you can share, I'll find a way to put denominations on the backs of the caterpillars. Or course, some one is going to have to redesign ATM machines. If I'd had a bit more time I might have figured out how to do this with a little

less drama.” She smelled smoke. They had started using a torch.

Hosanna sent images of strip mines out on the television. “The Bible has it a bit wrong – you weren’t cast out from Eden, you bulldozed it so you could enlarge Wal-Mart. So now its time to mend your ways. If you can mobilize for war. If you can send overfed businessmen to the far corners of the world - you can get food to everyone who needs it.”

She sensed the frenzy outside the room had risen to a dangerous level. They were trying to come through the ceiling. “Soon they will open this room and they will find that I have gone. I will not be far. And I will be watching. One last thing - any one who tries to profiteer or hoard from this – here or where the food is being sent – watch out. I will get creative with you. It will make serpents tongues look like an amusing trick. Looters will walk on their knees because they will forfeit their feet. Not nice I know, but it will deter.” After a moment she added, “I am Hosanna, I used to be one of you. What happened?” This was a statement which would be analyzed and dissected by scholars and talk show hosts.

The bonds fell off her and she sat up. She pulled the wires off herself. The hospital gown was an indignity that she bestowed on everyone in the building. She left it on the floor. She would see what the weather was like when she got there and would conjure up appropriate clothes.

“I am Hosanna, and I really hope you are listening to me.” She took a last look around the room and then left through a door that took her to a meadow high on a mountain. (There was a man there working on an array of solar panels.)

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Max throws one last slap.

It had taken repeated letters and phone calls before the lawyer who was handling Max's estate got Martha's attention.

The meeting took place in his cluttered, small office. He got right to the point, "There is a problem, a big one."

"Of course there is. Is this about the child he had, or the tax thing?" Martha did not seem disturbed or worried.

"What child? No." He nodded and picked up an envelope, "Taxes. I filed his final return with the IRS and they came back at us." He shook his head again and reached up to loosen his tie. "According to them he owes an enormous amount in taxes, penalty and interest. I called, and the person I spoke to said that they would be looking to prosecute if it weren't for the fact that he was dead. Fortunately he left you off the returns so you are not liable. But his estate is."

Martha smiled and turned to Jeanne, "I missed a good scene, should have had Hosanna get audited."

"I don't think you understand how serious this is. They are making noises about taking the house."

Martha laughed quietly. "In some ways that would be a good solution, an appropriate legacy. But I don't particularly like the way they would spend the money, so that won't happen."

"I suppose you could retain the house, but I should tell you the tax bill is much larger than its value."

"Call the woman. Tell her to run the figures again. Then pay with this." She opened her

purse and after a moment extracted a bill which, after smoothing out a wrinkle, she put on the lawyer's desk.

He looked at it, "a dollar?"

"Call."

"You don't understand, just getting through to them takes..."

"Humor me. She's waiting for your call."

Five minutes later he put the phone down and turned to watch a document emerge from his fax machine. After reading it, he picked up the dollar bill and placed it in an envelope with the document. Only after sealing the envelope did he look up, he was nervous, his voice quavered slightly, "I read your book. I've seen you on TV a couple of times. I don't pretend to know much about God. But I'll tell you that I've just witnessed a miracle." He paused and dared a sight smile, "I don't suppose you would be interested in giving me a hand during tax season?"

* * *

Three days later Doug listened as his source told an interesting tale. There were two equally intriguing parts to it. The first, involved how the IRS had been alerted to a massive fraud on the part of Martha's husband. It was a convoluted tale involving several million dollars that passed through Max's accounts on the way back to what he assumed was their original home in a variety of offshore accounts. To the untrained eye it looked like a slip up by someone with a lot to hide. Doug had seen this kind of thing before, it had all the earmarks of an operation orchestrated by Walker Bay the industrialist Doug had referenced in his letter to Paul. It was neat, it was simple, and ended up costing practically nothing.

"But that's not the amazing part," the woman had told him. "The agency is in contact

with a lawyer, we'd started the process of foreclosure. The agent who is handling this was sure it was going to bump her up a grade. Then she gets a call from the lawyer, tells her they are going to settle, to send him a 4509-A. She punches it in to her computer. It comes out for a settlement of one dollar. One dollar! She had a previous printout that showed two million, seven hundred k and change. She calls it up on her screen, and everything is ok, except the tax and penalty are one dollar. She puts the lawyer on hold and calls for restoring a backup onto the computer."

The woman paused, "I've known Nellie for fifteen years. Her desk was next to mine for five of them before I got the first promotion. Nellie is a rock. She knows the code as well as anybody. When the computer goes down she can figure out settlements using the forms that nobody else uses any more. She goes to church three times a week, would sooner drink lye as alcohol, and pays no attention to any one else's business.

"I'm telling you this so you'll understand that I accept what she told me as truth. No matter how crazy it sounds." The informant took a deep breath, "Nellie would never sell you this or any other information. But, anyway, this is what she tells me, 'I switch to a free line and before I can dial I hear this voice. It takes two words for me to realize it's my mamma, God Rest her Soul, dead seven years now.' After taking a quick look around the park to see if anyone could be listening the informant went on, "Nellie says her mother said, 'Bless You Child, Remember how I used to tell you the Lord was always doing the impossible? This is one of those times.' Nellie understood immediately. She didn't argue. Instead she told her mamma that she loved her still and missed her. In reply her mamma told her she was doing good, but that she should tell her niece that the boy she was seeing was about to come to a bad end. It took her another two minutes before Nellie could get her voice back to talk to the lawyer." The woman shrugged. "Anyway the case is closed, settled for a dollar."

Doug put an envelope on the bench between them. “Thanks. You’ll find that was worth much more than a dollar.”

As he walked away from the meeting, he wondered what they would try next. They weren’t the sort to give up easily.

Chapter 26

But not for Long

Hosanna would have liked it if Ray had been happier to see her. He put down his tools and hugged her, but then he stepped back and said, "I'm not sure I can give you what you are looking for."

"What I'm looking for? I don't know what it is either. I just got away. The FBI drugged me and put me in a little room. I've gotten myself in a lot deeper than I ever imagined. What I'm looking for is a day without someone telling me what to do or being forced to do things that usually turn out being mistakes of some sort or other."

He nodded, "I understand that. But you have to understand that what we had can not necessarily be replicated whenever you get slapped around a little by the monsters you have made."

"Monsters I made? That's not fair."

He shook his head, "Maybe not. But life is not fair. And you of all people should know it." He stepped forward and hugged her again. "Don't get me wrong; I would love nothing better than to turn my little tent into another palace of pleasure. Running naked across the meadow and frolicking in the stream over there," he gestured towards the trees. That would be great. His smile slipped, but I have my mission," he gestured at the solar arrays, "And the investors are coming tomorrow to see how the new panels show an improvement." He smiled, "and, if I can get the work done, they will be."

Hosanna nodded and looked around. There was another person working on a

set of panels about fifty yards away. It was a woman, and she knew there were things he wasn't telling her. Hosanna started to get angry, but the feeling was overwhelmed by fear and sadness. She didn't want to be there any more.

She felt so alone and such a freak. Swallowing a sob, she nodded. In the next second Hosanna was away and sitting on the rocky top of a mountain which afforded a view of a jagged cold landscape as empty and bitter as she felt. When the cold got to her she dressed herself in jeans and a sweater.

* * *

After five years, Joyce Prescott was still amazed by her job in the Master Card control center. They had more computer power and communications capability than most countries. Three large flat screen monitors on her desk allowed her to keep an eye on the whole system. She would watch as stores opened and closed in each time-zone around the world. She could filter to see restaurants in Paris serving dinner or surfers buying bikinis in Hawaii. A graph in the upper corner of the right hand screen showed the volume of calls as credit cards were swiped in thousands of locations. Joyce did not deal in details, a max-ed out or lost card would not concern her. She was there to see to problems on a much bigger scale. If there was a problem with the phone networks she made sure they switched to backup circuits. If a bank's computer went off line she made sure that the transactions were backed up and later restored making sure all accounts were paid or debited. There was just enough of that sort of thing to keep it interesting. Not enough to make it frantic like in her previous job.

At times it worried her when she thought about the debt all those calls

represented and how at any moment thousands of bills were being opened with dread, but, most of the time, it was just numbers.

“Beep.” On another computer the sound might have signified arrival of e-mail. Joyce glanced at the left hand screen and saw that the communications links were all green. Clicking her mouse, she opened a window on the center screen that showed a representation of the bank computers they were linked to. As she watched the symbols turned from green to red as though they were a string of stoplights. She frowned, one or two reds was not uncommon, but this. She’d never seen anything like this – even during the East Coast blackout a couple of years ago.

“Holy Shit!” The words, loud and close from the desk next to hers, broke her focus on her own problems.

“What?” She was officially worried now, Tim wasn’t one to break into a sweat.

There was no response. She heard keys clicking rapidly as he tried to force commands into his machine.

Her screens flickered and were taken over by what looked like a screen saver picture of a butterfly sitting on a flower.

After realizing her keyboard and mouse were frozen, Joyce looked across the room and saw similar pictures on all the monitors.

“Virus,” she asked?

“More like a worm the size of a boa-constrictor. Before it went, I saw four servers reformat themselves.”

“What about the sterile back-up units?”

“Maybe, if I could access them. But I don’t think I can and they’d be vulnerable too.” He raised his voice, “Ladies and gentlemen, The Eagle has crashed.”

He looked across his desk to Joyce. “Time for you to go home to your kids. It’s going to take an act of God to get this back up and running.”

Marcy Trumbull took the check and the deposit form from the customer. It was the unhappy little old lady who came in four times a month to deposit checks. Once a month she took out eight hundred dollars in cash, but all the rest went straight into the account. Marcy made a habit of not paying much attention to the customers and the amount they held in their accounts, but this woman had snagged her attention. This one she knew because the old lady always asked for a balance to verify that the money had been deposited, a couple of months ago it had passed three hundred thousand dollars.

As Marcy punched the account numbers into the terminal, the screen froze. Then there was a scream. Looking to her left she saw Joan had her cash drawer open and had taken two steps back because thousands of caterpillars were pouring out of it. Most of them fell to the floor where they created a living carpet, but a number climbed up the front of the counter and were moving onto the work surface.

Bill Elliot, the teller in training two windows down, pushed the button that sent a silent alarm to the police.

At the two p.m. meeting the news director of WPLK Action Eleven news looked at

his anchors. "Question is, where do we begin? We've got three teams covering the looting. We're getting reports of suicides from police scanners, last count I have is thirty-seven."

Alice Monroe, one of the hard news anchors, raised her hand, "I think we should lead with the mob that set fire to the church in Baltimore. Then have some coverage of local churches how they are dealing with it."

The news director nodded, "The local church angle is good. Get one of the crews on it. Find me a photogenic minister who makes sense. That won't be easy. The Governor's office called and asked that we play down the mobs. The National Guard is being sent in and they already have enough to deal with."

"Are you going to let them tell us what to put on the air?"

"Not them. But they've got a point, we're right on the edge. I was driving here when it happened. Stopped for gas. Tony, the guy who owned the station, turned off the pumps when he saw he wasn't going to get paid. Some idiot in one of those big SUVs rammed the glass booth where the owner was sitting. Tony comes out with a shotgun and blows a hole in the truck. Then he decides to pump gas after all, but for barter. I gave him a couple of bottles of wine I had bought for dinner tonight."

The sports anchor, Wally Young, said, "There's a story on the wires about how this real rich guy went out to the airport and took off in his private jet and then got on the radio telling everybody about how his life wasn't worth living and how he was going to crash."

"The national news will cover that. What's it got to do with us?"

"I was thinking, what if I took a crew over to the stadium and interviewed the

players? Find out how it feels to be poor again.” He paused, “I know I don’t like it. Called my broker before I came in here. Actually got through to the bastard. He told me that about the only thing worth owning was a place way out in the country with strong locks and a gun rack to keep neighbors from taking what you got. He said he was leaving to go to his place when my call came in. Son of a bitch. At least I won’t have any payments to make. Called my ex and told her that the alimony train was off the rails.” He smiled and sat back in his chair.

“Thank you for sharing that with us Wally,” said the news director. “But I don’t see interviewing players as getting us anything we can’t get in Westwood Heights.”

“But they canceled today’s games, I’m not going to have any sports news!”

“Good, we can use the time. I think someone should look into seeing if anybody is making any efforts to get food to the places Hosanna mentioned.”

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Martha wondered if the questions would ever end. She was glad that she had excited people enough that they would come to the readings, but why couldn’t they come up with new questions she wondered?

“You have Hosanna practically go to war with people. She throws then into panic she threatens to cut the feet off of looters.”

Martha cut her short, “The question is - what is a nice girl like this doing all these horrible things?”

“Sort of, I guess.”

“There is an instinct to shout when people don’t listen.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think you do. I developed some alternate story lines, about ordinary people. Becky Rains in a SUV on the freeway when she turned Gas into Wine. Decided folks could imagine a husband trying to conceal his serpent penis from his wife. But had some scenes when money turns to bugs. Money, the false idol was no longer a god to be worshipped. How would the rich deal with being equal? But greed was still in play. They traded things and came up with new forms of currency. Liquor and tobacco led the pack of bartered items. I took many of these scenes out, figuring that readers could imagine them with the various situations I created. It could have turned into an epic. It would become a book about people and their reaction to a more demanding God. Now that could be an interesting book – but it is not *Hosanna Sings*.” She pointed to another person who had had her hand up.

“On a different track, Hosanna does not seem to be happy. Does she regret her lessons – her job as it were to deliver them.”

“Hosanna is definitely not a happy person. Though she tries. I saw her as being like a lot of young women in their early twenties, with a chip on their shoulder. She certainly resents being the chosen one. She wants to have a life. She does not do well with authority figures. God has figured this out and gives her some room.”

Martha looked around the room. “I don’t know why, but there are very few instances of happy gods. Zeus and Thor and most of those were always battling or at least squabbling. There is Pan and Bacchus but they were lesser and not jolly in a Santa Claus kind of way. I like to think of God - at least the God who made hummingbirds, orchids, and kangaroos, as being a happy God. Hosanna might have been happy if God had given her the job of coming up with some new animals. But I suspect that in her early twenties she might have gone in for some carnivores. Or animals with attitudes like the little creatures in the garden. Just because of her

age and outlook.”

She saw Jeanne give the little wave that meant that she could wind it up. Martha wondered if some of those questions applied to her too. Did she still have a chip on her shoulder? Could she find ways to be happier? She didn’t know. Standing in front of a room full of intelligent people discussing her book wasn’t half bad; even if it had become a little routine. She had come to understand that she was a messenger of something other than good news.

Two nights previously, while she and Jeanne were eating out in another of the restaurant chains that were trying pretty hard and were reaching a level of high mediocrity, a couple had approached their table. Martha had expected a typical ‘we liked your book,’ comment, but when the woman spoke it was in a different tone, “You have given us so much. We have gained understandings of many things including our nineteen year old daughter. We are very grateful. Two months ago we were stuck in a rut, following a God that our minister told us to worship. Today we are free. We are following a path though we do not have a destination.” With that they’d left - though Martha soon learned they had prepaid her check. On one hand it was gratifying, but on another she felt as though she might have slipped into the realm of the televangelists.

Another thing was troubling her. She had learned that a coalition of religious groups, fundamentalists mostly, had joined together and were negotiating for the film rights to the book. The plan was to buy them up to prevent a movie from ever being made. The fact that there was such organized opposition had made many real producers wary. It wasn’t as though the money was that important – more unsettling was knowing that she had enemies who were willing to spend lots of money in an attempt to quiet her.

Chapter 27

Gospel of Princess Alexandra.

I saw it coming. I told her it would stir up more hatred towards her. I told her that she needed to remember how things had gone wrong when she had not thought through the ramifications of her earlier lessons.

She paid no heed. Even the Lord was concerned. *"You are becoming a hot head like you know who."*

Hosanna replied, "Don't talk to me about him. He was killed because he was too nice. They were not afraid to mess with him, and they were right. He did not smite them or is it smote? Which ever it is - I'm going to smote first."

It was at seven minutes after seven in the evening that Hosanna again over-rode the TV signals. "This is a test. It is just a little preview of judgment day. The day after tomorrow each and every one of you is going to get what he or she deserves. It is not going to be pretty. It will only last for six hours but ought to be enough. The jails will be full by ten o'clock. The hospitals will be loaded with cases. They will be crippled because the legendary arrogance of doctors will have made their breakfasts memorable (crow and humble pie come to mind). Do not think it is a day you can avoid by calling in sick and hiding under your bed. You never know who you might meet under there." She paused, "I'm giving you a little warning because it might be better for you to make

peace with those you have harmed – than to wait for God to do it.”

“Daughter! have you lost your mind? Did we not discuss where your responsibilities lie – where your authority ends?”

“Got your attention with that one. I thought it might. Let me tell you, as if you didn’t know, we’re dealing with a pretty difficult and if I may say so, flawed creation.”

She was struck with images of mobs. *“The cross made a pretty good symbol, the way you are going it looks like a trash compactor might be yours.”*

“You set me up – Just like Jesus. Give us an impossible task - give us a message so unpopular and threatening that they are going to rise up and take us out. Why couldn’t the message be – God loves you so much He bestows a Porsche on each of you. That they’d worship.”

“Do you want worship?”

“That’s a trick question. And we’ve been through that before. The quick answer is no. Wouldn’t mind if someone - an individual mind you - thought I was something special, but worship no – that belongs to you and I’m not interested in going there. On the other hand I do not particularly like being such the villain.”

“Then maybe you should lighten up a little.”

Maybe She had a point, Hosanna thought. She made a call, “Hello Princess, God Girl here. I need you to dust off your crystal ball.”

Princess Alexandra, who had been passing a bank of pay phones and had known to answer the one that was ringing, said, “Don’t need a crystal ball to know that you stepped in it. And you were doing so good. That bit with the tongues was absolutely perfect.”

Hosanna's voice was tight, "Well there were those who didn't agree. They . . ."

"Got to cut you off, this ain't about them. It's about you. You've lost perspective girl. Remember how you said folks got to keep their egos smaller than their hearts?"

"That's not."

"Yes it is," Princess interrupted, "It is exactly the point. And you know it."

"They want to kill me!"

"Sometimes strong medicine has to be given a little dose at a time. Crystal ball tells me you have to lay low for a bit."

"Just one more lesson - it's a good one."

"Why don't you wait?" The princess knew the answer, but had to ask it anyway.

"Just one more – and if they don't get it I'll take a break."

"Break, that's a good word. I'll be along to help pick up the pieces."

Alexandra placed the phone back on its cradle and slowly shook her head. She took out her appointment book and erased the entries. Not that there were that many. The tongues trick had happened just as a producer had been explaining how her talents were going to make her a star. The princess had seen more than the immediate lie, for it was built on a skeleton of deceptions, most of which she had told herself – and believed. She was relieved now that things were simpler. No matter the circumstances, it would be good to see Hosanna again. It was a long ways away, and she needed to get started.

Chapter 28

Gospel of Dr. Eldridge

Hosanna returned at a time when things were pretty chaotic. Most students had stopped coming to classes, though the religion and philosophy departments were the exception to the rule. In fact, my new course “Understanding Miracles – or Not.” had been shifted to the auditorium in the student activities building to accommodate all those who had signed up.

The class had progressed for about fifteen minutes, when the door at the side of the stage opened. In a second I lost the attention of the entire audience and, following their gaze, I turned and saw her walking across the stage.

She did not look well. Instinctively I stepped towards her and opened my arms.

Hosanna stopped a couple of feet away. I was afraid I had offended her, then she came closer and hugged me. Softly she said, “I have not been hugged or welcomed in some time.”

The audience was silent, though there was an electric tension in the room.

After a few moments she pulled away and turned to the lectern. As she pointed her finger at my notes they erupted in blue flames.

Hosanna said, “As Kermit the Frog once said, ‘It’s not easy being green.’”

The audience gave a soft nervous laugh.

“I like green,” she continued. “And blue. I guess it is not important, but I’m having trouble deciding. She pointed at the front row. “You four come up here.”

The students looked at each other and then slowly rose.

“I’ve decided that my next lesson is going to be on race. God told me to lighten up – as the whole judgment thing was getting a little bit over the top.” She paused, “A bit of advice, if you start hearing voices – and a psychiatrist can’t make them go away - and it claims to be God – it might be better to say, ‘God who?’”

She turned back to the students who were standing nervously off to the side. “Stand a little apart would you? And turn and face out there.” The students complied as Hosanna walked over to them, “Don’t be alarmed, it won’t do any good and, remember, I’m just trying some things out.” Stopping in front of the first boy, she frowned and then nodded slightly as his skin turned a dark green. There was a whoosh as the audience all exhaled at the same moment. This was followed by a couple of stifled screeches.

The boy was puzzled until he held up his hand and could see what the others were seeing. Hosanna moved to the next one, a pretty young woman. With a flick of her finger Hosanna turned the girl a lighter of shade green, but still very. The student gave a little scream as she stared at her arm. Next and quickly the remaining boy became sky blue and the last girl a deeper cobalt. Hosanna stepped back as murmurs ran up and down, back and forth through the audience. “And Then there is purple” she pointed to another student in the first row. He was purple and the person beside him was lavender.

Hosanna stared at them for a minute. “Decisions. Decisions.” She looked out at the crowd, some of whom were edging towards the doors in the rear. “If you leave you’ll miss the fun. Besides, you’ll get it anyway.” She waved her hand and two huge beasts stood guard at the doors. “Anyone out there with a good sense of color?”

Nobody raised a hand. She scanned the audience and picked a young woman

who was well dressed. "You – come on down."

At first the young woman pretended not to understand, pointing off to the side, then turning to look in back of her. Two angels appeared, hunky angels wearing tank tops and shorts. They reached out and lifted the woman from her seat, then spread their wings and glided down to the stage. They were very handsome. The girl did not appear to mind.

"Ok here's the problem," Hosanna began, "As a lesson, everyone is going to be the same color. But I want it to be a nice color and I need some ideas about what to do with hair. I would guess it should be some sort of complementary color? What do you think?"

The girl swallowed. Then she swallowed again. She looked at the students, "the light blue is nice, How about a darker shade for the hair?"

Hosanna's finger twitched and the far student was so colored. She tried light blue hair on the dark blue girl. It did not work so well. For a kick, she switched the hair to pink which got a laugh.

Hosanna smiled. "Any social science majors here? This ought to provide substance for a few papers." With that, she made a sweeping gesture with her hand and everyone including herself became the darker blue. There were cries and a couple of shouts.

Her voice cut through the rising murmur, "Deal with it."

With that she turned to Eldridge, "Do you have any assignment you want to give them?"

He bent over the microphone and spoke loudly to overcome the clamor. "Yes, for

next class, write this up. You were there – not exactly the Sermon on the Mount, but worthy of recording. Write this up – as though it will be passed down to people who were not here.”

He stepped back. Hosanna spoke, she did not use the microphone yet her voice filled every part of the room. “You may be wondering. No, it will not wash off.

“Is it permanent? I haven’t decided.

“Will you need new outfits? Probably, because this is a lesson that may take some time to sink in.”

She turned to Eldridge, “Come, let’s see how God’s creation adapts to this.” She took his arm and together they slipped out the side door.

For ten seconds they walked quietly across the parking lot. Then the door behind them slammed open and she heard angry shouts. Fortunately the door was narrow so it slowed the angry group that was trying to get to her.

Trying to show a cool she did not feel, she said to Eldridge, “We’ll have to discuss this later.” Then Hosanna took a step through an instantly created emergency exit and found herself deep in the woods.

Chapter 29

Martha Explains

“Are you saying that all racism would be eliminated if everyone were the same color?”

Martha looked up from the lectern, “Sort of. I’m sure there would be new and inventive ways to discriminate. Age, height and, an old favorite, gender. It was simply Hosanna’s way of showing her frustration, giving a demonstration and a wake up call.”

“But it was the thing that turned people against her.”

“Actually it turned those who had been the favored races against her. It was viewed with some glee by those who had been on the low end of the discrimination wall. But they were not the ones who had any say.”

“A related question if I may? When she flees into the woods to avoid the mobs who are looking for her. Why didn’t she just change her appearance?”

Martha paused and took off her glasses and polished them with a tissue. “That’s a good question if you expand it a little. Remember, this is a book. It takes a while to write it and is influenced by what is going on as it is being written. I was locked in my room but thanks to the meditation I learned I was able to go elsewhere. I spent some of the time in the woods and probably wrote that scene after such a trip. Some things were planned – others just happened. Besides, I was trying to set up the next section where she went from being privileged and special because of her gifts and contact with God – to an outcast.” She turned a few pages.

“Sitting alone on the sun warmed rock, Hosanna caught her breath and waited for the pulse to stop thumping in her ears. She started to speak to God, “I guess I blew that one,” but there was no response. The presence she had bridled against was missing. That scared her. As much as it was a pain in the butt, there was something

comforting about knowing that she was somewhere near the center of God's attention. Now there was none of that feeling and Hosanna realized she was really alone."

Martha looked up. "I may have taken this scene a little too far, but I had to set it up so that the next time she tried to talk to God, it was more of a prayer. Sitting on the ledge she could see smoke rising in the distance. It was not a good sign, it meant that the rioting was continuing. It meant that her tiny little hope that her lesson would eventually sink in was bogus. It had put people in touch with their feelings, but not the feelings she'd been fishing for."

Martha read again, "The fleeting thought of walking off the cliff passed through her head. She shook it off. "Ok God. I guess I messed up – are You satisfied?"

It wasn't much of a prayer. But it got a response. "Messed up? *Big time. Looks like I'm going to have to find another Noah. Are you any good with tools?*"

"No – I can't hit anything but my thumb."

"Relax, I was kidding. But there is a boat in your future. Actually it was a good idea. Just didn't work. You are beginning to understand the difficulties of working with semi intelligent creatures."

"So what's going to happen? I tried to turn everybody back, but it didn't work!"

"Of course not. I stopped it, because it was too good a lesson to you to throw it away."

"Lesson to me?"

"Yes, and you need to realize that even though you had moderately good intentions, you once again acted without engaging your brain first."

"Moderately good intentions? What was bad about them?"

"Let's start with pride, you were throwing your weight around like a Sumo wrestler

in a canoe. You spent more time finding the right shade of blue than you did looking into the hearts of the people you were messing with. You thought you knew better than everybody else and since they weren't listening you simply pushed the volume up a few notches."

She thought about it for a minute and realized it could be seen that way. "So where does that leave me?"

"Well let me see. You have mobs loose in the streets that are intent on doing away with Hosanna, Daughter of the Devil. If they catch you crucifixion would look like a pleasant afternoon. Then there is your relationship with me. As you so nicely put it, God of the Israelites wasn't nice and cuddly like Jesus. For a while I was amused by the challenge and by the diversions you were causing but now, when it is time to clean up the mess, you are looking for me to push a big broom." Her voice rose, "I don't do windows girl! I don't do domestic work at all."

The Gospel – By Alexandra.

She came and she was scared. Much as been said about what she did, but little is known about who she was.

She was baffled by many things. The questions she asked, “Why was I chosen?” And “What am I supposed to do?” came from deep inside where she understood exactly how unprepared she was for the task.

She asked God, “What do you need me for? Why don’t you do it yourself?”

God said, “*It’s more interesting this way.*”

Talk about performance anxiety.

She was afraid that if she failed God would send another flood. She was afraid that if she allowed herself to believe in herself, she would fall prey to her human trait of pride. She saw her path as having, on one hand, not to take her self too seriously while she tried to save all mankind.

Late at night, she would talk about the impossibility of her task. How no matter what she did it would result in people being killed and that thought paralyzed her.

In the days that followed her lesson on truth, several men were killed when the lies were revealed. One of them was an undercover policeman who had been, in one form or another, doing God’s work among the drug dealers. That night she begged God to remove the burden from her.

A similar thing happened with the Gas to Wine lesson. A woman, in labor, had her car stall three miles from the hospital. The baby died. The mother went on television and cursed her.

God told her that these unintended victims would be in Heaven, and she said, "Lot of good that does the families."

There is a period, known only as the retreat, when she refused to continue. When she told God, "This is not the way."

And She, cruelly, threw it back at Hosanna. "It is your doing. These were your choices. Do you think the lessons are only for them?"

And that was when Hosanna found her voice. When she returned emerging briefly from the woods, she gave her most famous speech. She gave it in a little restaurant in New Hampshire where a tourist had a video camera. "I was wrong to think that displays of power and might were the way to get my message across. I succumbed to the very flaws I was trying to correct. I was clever. I knew what was right and I tried to show you - to bend you to my will."

"This was wrong, for my will was not God's will even though it seemed very clearly that it was. I was fighting, trying to hold back a river, when I should have understood that it could not work."

"From now on I will not tell you. I will show you."

I was there. "Alexandra", she said, "you are my disciple." But when she gave that simple speech I knew she had given me my pink slip for another lay-off. She would need me later and I would find her then. We all watched as she walked out of the restaurant and across the parking lot to a field that had been freshly plowed. When she

reached it – it seemed as though the dirt reached up for her. Within a few steps she vanished.

The next day there was a tree where there had been none. By noon it was seventy feet high and eight feet around. Its branches rose up to the sky as though in prayer.

And Hosanna said: “Did you ever notice that people don’t like to hear things that make them uncomfortable? The diet can start next week. The drinking isn’t so bad. And God must surely love us – after all he sent his only son to forgive our sins.”

“Did they miss the fine print that the sins were supposed to stop?”

“Then they edit the record. The Jesus I understand was a radical who condemned the rich and powerful. The rich and the powerful created the Church of England. The rich and the powerful became the Popes and Bishops.”

Chapter 30

Martha's Last Show

The people from the television show had called her publisher, who referred them to her agent. The agent called urging Martha to accept. If her book was recommended by Pearl, the show's host, it would guarantee another fifty to a hundred thousand in sales. The trouble was that Martha had just let it be known that she was tired of the publicity tour that always seemed to be having another appearance tacked on to it.

The producers of the show made the usual offers, First Class Seats, a limo and a night or two at a hotel downtown. But it had to be next Tuesday.

"No."

Carole chided her, "No is not an option. Martha. You have started something. The things you have written have touched a lot of readers. It has made people think. It is on the very verge of putting you in a place where you can say no. You can become a latter day J.D. Salinger and go back to your attic if you want to, but not quite yet."

"Do you remember how Hosanna got a little unstable when she felt she had to keep producing miracles?"

"Don't Hosanna me. You are going to this as an important writer."

Martha sighed. "I have long since passed the place where feeding my ego was good for me. In fact, my ego needs a diet."

"This is not about feeding your ego. This is about getting more people to read your book. Tell you what, if you agree to do this, I will personally turn off all requests for the next three months. I'll tell people that you need time to begin work on your next project and that you

absolutely can't be disturbed."

"That's a good idea, let's have it start today. And make it for a year."

"If this was about your ego I would not be saying NO to you. And I'm saying it now. A car will pick you up Monday morning and will take you to the airport. The show is Tuesday, and you can come back that night or on Wednesday – your choice."

Martha sighed again. "You know if you ever get tired of being an agent, you would do well working on the back wards of the hospital." As she said it, she knew it was unkind, a product of a tired and slightly perplexed soul.

In the green room, Martha, made up and ready, learned that she was scheduled to go on following an actress who had a new film that had just come out. The production assistant mentioned the woman's name and seemed amazed that Martha had no idea who she was.

The show was in a small theater with the seats for the audience rising steeply in front of the stage. This allowed them to see over the cameras and other production accessories. As Martha was announced the Production Assistant made a motion indicating exactly when she should start on-stage. Martha let the signal pass and watched with amusement as the harried young man gestured more frantically. After waiting another half-second, just to jerk his chain, she stepped forward and blinked as the bright lights dazzled her. There was applause that she knew was being prompted. As she walked across the stage she looked at the woman who was hosting the show and the actress who had moved to the second chair allowing Martha to sit nearest Pearl.

Instead of going directly to the chair, Martha stopped about three feet from it and looked

again at the woman behind the desk. She sensed something was wrong. She looked at the actress and sensed nothing beyond talent, ambition and some silicone. The host made a gesture and Martha moved forward. The whatever that was wrong wasn't here, but it was close. They got through the initial welcoming platitudes and then, as the first question was being asked, (one of the usual ones about how her solitary experience allowed her to come up with the various elements, blah blah blah.) There was a shout, a shove and a disheveled woman staggered towards the stage. Security guards and a variety of production assistants moved to intercept her, but somehow she slid between them. "I am Hosanna," the words came as half shout, half shriek. "Listen to me."

Martha stood and took four steps towards the woman. "Tell me," she said.

"I am Hosanna," the woman repeated as security guards grabbed her arms.

"Of course you are," Martha answered, then speaking to the guards she said, "Let her go."

They did not, instead looking for guidance to Pearl.

More people rushed towards them and Martha raised her hands. "Stop – all of you. I will deal with this." She turned to one of the assistants. "Get another chair. She will sit with me."

The host had a sour look on her face, but she nodded. Martha took another step forward and put her arm on the woman's shoulder. The guards released their grip, but did not move away.

She helped the woman into the chair. And then said, "This is the perfect illustration of what the book is about. I wish I could have thought it up myself, but then it would have been fiction – this is real."

She turned back to the woman, "You are Hosanna."

The woman nodded. "I am, and I have come with a message."

"Tell us."

The woman looked as though she might cry. She looked up as though just now realizing where she was. She looked scared. "I..." she paused "I am afraid."

Martha touched her hand. "We all are afraid – often of so many things that we can not tell one from another." She looked up and saw policemen gathering behind the curtain. She turned her head to the host, "Tell them that we do not need them. And keep filming, something amazing may happen here."

Turning back to the intruder she said, "And it often happens that the things we are afraid of are actually good things. We are afraid of letting them into our lives. Were you afraid the first time God spoke to you?"

The woman nodded.

"What did God tell you?"

"That I am not alone. I've always been so alone. And then there was this voice and." She began to cry.

Martha nodded, she held up her finger signaling, 'wait a minute.' Then she spoke, "There was a closet. It was dark and smelled like shoes and mothballs. And you were so scared that your mind learned to see things. And even when you were let out of the closet some large part of you stayed inside."

The woman nodded.

Martha continued, "And now you are Hosanna. And you are ready to step out of the dark into the light." The woman nodded again. "Tell us." Martha asked again.

She took a deep breath. "I... I don't know. I don't understand. I just know I have to be

here.”

There were some nervous laughs. Martha raised her hand quieting the crowd. “Very good. That is exactly right.” The woman looked at her, her face showed confusion.

“Knowing that you do not understand is the central piece to the puzzle. You don’t understand.” She dropped her voice, “The truth is – nobody understands. Take the smartest person, the most educated and talk to her and sooner or later they will say ‘I do not know – I do not understand.’ It’s the people who do not admit this who get themselves into the most trouble.”

Martha turned to the host, “She really is Hosanna. So are you, and all of them,” she waved her hand at the audience. “If you look for the miracles you will see them.”

Turning back to the woman she said softly, “Come out of the closet. It is time. And don’t be afraid. You have found what you have been searching for.”

Martha gestured for one of the young assistants standing in the wings. “Not you, no, to your left. Hesitantly a young woman came across the stage crouching, trying to stay off camera. Hosanna spoke to her, “Take this woman from here. Go to dinner with her – she has much to teach you. She is your mother.”

The assistant looked around wildly. Her eyes met Pearl’s. The host nodded.

The young woman reached out and took the woman’s hand and led her off stage.

As soon as they passed behind the curtain, Pearl called for a break. “Ok, sorry about that, we’ll start the interview again.”

Martha shook her head, “You don’t understand, that was real.”

“What do you mean?”

“Twenty years ago she was fifteen and pregnant. From her fifth month when she started to show, her father locked her in a closet. He was a brutal man. The baby was given away. It broke her inside. She has traveled far, sometimes not knowing what she was searching for. And now, finally, the circle is closed.”

“You are saying?” Pearl looked to another worker, what is her name?”

The worker gestured, “The intern? Sherrie.”

“Sherrie, right, is her daughter?” She pointed to the empty chair where the woman had sat.

Martha nodded. “See what I mean about not being able to understand?”

Pearl looked up suddenly – “Are we getting this?”

A camera man answered, “Yeah, I’m shooting.”

“Someone go. Get them – bring them back. My God. If this is real...”

“Don’t cheapen it,” Martha suggested. “Let the silence speak.”

The second the two stepped back on stage, it was clear that it was real. Their faces were wet from tears, they clutched each other.

Pearl started to say something. Then she stopped. The mother and daughter stood off to the side breathing heavily. After about ten seconds Martha said, “Go and be alone together. You can tell it later if you wish.”

As they stepped off stage, Pearl turned to Martha, “This is my show.” It has half a hiss, half growl, strong – a tone that had put many in their place and had helped Pearl climb to the heights where she now sat.

Shaking her head, Martha spoke softly, “Not really. Not today especially.” Her reply

was calm and quiet. It drained the strength from Pearl who settled back slightly. “God gives us the illusion of having things. It is a fragile possession, based on a tiny electrical charge that starts your next heart beat.” She paused, “I would guess that just about says it all.”

Pearl was looking at a sheet of paper. She tossed it aside. “Another question if I may, there have been reports of things like this – impossible things happening when you are there can you explain?”

“Impossible? – Obviously not. You just saw it. Sometimes you have to listen hard to hear the clues – you have to look closely to see them, but the world is full of miracles.

“How many miracles have been foiled because security ejected them? Often they are disheveled and a bit incoherent one theory I have is that because I spent so much time in a quiet world, I may have learned how to hear these things a little better than someone who spends his or her days bombarded by TV and other yimmer yammer.

“In your book Hosanna doesn’t do miracles?”

“Not nice ones, at least not often, but you have to remember, she is an angry twenty-four year old who has an attitude – and who is to say it is unreasonable? People are not all that nice to her. She is in an impossible position. And finally, remember it is only a book.”

Pearl reverted to her polished professional persona, “And what a book! I think the word only does not fit in the description. I have heard of people who have read it fifty times. There are web sites where people discuss it and relate how it has changed their lives. It has captured the imagination of many, both believers and atheists. It has been condemned by some denominations, while others have study groups on it.”

Pearl looked at the camera, “we’re going to take a break here and afterwards we’ll be talking too...”

Martha knew a cue when she heard it. She got up and walked off the stage wondering if she was going to miss this. A part of her, she had to admit, really liked it – especially like tonight when the strangeness really clicked in.

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“James, we have a problem.”

“Of course we do,” he answered.

“I mean it. The dog decided that this afternoon would be a good time to do some recreational digging.”

“In the garden?”

“And Eddie took exception, and went after him with that little shovel.”

“And?”

“I went out to see because I heard the noise. Rusty thought it was a game, I guess he thought Eddie was one of those squeaky toys and he grabbed him. You know how he gets and he won’t give his toy to you.”

“Can we fast forward? How is Eddie?”

“Well he’s pretty pissed off. He was all dog slobbered, and, if you believe him severely injured, though he was not bleeding that I can see. He’s demanding that we keep the dog tied up, that we give him whiskey which he says will help him recover and he’s declared a week’s vacation.”

“Is that all?”

“Well he also wants to call a lawyer, but realizes it is rather impossible.”

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He was an amateur and didn’t know Doug was watching him as he followed Martha,

learned her routine, and scouted out what could only be sniper positions. He chose spots which were at least a quarter mile away from her usual route, and from this Doug figured he had to have a large gun and probably a history as a military shooter.

Certain that Paul had not commissioned the hit, Doug found himself in a bit of a quandary. His normal role was non-interference, and he was fairly certain that an assignation of Martha would not seriously bother his client, yet there was something about allowing this man to pick off a sixty three year old woman that went far enough against his grain to cause him to consider getting involved. There were many options. He could call the cops, warn Martha, speak to the unknown man, or find a way to have him become disabled or dead enough to prevent him from being able to shoot her.

He was considering the last of these options, that Wednesday afternoon as he watched the man hoisting himself up into the tall Oak tree four blocks from her house that gave a field of fire that included her driveway. This time the guy had a long rectangular box with him, and Doug knew that it was time, if he was going to do something. It was warm and clear, a few harmless puffy clouds overhead. No wind to spoil the sniper's aim.

As Doug put his hand on the handle, ready to open the door and emerge from his place of watching in the van he heard a voice, Martha's, "Thanks anyway."

He turned and saw her standing next to his van. She pointed at the tree where the man, oblivious to them, was concentrating on opening the case. Quietly Doug got out of the van and stood beside her. By that time the man was holding the rifle in both hands as he settled into his perch on a large branch.

"It seems to me that turning the other cheek doesn't apply," Martha said, raising her hand and pointing a finger at the assassin. In a moment the barrel of the gun started to glow. The man

tried to throw it down, but it seemed glued to his hands. He tried hitting it on the branch but succeeded only in losing his balance. With his hands gripping the weapon he could only hold on with his legs, and they let go and he fell to the ground.

He hit with a thump, but quickly rolled over, still struggling to let go of the superheated gun whose barrel was starting to droop. He screamed when the molten metal flowed across his hands.

Martha took hold of the door handle saying, “Would you give me a lift back to my house?”

Doug took one last look at the man who had now sunk to his knees, and hurried around to the driver’s door saying, “Certainly.” As they pulled away he saw a police car turn up the block.

Later Doug would learn the man was very much alive, but the molten metal produced wounds that would keep the man from ever holding a gun again. Not that he would have since he apparently underwent a significant religious conversion.

Since the event was reported widely, Doug included it in his report, though he left out the details of Martha’s participation in the incident.

She had been quiet on the short ride back to her house saying, as she got out of the van, only, “Tell them not to fear me. I am only a writer of fiction. Of course they might do well to seek a broader version of the truth, but I doubt they’d take advice from me.”

Doug knew she was right, and left that out too.

Chapter 31

Hosanna wonders where she went wrong

Hosanna remembered a day when she was in school, seventh grade she thought, when going between classes with the chaos of hundreds of kids all around her, and it seemed as though she was in a bubble. She could see them talking, laughing and otherwise mouthing off, but she could not hear them. It wasn't like she was deaf, because she heard other sounds. It was just that all the gabbing seemed to cancel itself out and there was nothing much left.

It was like that now. Everybody was talking – everybody had an opinion. This time the equation did not come to zero. Its value was minus. She was a fake, she told lies, she said things that were an offense against God. A poll showed eighty two percent agreeing that things were worse because she had come. Those who had supported her were pressured to recant. Magazines were boycotted. Occasional bookstores raided and striped of books about her.

Having been burned the last time they captured her, the government was quiet, but there were rumors of assignation squads ready and waiting for another appearance.

The blue had faded and original color had reasserted itself as God proved she could do domestic work after all. Caterpillars spun cocoons and reverted to cash. Hosanna sensed a limit had been put on her powers but she still had some. A quick little miracle had provided a pack, hiking boots and a small tent. The Appalachian Trail cut through woods and over rocky mountain ridges. It did not choose the easy route, often

detouring to go up a steep pitch. There was an extended group of hikers walking separately, but very aware of each other. They had taken on trail names; there were Huffer, Howdy, Scrambler and Possum Puss. Hosanna became known as Quiet Kate. Mostly they walked alone at their own paces, but sometimes they hiked in tandem. Often at night they shared shelters. One claimed he had seen Quiet Kate talking to a raven on a rocky ledge. Another swore she'd crossed a swamp without sinking in the mud. For the most part the hikers attributed these sightings to the state of mind brought about by extreme fatigue.

Only occasionally did the trail provide a view longer than a few yards. For the most part Hosanna only had to think about the next step. Compared to what she had been carrying, the pack was a delight. At the end of a day she was as sweaty as the rest of them. The simplicity put it all in perspective. The future was the next mile. After that Hosanna knew that when she got to Maine she would find a ride to take her to the coast. There she would find a boat that would take her south.

* * *

James stood and faced the congregation. The pews were filled. Some folding chairs had been placed in the side aisles. "Well, it has been quite a week. We wake up on Tuesday morning and we have an interesting encounter with the bathroom mirror as we discover we all turned blue. There are reports of mobs in the streets looking for Hosanna. Many of you were here for a service in which we prayed for guidance. We then went home and searched our wardrobes for things to go with our new look."

He paused and smiled, "If you remember, I did caution about running out and buying anything specifically to go with blue and by Thursday we were starting to return

to our normal complexions. There was a lesson there. Several I would guess – including the obvious one about racism. We learned that whatever we had though were our problems on Monday we saw them differently on Tuesday. We also have watched the news and I, for one, am reminded with the Parallels of Jesus' life when the populace demanded his death. I can more easily see how it happened. By the way, would whomever is placing mealworms in the collection basket please stop. I am glad that lesson is over and an upcoming sermon will deal with lessons learned."

He gripped the edge of the lectern as if to hold on against a gust of wind, "But what did Hosanna do that was so terrible? She made us take a good look at ourselves, and we did not like what we saw in the mirror. It shook us up – but good. Now I may have a soft spot for her because she was among us and said some kind things to me.

"There is one thing we do know. There is a God and He or She is paying attention. The other powerful lesson that I take from this is that we need to realize exactly how little we actually control. We are not in charge of our lives, let alone other people's lives. That is a lesson that has the potential to change our lives for the better."

* * *

Hosanna and the mob.

Ed Foster was a born risk taker, abet a very careful one. He loved winning and to him winning meant making lots of money. He hated losing even more; so he was very careful where he placed his bets. It had taken him six years on and off to work the deal on the Warner farm. In the end he'd been forced to put more of his own money

into it than he ordinarily did, but the potential return was enough that he'd be able to retire at thirty-seven, not that he would as he could not imagine life without the thrill of making more money.

Three things went wrong, all attributable to Hosanna. First, Charlie Diggs, the Chairman of the Board of Zoning Oversight, reportedly got himself a serpent penis and shortly afterwards a new-found religious bent. This reduced his build-able lots from forty-six to thirty-two and, even worse, eliminated his exemption from wetlands review which would probably decrease the lots by another twenty and might even force the entire parcel to remain single family.

Second, Louise Fisher, his "friend" at First Western, "The Friendly Bank" had her tongue fork at an inopportune moment during a meeting of the loan officers. Louise had been instrumental in getting him special rates, and finding ways to extend deadlines. This extra assistance she said would no longer be possible.

Third, and most damaging, was that Ed's tongue also forked during a meeting with his partner, revealing a long standing skimming which could not have been detected except by divine means.

Suddenly with all his notes called, no means of securing capital, and a piece of land which was worth far less than he had put into it, Ed was facing the biggest loss of his life – one which would suck up all the profits he'd ever made and leave him bone dry.

He was sitting at the Belle-View Diner nursing a cup of coffee and searching for a way out, when the door opened and a couple of hikers entered.

Though she looked different from the photos, he knew the taller woman was Hosanna. She was the one who had ruined everything, not only for him, but for a lot of other guys – especially the contractor who had been lined up to build the houses. He got up and went into the bathroom. Flipping open his cell-phone, and finding his service had not yet been terminated, Ed made three quick calls.

Within fifteen minutes, there were seven pick-up trucks in the gravel lot and a group of angry men standing at the edge where the path led to the Appalachian Trail.

In the diner, Hosanna was so engrossed in her milkshake that she was unaware of the events unfolding outside. It was Mary, the waitress, who said, “Do you think I should call 911?”

It took Hosanna about six seconds to realize she was being spoken to and that the situation related to her. “No, I think I can handle this. May have to borrow a page from the Old Testament though.”

Ellen, the young woman she’d been hiking with for the past five miles, didn’t get it. “What?”

As they stepped outside, the guys took a step back so that Ed could be the spokesman. “Hey,” he said, “You, we want a word with you.”

Hosanna shouldered her pack and after adjusting the straps and picking up her walking stick, looked at them. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“We liked things the way they were. Nobody asked you...”

“That’s more than a word,” Hosanna said. “And I really don’t think you want to go there.”

“Listen, you self-righteous bitch,” said one of the other guys, the one with the biggest beer-belly.

Hosanna replied, “Your mamma never taught you either manners or sense, did she?” She thought for a second and then said, “I have a word for you.” She raised her walking stick and pointed it at the parked trucks. “Salt,” she said, and in a moment each of the trucks had been transformed into the mineral. The detailing was exquisite; there were mirrors, door handles, raised ram heads on hubcaps, and even the loose trash in the pick-up beds.

She jerked her head, saying to the other woman, “Let’s go.”

The men moved quickly towards to what had been their trucks leaving an open route back into the forest.

By the time Bill Daniels had come up with the idea of selling the trucks on Ebay, Hosanna was a mile down the trail, and a very localized squall came over the ridge towards them. Twenty minutes later there were seven large mounds in the lot, and seven disconsolate lumps sitting at the counter.

* * *

“Agent Reed, I suspect that you already know that you will need to be debriefed. Because of your close involvement with the subject you will be temporarily assigned to a stress debrief center that has been established in a secure portion of Fort Mason.”

Phillip was about to become a living ghost. He'd heard whispers of it happening to agents before, but it was never anything more than hearsay to the third degree. The stories always involved knowledge that was so dangerous it had to be contained.

One he had heard told in hushed tones on a very long stakeout had involved an agent who had done a background check which stumbled across a long suppressed lesbian affair involving a former first lady. According to the agent telling the story, this agent had done everything by the book, following all the rules - written and unwritten. He'd bypassed the local chain of command and had secured an interview with an Assistant Director to reduce the number of people in the know. The reelection was a year away and the agent was assured that he would be brought back as soon as it was possible. In the ensuing five years, he was cross trained in endangered species and placed on loan to the Fish and Wildlife Service and sent undercover to the headwaters of the Orinoco River. It was in Brazil or Venezuela depending on which map you read. Subsequently he was divorced by a wife who thought that three years without contact was too much. The agent who told the story had been delegated by the agency to be liaison with the wife who had retained a lawyer and was making unpleasant noises. The wife had been bitter and developed a drinking problem. One night she showed him an envelope which held a copy of the report.

Not wishing to become an expert on Rain Forest Fauna, the agent made no note

of the interview and found a way to convince his superiors that they should get the woman a job after she finished a government sponsored alcohol rehab. He claimed to have met the agent after his return and reported the guy was sporting tribal tattoos and had difficulty wearing shoes for periods longer than an hour.

“So much for the fucking fast track,” Phillip thought as he went through his desk. He knew better than to take it personally. It wasn’t that they distrusted him, they didn’t trust anyone and that included him.

The commander of the secure area at Fort Mason had mumbled when Phillip asked what his duties were to be. After interviews with a number of psychiatrists, some of whom in need of stress debriefing themselves, they told Phillip to report to the helipad.

The barrier island had once been owned by a baron of industry. The hurricane wracked ruins of a once great mansion were overgrown with trees, vines and thickets of thorny bushes. A smaller caretaker’s house survived because it was nestled in a valley between the dunes so as to not spoil the views from the main house. It was, he was told, ‘a safe house’ that could become an ‘undisclosed location.’ Because of the extraordinary requirements, Phillip made an ideal caretaker with his security clearance and arrest powers.

Once a month Phillip was re-supplied by a Marine helicopter that used the occasion to practice night insertions. Outwardly the island was a part of a nature preserve and was closed to the public. He was told that he must not be seen by anyone as it might tip off the location of the undisclosed location. The only people who had even a remote chance seeing him were the boaters using the Inter Coastal Waterway

that ran behind the island. For the most part they passed by because of tricky shoals and the mosquitoes that were warned of in all the cruising guides.

A boat was not provided, nor were any power tools lest the noise reveal his presence. However, Phillip did have a machete and used it to cut paths across the interior of the island. In the ruins of the mansion he found what had been a maintenance workshop. There were some hand tools and enough nails to allow him to repair an old wooden boat that he found under the collapsed roof of the original boat house. In its day it had been a beauty. A sixteen foot long sailboat with wide beam and shoal draft designed for these waters. At first, the repair had looked like an impossible task but, realizing he had the time, Phillip replaced the broken planks with boards lifted from the ruins of the mansion. The missing sail was a problem until one of the re-supply missions accidentally left a pallet with a camouflage tarpaulin on it.

Behind the island was an area of marshes, tidal islands and shallow bays that extended fifteen miles to the mainland. The main channel of the ICW curved past one end of his island and then diagonally to the southwest. In the spring he had watched a procession of boats ranging from motley to floating Mc Mansions as they passed heading north. In the heat of the summer there were commercial boats and the occasional fisherman. Now as the days shortened, and he was getting ready to launch his boat, Phillip began to see the parade reversed. At low tide he waded off shore to locate a channel leading from the boathouse ruins to the bay where the water was generally deeper.

At first the boat leaked but, as the water swelled the planks, the influx slowed and became manageable. Phillip had no idea how to rig the sail, but after several tries he

got it set on the mast. Fortunately the breeze was light and he did no damage as he rearranged the lines that had confused him.

* * *

The woman who called herself the director seemed to be several years too young for that to be true. Martha was again confronted with the years she had lost and disliked the woman's air of self-confidence. She was just a little too full of herself. "Film is a very good medium for telling the story of Hosanna. We will shoot through a gauze all the scenes where she talks to God." She went on in a great burst of enthusiasm that strengthened Martha's feelings of loss for the years gone.

"There is one thing though."

"What is that," Martha asked?

"It is conceptual – we do not have agreement yet on how much of your life to include in the film."

"My life? Isn't the movie about Hosanna?" Martha did not like the way this was going.

"Film. It is. And the question is, can there be a Hosanna without you? Your story is in some ways as compelling as the story of Hosanna. You are Hosanna and Hosanna is you."

"And you."

"Yes, I know. We have the final scene all worked out. Hosanna comes ashore from her boat unrecognized. It is a crowded waterfront street, and she melts into the crowd, but as the camera pulls back we see that the crowd is composed of a thousand Hosannas each with her face."

Martha nodded, "Yes that is good. It's one of the things that you can do with a movie that you can't with words."

The woman was looking at her, but she didn't say anything for a long minute. "What is it?"

"Well I've read the book a number of times. We've taken it apart to write separate scenes and there are a number of really amazing things that happened. But when we look at them as individual events they don't make any sense until we overlay them onto your life." She looked around, "do you understand?"

Martha shook her head, "No, not really, but I think I know what you are getting at – and that is exactly what do I mean when I say, 'I am Hosanna?' And you are starting to get to what is the core of it all. But you've got it all wrong. The movie should not be about Hosanna so much as it should be about those who understand – even just a little – that they are Hosanna and the power that gives them. Not so much good film stuff like the forked tongues, but the strength to say, 'I deserve better. Or, I will do better or I will not do whatever. I agree, don't do just a straight narration of Hosanna. The book doesn't do that and neither should you. You need Phillip learning how to sail and realizing that it is God whispering to him. You need to have the professor Eldridge learning about sex and then about love. You need the zealots learning that being a prisoner to your fears is a prison you can escape from. You need a young movie director coming to understand that there is no understanding. Not really. And that there is a freedom in that. A freedom to loosen up and to let yourself be wrong. A freedom to not take yourself so seriously and learn to laugh at yourself. Don't leave any of them out."

Chapter 32

Hosanna's Flight

Hosanna looked around the church. It was small and unadorned. Clear glass windows admitted a lot of light. Simple the way New England churches often are, it was empty. That was good. She preferred to speak out loud to God. Lately she'd been yelling some. She was there because she didn't seem to be getting through to Her out in the open. Being in a church might help.

"You never told me how tricky it would be. If I do good works, people want to worship me and I'm in trouble on a couple of fronts. So I tell people a truth that they don't want to hear – and they ignore me. I back that truth up with some lessons and scare them – and get them to hate me at the same time."

She paused, "And the tool bag you gave me. It was kind of fun to have that kind of power. But it may have been a little like giving a child a hammer to play with. I have to admit, I may have gotten carried away some. But none of that can be undone. Especially as the lessons were correct. At least they tried to be. But how was I to know that doing away with money would cause thousands of suicides?"

Hosanna took a deep breath. "I don't know why I came here to talk to you. Hell I don't know why I'm talking about it at all. About the best thing I can figure out is that this is a lesson within a lesson. I gave the obvious ones - don't lie, don't screw around, the love of money is the root of all evil. And You add the layer that the Human messenger is flawed and is only approximating Your message."

"You didn't do so badly."

It took her a second to realize that words were audible and that they came from behind her. Hosanna turned to see Princess Alexandra standing near the door. Her anger dissipated some, but not entirely as she asked her friend, “And how do you know this? Have you been hearing voices too?”

Alexandra shook her head rapidly, “Thank God, No.”

“And the people you meet, you can see into their minds and down deep they don’t think I’m a monster. That the hit teams of religious fanatics the papers keep talking about, are they figments of editorial imagination?”

“You know I lost my talent – if that’s what it was, when I met you.”

“You didn’t lose it. You just doubted the voice, and doubting it makes it faint.”

Alexandra put her hand on Hosanna’s arm. “I have a plan. If you will have me - We’ll go together. You’ve been doing this alone too long. I was wrong to leave you. The network contract turned to ashes as soon as I was no longer news. I was human - I was greedy. I told myself I could spread the word better if I took the path that was offered me.”

Hosanna interrupted, “How did you find me? I don’t know where I am - except that it’s Maine and that Maine is a lot bigger than I thought.”

“Maybe I didn’t lose all my crystal marbles. I followed your sadness.”

“And you know my plan to take a boat south?”

“NO. I don’t like boats! I get sick in the bathtub.”

Hosanna forced a smile, “Looks like I’m going to have to break a rule about healing.”

“What do you know about boats?”

“I had this relative who built an Ark.”

Garth, the old man who ran the boatyard, was so crusty Alexandra half expected pieces to flake off when he moved his arms. “Yep. Got some boats, they want some work though.”

Alexandra could tell from his expression that he did not think that two women, and one of them black, had a chance of fixing any of them. With a grunt he pulled himself off his chair. He walked to a window and pointed to the far corner of the yard. “Back there – look for a boat named ‘Exodus’. She’s a big wooden schooner. Once was a beauty. John Alden design. Local built.” He winked and smiled at his own joke. “Tell you what – get her ready in a week and I’ll launch her for free. I could use the space.”

It was a good joke. Some rotten planks had been pulled from her hull and not replaced. A part of the cabin top had fallen through, and when standing underneath Hosanna could see the sky. He was right though; it had once been a truly beautiful boat. The curves were elegant. Hosanna put her hand on the hull. “Go and tell him it’s a deal. But we won’t need a week – we’ll be ready this afternoon. After lunch. Tell him I’ll do some work on Vixen too.” She pointed to another derelict vessel beside them. “And that will make us square.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows.

Hosanna explained, “My half-brother was a carpenter. And if it doesn’t work we can always walk back to shore can’t we?” She moved her hand and then lifted it.

Where it had passed, the hull was sound, smooth and gleaming.

Alexandra walked back to the office and told Garth that they would be launching after lunch. He chuckled and nodded. "I'll be by."

Hosanna stood on the deck. All around her varnished wood glowed, polished brass glistened and new ropes snaked through pulleys and coiled themselves neatly. Sails sat neatly folded and tied on the booms. It took her a minute to decide on the color of the cushions in the cabins. She realized that the engine was an option she wouldn't need. She had spoken with the ghosts of the men who had built her and gotten their approval as well as an occasional tip on how to recreate something. Vixen was in a similar state, though Hosanna spent less time coordinating colors and did not replace the curtains on the cabin ports.

Garth swallowed the laugh he had been harboring. He touched the boat almost reverently. Hosanna understood he was worshipping the artistry of the original. "Guess I underestimated you," he said. Taking a quick look at Vixen he continued, "This makes it a bit easier to see her go." With that he turned and headed back to the front of the yard.

Ten minutes later they heard an engine start and saw a boxy machine made of steel girders rolling towards them. Hosanna remarked, "Doesn't say much, but he's a man of his word. Bet his tongue didn't get forked even once."

Alexandra replied. "Will he tell people of this? And you?"

Hosanna shook her head, "Don't think so. He understands that Vixen is reward for his faith."

After the machine set Exodus in the water, Garth came aboard and examined the bilges checking for leaks. "Never seen a finer job. She had to leak more the first time she was set in." After running his hand over some woodwork, he reached into a pocket producing a couple of documents. "Paperwork is kind of old, but it should suffice." He looked at the navigator's table, "Got all your charts?"

Hosanna lifted the top. It was filled with rolled maps and books.

He took a slow look around and then climbed back up on deck. "I'd ask about the engine, and if you need fuel, but I doubt somehow that you'll have much call for it." There was a tear in his eye, "This was a good thing you've done. She did not deserve what she had become. Exodus will take you where-ever you need to go."

They did not need the engine. The wind was light and blowing off-shore. Hosanna left a nervous Alexandra at the wheel and raised one and then another of the sails. The stiff canvas filled with a pop and, after untying the dock lines, Exodus drifted away from the dock and began to slide through the water. Once through the field of moored boats Hosanna got out a chart and showed Alexandra what they would be doing. "When we're outside the bay we'll head South and West some. If we get lost we'll get directions from the whales."

Gospel of Alexandra:

It was a day of great beauties as we slipped between the rocky wooded islands. Miracles abounded. All my fears were replaced with a faith absolutely blind which gave a clarity of vision. The vessel became a living thing; sailing itself so sweetly that we left the wheel alone. Below the cupboards were full of provisions, sweet water flowed from the pumps in the sink.

Other boats turned towards us but did not approach. We left almost no wake as we silently moved in harmony with God's breath. Hosanna was quiet, seemingly at more peace than I had ever seen. As night fell the moon gave us a path to follow as the lights of the shore receded and then vanished behind the shoulder of the sea.

Later there was a thunderstorm well behind us that lit the sky and seemed to salute our departure.

With dawn and no land or other vessels in sight came the first of the Leviathans. Hosanna went forward and out onto the bowsprit to be close to them. One and then another rose out of the water to pass close to her outstretched hand. When they had all gone she remained there for a while before coming back to the cockpit. She was quiet and then she said, "God hid some of Her greatest works under the seas."

* * *

On the ocean the waves were larger, but were spaced so that the rise was gentle. The wind steadied the vessel and moved them swiftly. The path they cut through the water healed quickly in their wake. After two days they altered course slightly after passing East of Nantucket. They spoke little, reveling in the timeless serenity of the sea. Occasionally there were boats on the horizon, but none came close

until the third day when another schooner approached from the West. The courses brought them within yards of one another and the other boat turned to run with Exodus.

Sailing side-by-side, fifty feet apart, showed them the power of the sails. The Captain of the other boat shouted, "Where are you bound?"

Hosanna replied, "We are not bound, we are free."

He nodded and waved vigorously. Then, with an order to the helmsman, the other vessel resumed its original course and slowly pulled away to the East.

Alexandra asked, "Speaking of which, where are we going?"

"You're the psychic. All I know is that I am most at peace when I am away from all that," Hosanna waved her hand towards the West. "I know there is a final chapter, but I am certain only that it is not here and not now."

Gospel of Hosanna

On board Exodus somewhere Southwest of Nantucket.

Well I guess it's safe to say that things didn't go as well as they might have. And yes I might have gotten a bit carried away towards the end there. On the other hand, and this is a biggie – things seem to have ended better than they did for the big J.

First suggestion is that there be a training program for anyone who follows in my footsteps.

The curriculum as I would teach it – (but what do I know?)

First lesson has to be, Do not take yourself too seriously.

Basic rules: Don't let them worship you. – this one I managed to keep in part because I didn't do nice miracles – especially healings.

Second lesson – don't expect people to listen to you – especially if you are telling them things they don't want to hear.

Basic rule – one that I needed to follow – is that yelling louder – or making more dramatic and drastic lessons still doesn't get them to listen any better.

Third Lesson – get some things straight with God before you accept the job. Of course I still am not sure how much choice there is in this. One thing – and this relates to number two above – is to establish divine endorsement early and often. (At least some people will agree with you that way.) The star was a good idea for Jesus. Though in today's world there would be a media blitz and no kid could grow up under that scrutiny. That I didn't have anything equivalent is mostly my fault. I could have had a star at any moment, but I was too busy trying to be independent. You can not do this kind of stuff alone.

Speaking of alone – Fourth lesson – disciples. Learn to delegate. Learn to ask for and accept criticism. I remember the night when Alexandra said to me, "God Girl I don't like the sound of that." She was right. When I listened to people things seemed to work better then when I thought I had all the answers.

Fifth lesson - Anger is not a dignified response. Your sense of humor is

one of God's most precious gifts. Becoming angry nullifies it. You are reduced to their level.

Finally, Yelling at God does not count as a prayer. By that time you probably have messed things up to a point that divine intervention is required. Admitting that something was your fault is probably the best prayer possible.

I'm sure there are some more out there, but, I've given up wanting to have all the answers.

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Four days later some low islands appeared off the bow. "Where are we?"

"Almost there, at least for you." They passed a buoy. Ahead waves rose and broke on sandbars.

Alexandra moved to the wheel. "Would it be a lack of faith if we looked at one of the charts?"

Hosanna smiled. "Probably. One thing I learned on the Appalachian Trail was that it was often best just to take one step at a time."

"When we're through with this adventure, you can write a book, 'How The White Mountains Taught me How To Sail.'" Alexandra pointed ahead at the breakers, "You see that don't you? I don't think we can go there."

Hosanna nodded. "And there is a channel just behind them. If you notice there is

current that is shifting us to the left. This is one of those times when you have to let faith do what you can not possibly do on your own.”

As they rounded the bar the waves were breaking twenty feet on either side of them. The buoys that marked the channel were half submerged, pulled under by the surging current. The wind shifted, throwing the booms across the deck. Hosanna took the wheel, and steered them through an S shaped bend that led behind the spit at the end of one of the islands. She caught Alexandra’s look.

“Sometimes it’s a bit much to ask for multiple wind shifts which coincide with the tide change. Go forward and lower the sails. We’re almost there.” On the bay there was a little sailboat with a baggy sail.

As he approached the anchored schooner, Phillip looked at the vessel closely. There was something too perfect about her beauty. Also interesting was that it had come in through the twisting inlet that only a few local boats risked. It slid between two barely submerged mud flats and dropped anchor just off the point where the boathouse had once stood.

Phillip pulled alongside the gleaming hull, and knew why he was there. “I’d like to say I’m sorry that our picnic was interrupted.”

Hosanna stood on the side deck, which was slightly higher than his boat, and looked down at him. “Rudely interrupted.” She waved her hand, “But that is past, let me fix your boat. It would be distracting for it to sink while we’re talking.” With a more dramatic flourish than was necessary, she transformed his boat from scow to sprite. Starting at the stern the wood became tight, losing cracks and checks and acquiring

layers of golden varnish. The sail became curved instead of baggy and went from camouflage nylon to white canvas.

“There. Drop the sail and come aboard.”

Philip listened as she told him, “I have one last message. Tell them I have retired, but that they should know that there are many like me who walk among them. They have the sense to keep to themselves. Alexandra will come with you, she has a story to tell, and will offer any proofs that their doubting minds will require. I hope they may be more willing to believe than they once were.”

Alexandra asked, “Where will you go?”

“Things didn’t work so well with Ray, but I’ve got a blind date with one of Poseidon’s descendants.” She paused, “I have the idea of running a charter service somewhere interesting. We’ll find a way to attract those who could use a voyage, like you just had.”

Alexandra wiped a tear from her eye. She took hold of one of the stays as she stepped across to Philip's boat. “Put me down for two weeks in January.”

“Don’t worry. You haven’t seen the last of me, Princess. In fact, you will be my booking agent. You will know those who are to sail with me. And since you can not make a living at that - your sight is restored, at least concerning the outcomes for football games.”

The boats were drifting apart but her voice carried across the water, “Phillip will know those who can help you make use of these particular talents. But you must be circumspect, that’s a word God taught me and I neglected to use.”

Chapter 33

Martha Puts her Past to Rest

Martha realized that she would never be comfortable in the house that had belonged to Max. She decided to travel until she found the place that would become a new home. But first, she had to return to the hospital. There were some ghosts and other memories to be dealt with.

As Jeanne drove, Martha said, “It’s funny, there were so many people, most of them were tortured. Both staff and patients. But there were some who had good souls. Despite the hurricane of chaos, they were calm. In that time while I was tormented, there was one who especially helped me. Her name was Marie and there had been real demons in her life. She had retreated until she found some shelter deep in her soul. She never, so far as I know, ever said anything to anyone. Wandering the ward and on sunny days she would find the places where sunlight came in through the big dirty windows. Marie would stand off to the side and would hold up her hand so that just the tips of her fingers were in the beam of light. As it touched her she would smile.

“One day when I was at my most down, she stood beside me and did this. I don’t know why but I raised my hand too and when my fingers touched the sunlight I knew I was in the presence of a Holy Woman. It was then that the idea of Hosanna came to me.”

The administrator, balding, tending towards rotund and slightly disheveled, was visibly nervous. “I have read your book. And that which remains of your records. I have seen interviews on TV in which you related. . .” He broke off and waved his hand as if brushing at a fly, “There is much that can not be undone. I could talk about inadequate funding, civil service,

and society's desire to bury its unfortunates here, but none of that can excuse the ways that you and all the others of your time were mistreated." He tried smiling to show his sincerity. It did not work. "We like to think that we have improved things, and maybe we have, but there are still times that I am ashamed."

Martha nodded; she was not going to say anything that would give him absolution. "I asked about some individuals."

He nodded vigorously. "Yes, there has been some success. Most of the staff has retired or moved on. In any case, various rules would preclude providing you with any information there. But one of the patients is still here, Marie Hoffer. The one at the top of your list. I have arranged for you to have a visit with her. Though I must warn you that she is one of those cases we never seem to make any headway on."

"I think the answer is that she has found her destination, and, for all your looking, you can not see it." Martha stood, "May I go to her now?"

He nodded and led them into a smaller room. Like his office it was showing the results of age and deferred maintenance on shoddy construction. Sunlight came in through a dirty window. Marie was standing apparently unchanged since Martha had seen her last.

From her purse Martha took a small crystal. She reached up - placing her hand next to the woman's. The sun struck the crystal throwing small rainbows throughout the room. Gently she placed the stone on the woman's fingertips and balanced it there until Marie opened her fingers to grasp it. Then Martha withdrew her hand and took a step back. She turned to the doctor and Jeanne who were standing near the doorway. "In Tibet, the monks would immediately recognize that this woman is a highly developed spiritual being." Behind her Marie stood still - saying nothing, but tears ran down her face.

To the doctor Martha said, “See that she gets more access to rooms where the sun comes in. Also, let it be known that bad things will befall anyone who takes her stone. Very bad things. If you read my records...”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes. There was mention of some, um... unusual events.”

Martha turned back to Marie. Placing her hands together in supplication, she bowed. “May God continue to shine through your soul.”

At that moment the shadow of a cloud passed over the window. The sunbeam vanished, but the stone continued to throw off brilliant rays.

Marie slowly lowered her hands and brought the stone close to her breast. She turned to Martha who was now kneeling. Cupping her hands behind the stone, Marie directed a bright beam onto Martha.

The cloud moved on, sunlight reentered the room, and Marie turned back and raised the stone again.

It was half an hour and several miles before Martha spoke. “There are no words.” She shook her head. “Did you ever wonder how many of them there are?”

“Who,” Jeanne asked?

“Hosannas, of course.”