I am the Whore and the Holy One

LEONCE GAITER

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For James

With many thanks to Elaine Pagels' "The Gnostic Gospels" and Robert Eisenman's "James the Brother of Jesus," the former for light and the latter, shadow.

I am the wife and the virgin….
I am the barren one,
and many are her sons….
I am the silence that is incomprehensible…
I am the utterance of my name….

For I am knowledge and ignorance.
I am shame and boldness.
I am shameless; I am ashamed….
Give heed to me.
I am the one who is disgraced and the great one.

I am the whore and the holy one

- The Thunder: Perfect Mind, Nag Hammadi (VI,2)

CHAPTER I

Los Angeles, 1995

He'd seen the grand facade day after day as his car idled at the streetlight outside. A bag lady lived by the elaborately wrought iron gate that sheltered the place from the sinful world around it. Perpetually clad in a green plastic trash bag with holes for her arms and legs, her shopping cart overflowed with tin cans and half-eaten food. Smudges and dirt mottled her wealth of exposed skin. Naked beneath the bag, she lifted it before passersby, motorists, God, and everyone to shit on sidewalks and rain gutters. Black, white, and Mexican front-stoop-drunks stood in the mini-mart parking lot across the street, drinking, cussing, pissing by the fence; and in back of it all stood the oblivious house of the Lord, imperturbable, stock still and defiant, its eaves reaching for the glories of heaven, its stained glass shouting the triumphs of saints, its bell tolling to the

faithful and the dead as the filthy, matted-haired bag lady sang gay songs to herself outside.

He stepped from the car into what felt like a wind-swept oven. Forty miles per hour gusts hurled dust and dirt everywhere. Like ragged angels, trash and old newspapers flew about the pre-dawn sky. He turned his back to keep the dirt from his eyes. Santa Anas. 80 degrees. 7 a.m. Sweat instantly poured down his forehead. The streets were clear. The few cars that traveled this early passed in slow motion—the heat slowed everything—and they braked to eye the yellow tape wrapping St. Vincent's Cathedral as if it were a gift from a clumsy child. From behind sealed, air-conditioned windows, they turned their heads trying to comprehend the outrage that plagued the news from their radios—sensing a vaguely cinematic fearfulness—as if demons would accost them through the walls, or blood drip deliciously from the eaves. The few who walked, walked deliberately, as if quietude would keep the heat and the fiends responsible for the abomination within the house of God from finding them.

An angry haze was all that the horizon offered up, a fiery carpet for the sun's grand entrance. It was even more strange, this heat, with no sun to justify it. Maybe this was what his recently deceased, beloved one had found when he left this world—someplace stunningly beautiful in its abject malevolence. He chuckled. Maybe heaven was LA, despite the fact that LA was hell.

Many times, he'd considered entering that church. It was the grandest around, one of the few that still re-

called his childhood images of incense-laden ritual. As a boy, he'd believed God lived inside such places. He believed that those who lived and worked within had made special pacts with Him. He didn't believe that anymore… even before he'd seen the grandiloquently ghastly TV images of the corpse draped across the altar like a blood-drenched zealot. Now, instead of returning to see if there was solace for him there, if the majesty of God and his Church could still awe the man as it had the child, he came to investigate why one of its priests was horribly dead, and determine the truth of the Church's insistence that it was by his own hand.

The stench of urine rose from the fast food mini-mart corner. "Hey bro, you got any spare change?" one of the drunks asked.

"I haven't got anything," he replied.

"That place'll kill ya'," the drunk yelled, pointing at the church. The others exploded with laughter.

He kept his distance from the bag lady. In this heat, he didn't want to smell her. Only a couple of news vans sat outside, awaiting aftershocks, but the initial reports had been filed. The early morning anchors had not yet arrived for their "on the scene" reports. This was all too new.

Alex Shipman, Catholic priest and scion of the famous, notorious, and often infamous Shipman family dynasty, was dead—his body torn apart, the pictures said, in this holy church.

Sam showed his ID to the cop outside, who disappeared for a moment to confirm Sam's right to walk this bloodied ground and then returned to usher him in. Sam took the heavy wooden door from the cop, relieved that cool air rushed him. Yes, it was as he remembered it. He took a strange satisfaction at that—that its outrageousness had not been the fruit of his youthful exaggeration. He kept coming back to "Grand." High ornate ceilings painted gold, with reds bleeding from the stained-glass windows, dark wooden pews, empty now, awaiting the faithful. Saints becalmed, sinners writhing in frescoes on the walls while recessed stone and lightless spaces bespoke mysteries that, in their need for dark and quiet, skirted the lascivious. Regular Catholic schoolboy church attendance had fallen to compulsory Sundays once he switched to public school. In his later teens, attendance fell to the odd midnight Mass. By his early twenties, even that lost its camp value. By then, churches—the imposing fortresses—had developed ominous airs. Far from sanctuary, they menaced. He felt no pull to enter them, and only mildly dismissive animus toward them. They were like flies. They served a purpose on this earth, one had to admit, but to him, they and their acolytes were a buzzing annoyance—impossible to ignore, but barely worth an effort to eradicate. It was all too appropriate that he found himself inside one under these circumstances. It was as if all his angry notions about the institution, what it represented, what buttressed it, and its acts in the world had metastasized into tattered flesh.

The church organ roared, shaking the ground beneath him, and him out of his skin. One moment silence, and the next, the colossal space trembled with hilariously ominous chords. A sign of God's displeasure at his blasphemous contemplations, thought Sam. He smiled that it only took an organ to reduce him to the devout Catholic 10-year-old he'd once been. It was a bit much, he thought—a bit over the top even for this chiaroscuro pageant of a religion. Thunderous organ in remembrance of the traumatically disemboweled priest? Vulgar even by Catholic standards. In the corner, rows of red candles flickered, the precise meaning of which he'd forgotten.

He lifted his eyes down the crimson runway to the altar. The organ alternately wheezed and roared accompaniment. Uniformed and plain-clothes cops milled chaotically about, and the blood-red carpet led straight to the altar, so brutally defiled. The anarchic crime scene vs. the imperious Church. The clash was spectacular. The music tipped it unreservedly into high camp. He gawked like a freeway rubbernecker as the organist really cut loose, the subterranean bass shuddering while chords fought pitched battles and single notes ran for cover. Cops hung from the upper balcony dangling a tape measure to gauge the distance to the huge, bloodied crucifix that hung above the altar, and then from the crucifix to the blood-splattered marble slab of an altar below. Whispering to one another, priests idled nearby. A single red stalactite dangled from the side of

the bloodied altar as if a thick drop had dried in mid-thought. Much more had flowed down the front, but it almost disappeared as it barely deepened the red of the carpet.

The music stopped. Everyone froze. Its absence was more assaultive than its surreal presence had been. They'd actually grown used to it. A moment—and activity resumed, in brooding, appropriate silence.

A cop approached. He looked Sam up and down, as do most men when presented with another whose reputation precedes him. '*What's all the fuss about…? I guess he is good-looking for one o' them… He's not so tall…*' Comparisons and dismissives so regular they'd become almost audible to Sam.

"Mr. Youngblood. Captain Smalls is over here," the cop said, his internal measurement against the Great Sam Youngblood complete. Sam had grown more than just used to it. Sadly, he'd grown *dependent* on it. In the public's eyes, he still had *it*. Star quality. He would have shrunk inside if the reaction he evoked became less pronounced. He would have thought himself a man of lesser worth—even while berating himself for needing it, exploiting it with so much gusto. It was just proof of how desperately he missed the so-much-more he had lost. It writ large what a piss poor job he'd done of living since he lost him.

He approached a clutch of cops. Smalls was the older one without the mustache; politicians don't wear facial hair.

"Heard from the very top you'd be joining us," said Smalls as he walked, hand extended.

"Do you all work to musical accompaniment these days?" Sam asked, shaking the hand.

"The bishop had scheduled maintenance. The tuner flies in from God knows where and costs a fortune to cancel, or so we're told."

"Priorities," Sam deadpanned.

"What do you want to know?" Sam was disappointed that Smalls ignored the dig.

"It's early, but the family tells me you're calling it a jump."

"We don't have enough information to call it anything."

"Then the *Church* is calling it a jump. Why?"

"And we don't have anything to say about what the Church calls it." Smalls sighed. "I see where this is going, and I've been told to work with you to see that it doesn't get there."

Sam couldn't hide a smirk. He sing-songed, "It's going toward a thorough investigation and the full disclosure of the facts, right?"

Smalls paused. "Still refuse to admit you live in the real world, eh? No compromise for the holier-than-thou."

"Is that your official response?

The cop sighed again as if speaking with a precocious yet misguided child. "Yes. That's where it's going—a full and thorough investigation. Of course, Samuel."

"It's 'Sam.'"

"I don't know." Smalls shook his head, smiling. "'Sam's' a bit rugged. You seem more *refined* than that."

"It's those keen people skills that got you where you are today." Smalls had just missed the list for Deputy Chief. His smile disappeared. Sam went on. "You'll have to find a way to piss me off that's much less subtle—while legal. That didn't hurt." Calling him a "faggot" would have gotten Smalls a reprimand. It would also have prematurely ended his prematurely stalled political career. Unfortunately for Smalls, too many Angelenos had gleaned that he held blacks in contempt, dismissed Hispanics, and detested queers. His career in this city full of each had stalled because of it, a fact about which Smalls carried a molten well of bitterness.

"You're the tape recorder type. Promise to play fair and we can speak freely," Smalls said.

"I never play fair," replied Sam. "Fair means rules, and your white ass owns those."

Smalls almost smiled. He had to admit, as much as he disliked him, he had *it.*

"Early!" Smalls hollered. The young cop who'd ushered Youngblood over returned. "This is the famous Sam Youngblood, the investigator representing the family of the deceased. Tell him what you know." Small turned and walked away.

"And how little does he know?" Sam shouted to Smalls' back. He sensed he'd overplayed his hand and resented the triumphal smirk he knew Smalls was wearing.

Sam turned to the young cop whose air of cluelessness reeked of central casting. Early launched right in as if well-rehearsed.

"He jumped from there," Early said, pointing to the balcony that hung about 20 feet above where they stood and 15 feet over the altar. He then walked toward it.

Assuming he should, Sam followed. "Jumped? It's not all that high."

"Hit the cross hanging over the altar," Early continued as if he didn't dare disrupt the narrative lest the whole thing fall to pieces. "Time of death was around 3 a.m. No note. No signs of a struggle. No forced entry. Nothing missing."

Early stopped as abruptly as he'd started. He stared up at the balcony as if examining a poorly hung painting. Sam looked up as if the balcony would continue the tale. It didn't.

"… And…"

As if surprised, Early turned toward him. "That's it."

That's how little he knew.

†

The body had been rent. It had struck the mammoth iron sculpture of the tortured Jesus that hung suspended in the air, and then the four-foot-tall bronze cross that adorned the altar. One or both objects had extract-

ed a football-sized section of the body—eventuating the profusion of blood, bowels, and flesh. The photos had hit the early morning news shows with the customary disclaimer: "These images may be too intense for some viewers." A civilian had discovered the scene: Alma Alvarez, a 48-year-old illegal immigrant who worked on a cleaning crew. After finishing the administrative areas, she had entered the church to pray for her son, she said. At first, she didn't notice the torn corpse lying atop the altar. Her eyes had been fixed on her rosary. She was saying Hail Marys. Only when she knelt to pray and cast her gaze up to the tormented Christ did she see the blood. She screamed. Then she ran. She was illegal.

Hysterical at her Echo Park home, she described to her 19-year-old son, who fluttered on the edges of a street gang, what she had seen. He pressed for more and more detail, increasing his mother's hysteria in order to pluck particulars from her.

"Did anyone else see?" "Who else is there right now?" "Did you hear any sirens?" The enterprising young man wasted no time. Once she had told the whole gory tale, several times, to his satisfaction, he grabbed the digital camera he'd recently bought from the trunk of a car, jumped on a bus and, for the first time in many years, entered a church for something other than a funeral. There he took—and sold for a handsome sum—the bloody pictures that woke the world.

After his photos appeared on the morning news shows, Alma's wayward son was interviewed six times in

as many hours by as many broadcast outlets. Before the day's sun had set, he'd reached semi-celebrity status. Upon being interviewed—and they were happy to be interviewed—friends and family described him, as rehearsed, as "hard working" and "entrepreneurial"—a word which they, almost to a one, mispronounced. In the presence of her lawyer (for there was talk of suing the Diocese for upwards of one million), Alma recounted what a comfort he'd been following her grisly discovery. In the subsequent days, he finally gained the courage to do what his debilitating fear of ridicule had heretofore prevented. He publicly articulated his yen to act.

To Alma, prayers had been answered. Her son had been redeemed. There were whispers of a stint on a reality show. It was God's work. The miracle of the blood-soaked altar was proof of the greatness of her Lord and of her blessedness in His eyes.

†

Soon after the gruesome photos had blown the morning news coffee klatches off the air, Sam Youngblood had gotten a call. It was Jonathan Aronson, a very smooth lawyer for the very rich Shipman family. Sam had known Aronson for around five years. They'd met in Sam's early days with the District Attorney's of-

fice, where the Harvard educated Sam had quickly become the favored liaison between rich defendants' family retainers and the DA bureaucracy. These were not their defense lawyers. Those lowly folk spoke directly to the Assistant DAs. These were the *family* lawyers. A different set, and higher echelon. They preferred not to sully themselves with public university-educated civil servants. In a town that taught the world that image was everything, these family lawyers oversaw general reputation, intimate details, and press disinformation. They determined who got an interview, what potentially juicy details the DA would and would not mention, whether the hairdresser could visit before the perp walk, etc. Sam got on well with them. Whereas they saw most of his DA compatriots as middlebrows in bad suits, they regarded Sam as an equal. His interests (he could talk art, architecture, and the LA Philharmonic season with the best of them), Harvard pedigree, carriage—they all bespoke the level of breeding that the Yale/Harvard/Columbia educated family lawyers called home. That he was black was no handicap. They were Jewish.

Sam liked Aronson. There was a streak of irreverent boyishness in both that they could indulge with one another, and few else. Otherwise, Jonathan was the quintessence of studied refinement. His poor New Jersey parents had grown rich in groceries, and he had spent every waking hour since trying to forget it. Repping the Shipman's may have been the final step toward total amnesia. Shipmans were royalty. Crooks, a Vice

President, more Senators and fools than you could shake a stick at… the family were an American legend. Watching their doomed marriages, tragic deaths, absurd attempts to become humans instead of Shipmans had been a national pastime for decades. Now the only one of them who had successfully disappeared from public scrutiny had literally exploded onto the nation's consciousness. His blood splattered all over America just as it sprayed that church, and we dabbed our fingers in it like it was chocolate sauce, the water cooler talk and sideshow chatter like yummy noises as we licked it off.

"Sorry to wake you. I suppose you've heard," Aronson said.

"I heard," Sam replied. "Couldn't sleep."

"You say that every time I call you in the wee hours, which I do 'cause I know you don't sleep."

"I'm evolving."

"How about getting some help, counseling, like a normal person."

Sam didn't answer. He couldn't. If he spoke about it, he would cry or break down, and he wouldn't let himself do that anymore.

"The family needs you," Aronson continued, sensing he'd get no response. "There are some circumstances we'd like more information about, and we won't get it officially," Aronson said. "Can you help?"

Sam had one of the cats in his lap as he sat in the kitchen downing his toast, the stillness so deep he clearly heard the laptop's hum. This job would mean a clean

break with the right-wingers. They'd been courting him since the Dyson case, and to his discredit, he had let them. They had made some trenchant noises about the state of political play: the democratic establishment taking black support for granted, education still substandard in black neighborhoods, unforgivably disproportionate sentencing for drug possession, etc. For a moment, Sam actually thought them sincere, and took as genuine their stated desire to put post-civil rights era racism behind them. He had allowed himself to be quoted in a couple of articles and op-eds their ilk had written. But then he learned that that was only the pitch—the hook meant to lure him in. Like any finely crafted marketing message, the real meat lay in the offer—the discount—the free swag. There had been a dinner. The lights of the LA conservative movement were there, as were a couple of national pundits flown in for flavor. They let him know that they could guarantee him a platform. Television, magazines, speaking tours. The liberals couldn't do that. As a liberal, he was just another black face. As a conservative, he would be newsworthy. All he had to do was march to their message—which, lo and behold, remained the same. "If you forget you're black," they signaled, "so will we. If you forget your history, and more importantly, if you let us forget ours—help us absolve ourselves of it—we'll make you rich." He listened as they subtly patronized him as if he were too stupid to see it. They did it all so skillfully. There was nothing at which he could take umbrage, nothing that would justify him storming from the room

in righteous fury. It was all code and cues, winks, and nudges. Staring across a dinner table as if at slugs with opposable thumbs—at that moment, he found real purpose in being so repulsed by a set of human beings. It made him feel something. Since Radley's death, there had been very little in that regard. He ignored them subsequently, but he had been associated with them and the taint needed washing off.

He was ashamed at having allowed himself to entertain, even for a moment, their flirtations. He blamed it on knee-jerk contrarianism—his attraction to filling a vacuum. LA blacks, regardless of how middle class, were so bent on playing "street" that failure to reduce diphthongs to monophthongs was akin to race treason. It pissed him off. Born to a light-skinned New Orleans "Creole" mother and a dark-skinned man from bayou country, both virulently proud and ambitious, they insisted that their only child attend the best schools. Most often, this meant white neighborhoods; when in black ones, it meant integrated Catholic schools. From the beginning, Sam was soaked in the white world—everywhere except inside his house. His teachers, his playmates, his neighbors, mostly white, throughout his school years. Needless to say, Harvard was overwhelmingly white. On graduating, he moved to LA and joined the best firm, which was irrepressibly white.

He'd been intimate with whites his whole life, but free of the blood ties that would have bound him to them; he did not have a white mother or father to bathe

whiteness in a benevolent light. To him, despite his usually benign daily dealings with them, they would always be the ones at whose hands his parents had faced sickening indignities. His father wore a hairless scar on his scalp from a beating he took when he tried to vote for the first time. He himself recalled, soon after learning to read and during a family trip to visit relatives, a road sign blaring, "The Ku Klux Klan Welcomes You to Louisiana." So they could live in a white neighborhood that afforded him the best education, his proud mother listened to neighbors stage whisper "nigger" as she walked to her own front door. His parents never forgot, and insisted—rightly—that he not.

He had no illusions about where he stood in America's grand scheme. His parents taught him who his people were, who they had been, and the horrors they had fought and endured. He'd learned to consider his own life an anthropological study of white Americans' reactions to blacks—particularly the 'honorary white' status they so often bestowed. He'd learned that knowing an intelligent, well-read black man often did not improve their view of blacks, it just forced them to recategorize that intelligent black man as something else—'honorary white.' Once during a college economics seminar, the discussion had turned to black Americans, and Sam, being black, had made a comment, to which a white girl he knew blurted in deadly earnest, "but you're not a real black person."

Mainstream thinking—the idea of ownership in America, trust in it, privilege within it—none of these

lived inside him. However, when he walked out his front door, he walked among the privilege and opportunity whites inherited and experienced the myriad ways in which these mainstream eyes reflected his black skin. All his life, he'd experienced their reactions to a black man in their midst—a black man who did not fit the stereotype that both black and white worlds preferred: he was not "street;" he was not pitiable; he was not poor. He would not pretend he *was* for anyone.

He quickly calculated: The money would be in the low six figures; high profile; absolute discretion mandatory; public image mandatory. He offered it all. The Shipman job would line the coffers and burnish the public profile while solidifying his place with the progressive political establishment. In addition, he needed something to do.

This is what his life had become, a series of well-considered calculations, all for the benefit of other peoples' visions of him.

"Okay," Sam said. "I'll go to the church first. Clear it in the family's name for me. Then where do we meet?"

"At the Shipman house. You need directions?"

"I'll buy a star map," he drawled.

Sam was new to fame, but he had an innate understanding of it. How to make the world your friend while holding it at arm's length, making the folks on the other side of the TV screen feel that you rightfully condescended to live amongst them, all without seeming condescending, leaving them thankful for a mere

nod and a smile. That's how he had, almost subconsciously, yet brilliantly, exploited the Dyson spectacle. It's how he, after such a crippling loss, had made his name.

* * *

Throughout the long, drawn-out dying, Sam had been surprised at how little bitterness he'd felt. His life—his and Radley's lives—had been eventful enough to bleed them dry of any fancies of living in ease or according to plan. But this… the way it happened, the body powerless against growths hell bent on eating it alive… watching it… a barely breathing cadaver at the end, laboriously pulling and pushing vaporous air as if it were lead. Bitterness would have demanded a sense of justice, and that had nothing to do with it. Justice was a human construct. Living and dying were not. The man he loved had died. The man with whom he'd chosen to live his life had, appallingly, unforgivably rotted away and died and left him empty. The one who'd shattered his shields and suspicions of everyone and everything and somehow forced him to love like a human being was gone. And still the sun rose vengefully each day; he went about his business with only fading memories. There should have been cracks in the sky… There was no such thing as justice.

It had started as a tingling. Rad had mentioned it a couple of times; there was a tingling in his arm. At first,

he thought his arm was falling asleep. Then the stomach ache. Sam actually teased him. Assuming Rad had eaten too much fruit, Sam made faces awaiting a bombardment of noxious farts. And then it got serious. By the time they received a diagnosis, the lymphoma had spread.

They did all the right things. They shopped for the right oncologist. Sam spent days, weeks researching treatments from the tried-and-true to the cutting-edge to the downright fanciful. They began with chemotherapy. Rad had often disturbed Sam with his intractability on living. They would see someone on television bound to a wheelchair for life, and he would say, "I would never want to live like that." Sam wouldn't argue. He knew there would be no point, but he considered it a threat. Anything can happen in this life and to say that you demanded life on your terms… it was a cheat. Sam thought it was weak, and it scared him. It would cheat *him*. It wasn't Rad's life. It was not his choice. It was Sam's as well. And it made Sam feel small for the desperation with which he knew he would clutch living, in any shell of a body, against any odds, desperately, weepingly clinging to the shards of anything that could be called life and doing it out of sheer desperate terror of the nothingness beyond. That Rad could contemplate letting it go was a challenge to his own arrogance, his lifelong habit of residing inside his head, outside the world, a habit that Rad had come as close as any human could to breaking. That was why Sam loved him so

much and held onto him so fanatically. Rad had dragged him into the world for the first time in his life. That Rad could so easily contemplate leaving the world to which he'd lured Sam—it hurt like hell. It meant that Rad would let him go—Sam, the world… everything. He *was* Sam's ability to live in the world. Sam could never let that go.

Sam worked maniacally to forestall the coming of his greatest fear. He was right there, every day, cleaning up the vomit, carrying Rad from bed to chair, dragging him to green and verdant places to show that there was still beauty in the world, a reason for staying, feeding him, bathing him, and doing it all with a smile despite his exhaustion, as if it was no effort at all. He did anything to keep Rad from thinking that it had gone too far and that the pain and the filth were no longer worth it. He smiled and vamped ever more selfishly to prove that their world was worth the relentless, loathsome insults to Rad's body and senses.

The cancer progressed. Then came the pain. Sam would almost vomit just thinking about it. Racking, barbarous pain that even morphine could not deaden. Sweat-soaked, Rad panted like a marathoner to endure the agony and Sam wept and wrung his hands and wished he had a gun so he could put a bullet in Rad's brain and end it. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs until it all stopped. And then Rad took his hand and said, "I can't."

"I'm sorry," Rad said. "I can't."

Sam felt relief. There was an end. An end to the pain, an end to everything.

Trembling with pain, Rad took his hand and said, "I can't."

* * *

After the funeral, Sam had taken the requisite months off to wander in the bearability of it—the fact that he could and would go on even when every action seemed a mere dictate, an empty ritual. He couldn't look at a photo, sit on a piece of furniture, feed the animals, or confront anything they had made or grown together over 10 years without feeling, like an incision, the prospect of an effortful rambling toward nothing in particular. And then, like a shot of adrenaline to the heart, the ensuing 18 months had brought the headlines and the empty distraction of fame: The Dyson case.

It had everything—Hollywood, sex, race. An international media extravaganza: a cop who had every intention of lying on the stand to cover his sloppy ass—ready to lie to hide the fact that he had dismissed the victim as just another black whore not worthy of his time. As the Assistant DA charged with prosecuting the case, Sam knew it, and he artfully announced it during the trial simply by refusing to hide it. The D.A. was furious. The plan had been to ignore the cop's lie to get the high-profile conviction of this white Hollywood producer accused of murdering his black mistress. The

black community was screaming for Dyson's head, and the D.A.'s office was willing to do anything to provide it. Sam had not played ball. And worst of all, from his superiors' point of view, he had become admired internationally for it. That's what got him fired: not the fact that Dyson was guilty as hell and walked, nor Sam's refusal to support the evidentiary lies that would have gotten Dyson convicted. He was fired because he got credit—and positive press—for that refusal. He stole the moral high ground. To his superiors' egos—the most functional part of their existential selves—that was unforgivable.

Camera crews from LA to London camped on his lawn. Media hordes lunged and poked microphones at him like knife-wielding thieves. There had been daily death threats. He had known the risks he took, and so he concentrated on and focused public attention on his methodology—his Vulcan-like logic, Socratic Q&A, emotionless precision. By the time he was finished, the press had hailed him as the next Clarence Darrow. His last gesture had been the piece de resistance. Dyson, joyous and acquitted, reached to shake his hand. Sam looked the murderer he had helped set free right in the eye, and he turned his back, leaving that killer's hand suspended uselessly in the air. Cameras flashed like night sky fireworks. That photo went all over the world. The logician had done the job demanded by his oaths to the truth, the picture said, but when the job was done, the moral man had emerged.

It wasn't bullshit. The gesture had been spontaneous enough. But that perfect public pitch of his had whispered at him, as always, tainting things, like an authorial voice directing his movements for the benefit of the omnipresent lens.

Yes, much to his chagrin, he had *it.*

The papers and magazines soft-pedaled the issue, calling him "bachelor," but not mentioning his sexuality. Some black magazines, the Essences and Ebonys, went so far as to call him "eligible" and took pains to find photos of him in (black) women's company. Sensing the ways of American fame, he'd done nothing to correct the misimpressions. Perhaps he fed and kindled them because he needed them, like placebos, snake oil, Carter's Little Liver Pills for the disease of emptiness. He would stop mainlining fame, he told himself, when he was a person again. But if he was to be a specter goddammit, this was LA, and he would be a goddamned glowing one.

* * *

Sam returned home after the Cathedral. He recorded his notes and then headed out to meet Aronson. The Santa Ana heat chomped down on the city like its last meal. The air was feverish, but at least the hot, blasting wind cleared away the smog. The terrain grew progres-

sively less beautiful as he coasted down the steep curves of the hilltop on which he lived. Up top, it was all green with tropical reds and oranges for highlights, bluish from pools and fountains, and lush to augment the stately homes—old or architecturally distinctive. As you descended, Highland Park crept up on you. The house paint began to peel, and cars dully absorbed the sunlight instead of brilliantly reflecting it. The birds and the sprinkler sounds gave way to the basso grandioso of norteño oompah music. The lush grounds gave way to trash and dirt, and the architecture went all to hell. He was one of the few blacks at the top of the hill. Most everyone up there was white. Below, all around the decaying base of the beautiful hill, Hispanics lived.

After twenty minutes on the freeway, he landed in San Marino, the Shipman's old money hometown. The homes were massive. Gardeners tended the perfectly clipped flora and fauna, courtesy of the miracle of the southern California climate. Dinged and dented maid's cars sullied enormous driveways. Wide streets and no sidewalks guaranteed well-heeled silence and prized privacy. The Shipman house was a Greene and Greene masterpiece in classic Craftsman style, an enormous composition of starkly intersecting planes and right angles, accented with stained glass and elegantly detailed cornices—a place whose magnificence reeked of problems solved and the flames of all worry tramped down with cash.

A black maid answered the door. Telepathically acknowledging her joy that someone like her walked this

hallowed ground without a uniform, the maid smiled. "Won't you follow me, Mr. Youngblood? They're waiting for you." She led him through the foyer into a den, or a drawing room, or a living room, or one of the other 30 rooms in that place. Aronson stood in a corner talking to the dead man's mother, Amanda Shipman.

"Thanks for being so quick, Sam," he said, as he took Sam's hand in both of his. His air was all business with just the right touch of temperance to mark this sad occasion. At forty-eight, his vanity demanded he keep in shape, and he appreciated a good-looking man for the ancillary light he might shed on him almost as much as he appreciated a well-shaped woman. Thrice divorced and obscenely rich, he worked not for money anymore, but for the power—its better half.

"My son didn't kill himself," Amanda Shipman spat, unprompted. Dressed in gauzy cottons with her gray hair expertly bobbed, she didn't look her 60 years. "He would never have killed himself," she continued. She marched to the bar to pour herself a drink at 10 a.m.

"Amanda Shipman, Samuel Youngblood. Samuel, Amanda," Aronson said.

Of course, Sam had heard of her. He'd seen photos, seen video, and read about her, like everyone else in America. She had recently learned that her only child was dead. Sam watched her in respectful silence, his own deathwatch crowding his thoughts. He wanted to see her as a kindred spirit, lost, and even fantasized about bonding with her in shared grief.

"I've been pissed off since he joined that band of skirted clowns." She stopped at the fireplace. "There were other ways. Better ways. But I guess he had to rebel against all his freedoms somehow. The laws of Shipman dysfunction demanded that he shackle himself to something since I spent his lifetime preaching freedom at him. I was just sick that he chose the shabbiest little chains he could find. At least I thought I'd raised him to make better choices." She circled the room with her drink, eyes flitting from Aronson to Sam.

Obviously, there would be no tearful scenes of mutual loss. So, Sam adapted. He turned off. He went to work.

"Excuse me," Sam said, "but your family's been allied with the Church for generations."

"This family," Amanda corrected. "Not me. The last time one of them set foot in this house was when my mother-in-law was dying. Like sadistic little boys, they insisted that she choke and wheeze and groan in pain for as long as possible before she left this life. And she was fool enough to listen."

Sam worked not to visibly cringe at that.

Amanda stopped her wanderings. "He was my only child," she said, and Sam recognized the sheer amazement at such a loss. Her rage had protected her, and it was slipping away.

"When did the suicide talk begin?" Sam interjected, as much to prop her back up as to gain information. He wanted her strong. Hers was a pain you didn't want laid bare.

"It was just… there," Aronson offered with a quick glance at Sam to signal thanks for the segue, "from the beginning, and you know how it goes. If the Church authorities were bandying it about, the media would pick it up."

"So would the cops. Mrs. Shipman, why would they say he was suicidal?"

She didn't answer. She was staring off and beginning to feel something.

"Mrs. Shipman," Sam repeated, a little too loudly. Slowly the comforting snarl twisted her lip again. "Me. They'll use me." She sat with a flourish on the red velvet sofa. Her anger mixed with pride now. "They'll whisper that my denying the Church and trying to convince him to leave it had left him in such a grand state of emotional and spiritual confusion, that he took his own life. They'll use the "mama's boy" angle, suggesting he was gay, which he was. I always thought he joined up to keep the family from having to deal with it. The politics and all. My mother encouraged it. Couldn't flummox Cousin Andy's prospects, now could we? He was doing penance for my sins. Paying back the family because I'd refused to offer up my rightful dues to the Shipman Way… my life, my happiness."

"Did he like the Church?" Sam asked. Amanda thought a moment.

"I think so," she replied. Sam admired her admission of that hard truth.

"What line was he in?"

"The Shipman endowment. It's a research grant for archeological study, manuscript preservation and the like. I convinced mother to offer the endowment on condition that he run it. It kept him nearby."

"And I assume you wouldn't know of anyone who'd want to kill him?"

"Aside from me," Amanda said, a tear falling down her face. "No."

CHAPTER II

Now Peter tirelessly tends his ministries to spread the good news of the Kingdom at hand through the life and the resurrection of Christ, the Messiah. It is a tale to which he clings with a penitent's fervor. It is a tale from which, in private, he recoils like a virgin besieged. Despite his torment, he does not yield. He shouts to the world of the divinity of Jesus as Christ, the Son of God. He lies to serve the man he failed in life. And to me alone, he rails against those who were not there and claim to know his thoughts and words. He watches in horror and awe as an unfamiliar world grows from this man he knew and loved, although he, himself, helps give it birth. In doing so, he knows that with every utterance he denies his true greatness his friend, this man he fails in death as he failed him so in life.

By the time Sam left the Shipman house, the press had arrived. Aronson took the questions. Sam made a point of being seen slipping away. As he knew it would, his involvement became the focus of guesswork and speculation for the next several hours. He turned his cell phone off. Keep 'em guessing.

That was the toe in the pool. He'd know when to dive in.

News outlets had been reporting all day that the death "looked" like a suicide. Police Captain Smalls played to the balcony, all Police Chiefly, while he swatted at softball questions. He insinuated much and said nothing. The press was beating suicide to death, considering they had no evidence. Sam expected journalistic laziness, but this was more. Someone was actively pushing this, and Sam agreed with Aronson that it had to be the Church. A mother's assurance, regardless of how impressive the woman, was no guarantee that a child had not killed himself, but Sam was inclined to believe her. She had a clear-eyed view of her son. Her mother's love did not blind her. She admitted that he liked the Church when she hated that he was a part of it. Had

there been something suicidally wrong, she would have seen it.

Sam waited until evening to return to the cathedral. He spent the rest of the day researching Alex Shipman: At age 30, the only child of Amanda Shipman, the much-maligned free spirit in the heretofore well-politicked, buttoned-down Shipman family, had packed up his Ph.D.s in archeology and comparative religion and waltzed them into a seminary. The conservatives crowed that it was just desserts for Amanda's hedonistic bent and more proof of her family's slide into political and cultural insignificance. It seemed that one of the family's great hopes would slink into the cloister instead of trying to run the world. The pundits tittered on op-ed pages from coast to coast.

Aronson had given Sam the Alex Shipman archives, as they stood, including old letters, papers, and a copy of his doctoral thesis on apocryphal texts, which, Amanda explained, were alternate versions of the gospel that never made it into the bible. The thesis, entitled "The Submerged Narrative of Biblical Apocrypha," suggested that close study of various apocryphal writings, when viewed in tandem, implied an alternate version of the life of Christ. Sam skimmed through the whole piece, fascinated. Shipman wrote with verve, a zest that one didn't expect in normally dry academic texts. Although infused with deep faith and even fervor, there was something downright blasphemous about his conclusions. His work reeked of doubt, which it then dared to justify. Here was a man of faith fighting to be-

lieve and daring to gleefully suggest that it was the doctrine's fault he could not smother all doubt. The doctrine's fault—not his own.

Once ordained, Alex had spent most of his time at the Huntington Museum and Library in Pasadena, an institution renowned for the collection and preservation of valuable texts. His family's grant to that institution allowed him full access, and to amass there copies of the rare manuscripts and translations that he needed. According to his letters, he took a few trips abroad to study originals and seek copies of the most obscure texts. But there were no specifics as to what he was seeking. He studied Greek and even took a stab at understanding Aramaic, the native tongue of Jesus Christ. In deference, it seemed to Sam, to his mother's virulent displeasure at his acceptance of The Call, he wasn't terribly forthcoming in his letters. Sam wished she had shown less stridency. If she had, there'd be a hell of a lot more to work with.

He skimmed the papers, trying to get a sense of the man. What he read reinforced his prejudice to believe Amanda. Sam was passionate, and he was onto something, but whatever it was he found, he didn't seem the type to let it scare him off a balcony. He was too worldly, too self-possessed, and even too cynical for that.

> "*Mother Dearest,"* one letter began, in mocking tribute to Joan Crawford. *"It's hard to describe how unholy it seems here in*

the holy land. After the Rabin assassination, there is a sense that hopes for any peace are dead for at least a generation. When I think about people blowing each other up and away for this supposedly holy land and I stand in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, always aghast as pilgrims kneel and bow before garish tin foil idols as tour guides hurry them along with theme-park like efficiency, I wonder if humans are equipped for faith. We wallow in our semblance of it, anoint and festoon ourselves with it as if it was jewels, but we clearly don't understand it. I know I don't, especially now. The more I learn, the more I have to un-learn; the more I know, the more I recoil at the image we sell of religion, simplified and bastardized to the point of idiocy. Faith's true nature is ephemeral, even wispy. But you can't build empires on wisps. That takes cash, as we Shipmans know so well. Thank God we've got plenty. If we didn't, I wouldn't have the time to run around the globe bitching about all this."

Yes, Sam thought, he was much too self-possessed for that. Whatever the Sam Aronson of these letters felt, whatever wounds or hurts he suffered, he'd give as good as he got. He wouldn't turn it inward.

That evening, Sam returned to the cathedral. He wanted to take another look at the scene, this time without an army of cops dancing to a mad organist's accompaniment. He checked in with the officer at the door and, to his relief, entered a realm of downright contemplative silence. He took a closer look at the bloodied altar. The balcony railing above was intact. It was an illogical place to attempt a suicide leap. Yes, you could potentially kill yourself; but you could also wind up with a couple of broken ankles.

"It does seem odd, doesn't it," echoed a commanding voice behind him, as if reading his thoughts. Sam turned and faced a priest in his 50s. Judging by the cut of his clothes and the little chapeau he sported, he was important. "It seems odd that someone would choose this spot to kill himself."

"Yes," Sam replied, turning. "Sam Youngblood."

"Of course. I know. The police told me you were here. I came out to meet you, actually."

"Ah yes. The famous Bishop Bishop." Sam extended his hand. "I would have hated to be you in seminary school."

With a polite twitch of the lip, Bishop Bishop shook the hand. "I've heard that one before. You probably have some questions."

A noted Church conservative, Bishop Bishop was a favorite of Rome and a media staple when a theologian's stentorian take on morals, ethics, and where a dick

should and should not go was wanted. His Coyote/Road Runner antics with the metropolitan archbishop were legend, with Bishop Bishop playing the Wile E. role. The Church had been so distressed with the liberal Archbishop McFarland that they had positioned Bishop Bishop as an "auxiliary" in the diocese to keep an eye on him, and, with any luck, make his life miserable enough to force him out. Unfortunately, Bishop Bishop's sanguine self-righteousness bled through the camera like a starlet's sex appeal and was no match for the fact that Archbishop McFarland carelessly ignored his existence, a fact that sent the bishop into semi-regular, untelegenic tizzies.

Sam had heard too much from this man not to consider him vile: he had written that gay men were morally evil, and victims of a disorder; that gays could not be allowed to live out their lives as… gay. Well, if gay is what you are, not to live as such is, quite simply, not to live.

"Yes. I have some questions," Sam replied.

"Please…" The bishop gestured he should follow and walked him behind the altar, through the saint-hung hallway, and into his spacious, pleasantly old-fashioned office. "I do hope," the Monsignor began, "that the family does not attempt to use this tragedy to further private agendas."

"We're not the ones talking suicide without any evidence."

"You don't speak the language of diplomacy, do you Mr. Youngblood?"

"Life's too short."

"Hmm. Capt. Smalls informed me that you suffered a loss recently."

"Don't."

"I simply meant . . ."

His eyes locked to the priest's, Sam lifted a forefinger, and shook his head slowly from side to side. The look was lethal. The clergyman closed his mouth and tilted his eyes to his desk, ashamed at getting caught in a vulgar attempt to exploit a man's death beneath the scrim of priestly ministration. Not ashamed at the attempt, but at getting caught. Sam let him stew. Any comment on Rad's death from this notorious priest of this notorious Church would have been a gross insult. This man of God had lost the right to offer comfort—not while pissing on the crushing love he'd shared, and to which he still so recklessly clung.

"You knew Alex well?" Sam finally asked.

The priest exhaled in relief. "Not as well as I would have liked," he replied, "though I was his titular superior here."

"Titular?"

"His province was academic. Spent most of his time buried in his books. His official church duties were light."

"Was it odd that someone would work under that sort of arrangement?"

The priest smiled. "Much to some peoples' surprise, Mr. Youngblood, we're a flexible lot."

"Was there any friction due to the amount of 'flexibility' he was shown?"

"Of course not. It was important work."

"Exactly what was it?"

The priest paused, then smiled. "You know, I'm not as sure as I probably should be." He thought a moment. "I know he was cataloging and researching early Christian texts, in essence creating a resource for the diocese."

"Tell me about him."

He shrugged. "As I said, I didn't know him terribly well."

"Impressions then."

He sighed, deciding to humor the clumsy shamus. "Nice enough young man. I had actually expected a bit more… arrogance, thinking maybe the life of privilege had gone to his head. But no, he seemed pleased to be here and eager about his work."

"Why was this work so important? Others do it. He wouldn't unearth anything new. He wasn't out in the field, digging up buried texts."

"Mr. Youngblood, faith takes its adherents down many paths. Not being a man of faith, you might know the…"

"Who said I wasn't a man of faith?"

"You're a Catholic?"

"There are other faiths."

"Of course, Mr. Youngblood," he acknowledged condescendingly.

"How good a Christian was Alex?"

The priest scrunched up his face at the question. He was now definitely annoyed. "What do you mean?"

"I've read some of his material, his papers, his thesis. He seemed less than doctrinaire at times."

"That was prior to taking vows."

"No. Some of these were quite recent. But do you believe he'd changed his views?"

"Of course. Or he would not have taken vows."

"Again, I'm talking six months ago. His mother said he was gay."

"What are you talking about?"

"A mother knows, they say. Was he?"

"Priests are celibate."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't gay. Plus, I spent a summer in an Italian village Monsignor Bishop, where I met the local priests' *kids*. Theory and practice are two different things, particularly in this church."

"This is what I meant about private agendas, Mr. Youngblood. There's been a tragedy here."

"About which you seem less than all broken up."

"How dare you."

"You would think you had priests falling from the sky and getting impaled on your altars on a regular basis."

"Please leave."

Sam smiled. "Happily." He rose, nodded. "We'll talk again," he said as he left the room. The bishop would dread their next encounter, which was a good thing.

The church was almost empty now. Four beings covered head to toe in orange plastic jumpsuits attacked the filth that corpses leave behind. He had admired their work before. Once they had finished, a stranger would never know that blood and bone once stained this place. Blood and bone. Just a little more. Sam glanced back up the stairs to the balcony from which Alex had fallen or jumped, or even been forced. The railing was low, and yes, the drop could be either injurious or deadly, depending on the fates. A grown man could have easily tipped over it; a small shove could have pushed him.

On the balcony, he saw the young, clueless Early keeping night vigil, overseeing the cleaning up.

"Mr. Early," Sam called brightly as he climbed the steps. "Anything new?"

"You're not supposed to be here."

"You remember me. We spoke earlier."

"Yeah. But you need to go now."

"Amazing, isn't it?"

The cop paused and stared down the transfigured altar. It was probably the first time he'd been asked to ponder the totality of it. "Yeah," he replied. "It's somethin'."

"Why did he do it?"

"They don't know." Sam watched the young man's eyes trace the bloody trail down the body of Christ. "I'm Catholic, you know."

"Oh . . ." Youngblood replied. "Me too." He paused in disbelief at his own lie. "Raised," he amended.

"I heard he was a strange one."

"Who said?"

"I heard some of the other priests. One of 'em didn't like him at all. The other said he was a fanatic." And then as if realizing his indiscretion, he jerked toward Sam. "Don't tell anyone I said this," he half-begged, half-demanded. Sam watched the machismo cop pose slip off of him quite cleanly. He was desperate to talk and very young. "But you bein' Catholic… I'm Catholic, you know." He looked around theatrically to ensure their solitude, or imbibe the weight of God's house, bloodied. "We don't really know anything yet. But this priest has been all over Captain Smalls."

"Which one?"

"The bishop," Early replied.

"About what?"

"Making it quick. Getting it over with."

"The investigation?"

"Uh huh."

Sam nodded. "Not a word. Thanks." He returned downstairs.

As he walked toward the huge double doors leading from the house of God into the LA night, he passed the fount of holy water, which this time did not beckon. He owed this place nothing. Outside, the suspended streetlights, blinking colorfully, swung in the hot gusts as the trashy, windswept angels still danced in the air. He walked around the block to his car, an unobtrusive

Subaru. He drove it on purpose, as sort of an antidote to this town. These days, he spent so much time watching others watch him, this lowly car was his meager rebellion.

As he turned the key, he began considering the many things he had to do, but he didn't want to think about them now. He didn't want to go home either. He'd been watching grief and dead men all day, and at home, there was more of the same. He was beginning to regret taking this job. He wanted to forget about it, and there was nothing at home to help him do that. No one. There should have been someone. Anyone. The person he had been, and the other person he'd been a part of. Grief and dead men. He passed the bag lady who snored beneath the streetlamps. He silently wished her sweet dreams. The mini-mall drunks had a fresh bottle they passed dutifully between them. On this ninety-degree night, he wanted lights. Sound. Not too bright, nor too loud. That's what he wanted. People, not too near and not too many. Shorts and tank shirts exposing damp, shiny flesh. He'd go where he could sit in a mixed crowd, boys and boys, and girls and girls, and he'd watch the young ones hunting and pecking their way through forcibly delayed romantic adolescences; and the older ones who, like him, had sown the oats and sought to know something more, but would settle instead for convenience or a shuddering, sensual surfeit. And since he had been one of the lucky ones who had known a grievous love, he now marveled at the machinations required to suggest the smallest taste of what

he'd had. How close he had to get to some strange man to match what he'd known the simplest touch to do, how deep inside they had to be, and how much flesh and body had to touch his flesh. All that sweat and effort to both free him from and immerse him in—just for an instant—the memory. They flocked to him now. He wore his scars too clearly and need downright became him. Some of them recognized him, and, after all, this was LA, and a crack at the famous was not to be missed. He needed them, just like he needed the articles and the media eye, but only for a short time, and only to remind him. He knew it wasn't fair; they expected more, but each one was just a piece from the sampler—take off its clothes, feel its skin, smooth or rough, brown or white, bite into it and revel in the taste and somehow keep alive the mystery of whether the next would be what he needed—despite knowing that that relentlessly, mercilessly tangible thing had died.

He drove west on Wilshire Boulevard. He knew just such a place.