

FALLEN ANGEL

A Modern Day Parable

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Chapter One

You may find it strange that an angel is writing a book, but that's my only way out of this mess. Angels can do just about anything – with God's permission of course. Well, to be exact, He tells us what to do, and we do it. We are His messengers. We don't decide things on our own. In fact, we can't do anything unless we get an order. Unless you are a Fallen Angel like me. What is a Fallen Angel? It's an angel who decided to do things on his own. When that happens, one of his punishments is that he has to stay in the world with humans until he can make amends. Usually, we angels are sent down to Earth on short-term missions, like destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, or saving some poor guy from drowning - if he has enough good deeds to his credit to merit all the trouble that a rescue operation causes in Heaven. That was the case with me. I was sent down to warn Harry before the proverbial candle was snuffed out from Above. If he wasn't the world's biggest conman and womanizer, he surely made the top ten. But we'll get to that in a minute, after this short introduction.

In addition to saving lives, angels do a lot of things that people don't usually associate with angels. For instance – inspiration. Usually, scientists take credit for new inventions, but it's really angels that give them the idea. When God decides that it's time for something new in the world like a telephone or electricity, he shoots one of us down to Earth in the form of an idea, and plants us in the brain of Alexander Graham Bell or Thomas Edison, and the result is a new discovery. It's the same thing

with artists. It wasn't just Beethoven who composed all of those symphonies – it was an angel friend of mine. That's how the Almighty brings progress into the world. Except that He does it incognito, in the disguise of inventors, writers, artists, and statesmen, but it's really Him and His army of angels, pulling the strings, working invisibly behind the headlines of the day.

But I had the chutzpah to do some things on my own, so I'm down here, and the only way I can get back up to Heaven is by doing something good for the world. That's why I'm writing this book. To wake people up to the dangers of going astray, so they'll become better people during their short stay on this planet, before they're taken up to the real world, the world of souls, where the lucky people live on and on forever, becoming almost like angels themselves, enjoying the genuine good life, and not merely the Madison Avenue "good life" down on Earth.

That's right. That's pretty much the whole secret. This world, my friends, is like the slight-of-hand of a magician. One minute it's there, and the next minute it's gone. As the old saying goes, "You can't take it with you." Not the money, nor the fame, nor all the most beautiful women in the world. It's all an illusion, like a cloud of smoke that you grasp, only to discover that there's nothing in your hand at all.

So why does God put people down here in the first place, you ask? Well, to explain very erudite mysteries in a simple way, life here on Earth is a test. A person can follow his eyes and his passions, and chase after all the temptations in this world, or

he can heed the Voice of his Maker, by being a righteous person, helping the next guy, and taking from this world only what he needs to get by. Just like with the story of Adam and Eve. But I'll get to that later.

Like I said, the lucky people, after their time is up in this world, assuming they accomplished what they were sent here to do, they get to live on in Heaven forever. The sad truth is, if you counted the number of people that have made it to Paradise since Creation, they wouldn't even fill up Yankee Stadium. So you see, getting into Heaven isn't so easy. What about all the others, the vast majority of people, including the richest and most famous celebrities in the world? Well, after their sins are burned off in Hell - and let me assure you, from the screams coming out of that place, it certainly isn't a like a Caribbean vacation - after what seems to them like a thousand years in purgatory, measure for measure, where the miserable wretches are made to suffer for all of their illicit pleasures, thieveries, nasty words, jealousies, back-stabbings, and all the rest - they are sent back to this world for another chance. In a different body, of course, and not knowing who they were in their previous reincarnations. People keep getting recycled, again and again, until they get their acts together. The quick learners only need to come back down to Earth once or twice. Others may need a dozen journeys to this world before they fulfill their missions. While other poor devils keep coming back a hundred times and more until they catch on to the game.

What's the purpose of the test? Simple. To get people to recognize their Maker. All Adam and Eve had to do was to recognize that God was the King and follow His bidding, and everything would have been honky dory after that – no wars, no sickness, no death. But they blew it.

If you're smart and do what God wants you to do on Earth, you go straight into Heaven. But if you make a god out of yourself, and follow after your own selfish cravings during your fleeting sojourn on this planet, then, like I said, you are going to be spending lots of time in the Great Microwave in the sky. And after that, you're going to have to go through all of the unnecessary hassle of life once again, until you get it straight in your next reincarnation.

Of course, within the big picture of coming to know the Creator, everyone's personal mission is a little bit different. A guy who blew it in his initial appearance by stealing has to return what he's stolen and stop being a thief. And another guy, who shacked up with someone else's wife in the first go-around, has to get through the second visit to Earth by keeping his hands to himself. Or, it may be that someone neglected to perform some good deed, like helping out his aging parents, so he has to come back again to be a good son to his new mom and dad. It's as simple as that.

Simple on paper, at least. In practice, you wouldn't believe how many earthlings mess their lives up completely. Not only the first time they're here, but time after time. Take my word. I'm an angel. I've been around since Adam and Eve. I'm seen

millions and millions of people, many with good character traits and solid potential, who sooner or later screwed up.

What did you think? That you were invested with a Divine soul just to eat hot dogs at the ballpark, watch stupid shows on TV, smoke a little dope, have a few affairs on the sly, and steal whatever other cheap thrills you can from this ephemeral world? Wrong. Your soul doesn't get high from those follies and frills. Material things don't get the soul excited, because the soul is a spiritual essence. Connection to God is what turns on the soul. But people generally don't pay any attention to God - or they pay lip service by going to church on Sundays, or to the temple on the Sabbath day, while behaving like uncivilized primates the rest of the week.

Allow me to play devil's advocate. Let's say that a guy is fantastically successful, makes a lot of money, and allows himself to enjoy all of life's pleasures – can he take them with him when they lower him into the grave? When he arrives at the gateway to Heaven, he won't have his checkbook and credit cards to bribe his way in. And even if someone has billions in this world, who can escape all the tribulations of life – the sicknesses and troubles that everyone suffers – battles with spouses, painful divorces, aggravations over the children, dishonest business partners, the death of loved ones, to mention just a few? No one is let off the hook.

I know from first-hand experience. In addition to helping people get out of all kinds of jams, it's us angels who are sent down to this world to inflict people with all kinds of tragedies

and pains. It's all out of God's love, to wake them up to their errant ways and give them the chance to repent before it's too late, before the ticker runs out, before the unexpected car crash, the sudden heart attack, fatal disease, or drug overdose. Believe me, when the Almighty's patience wears thin, and He decides to turn on the heat, He has no shortage of methods to let arrogant humans know that they are as vulnerable as newborn babies. That's when He sends us into action, so that the blind of this world have a chance to wake up from their slumber, by paying allegiance to their Maker before the sand trickles out of the hourglass, and the worms in the grave begin their work of chomping inflated egos down to size.

Most people think that sicknesses and sufferings befall them for no reason at all, as part of the happenstance workings of nature. But that's not the case. God sends afflictions to warn wrongdoers that it's time to put on the brakes. Lucky are those who take heed!

No, my friends. Not for this life of hardship and suffering on Earth were you blessed with celestial souls that are capable of soaring higher than satellites and transcending all barriers of time and space. You were granted your heavenly souls in order to forge a bond with your Maker and enjoy the indescribable spiritual pleasures of the World to Come. But to get there, to reach the final stop and ultimate destination, your souls were "morphed" and beamed down to this world first, the corridor before the palace, so to speak, to be tested and refined. To put it in the language of the layman, you have to carry the

proverbial football of your soul across the gridiron of this world, dodging a team of enemy tacklers, and then set it down over the goal line, without any mud on the laces, in order to score a winning touchdown. But if you fail, by letting one of the tacklers grab a hold of your jersey and drag you down to the mud, then TILT, you've lost the contest and have to play the game all over.

That's what this book is about. You might call it my penitence and rectification. It's my way of picking myself up out of the mire where I've fallen, because when temptation came my way, I forgot all these basic lessons, and strayed away from my mission to save Harry. The autobiographical tale I am about to relate is my way of teaching others, to open their eyes to the truth, so they won't make the mistakes that I made, nor suffer needless reincarnations again and again like Harry had to. If I succeed in this, then with the grace of God, I hope to atone for my own inexcusable blunders and climb my way back to the Garden, to resume my place as a favored angel just like before. For God is always eager to accept the penitent in heart, those who strive to correct their ways and start life anew.

Of course, I cannot disclose all the secrets. That would be the greatest error of all. So I will have to tread carefully, changing names and places, and deleting many details, especially the horrifying description of the judgment that lies ahead for the stubborn of heart - for this would only serve to scare readers away. And while I may seek to soothe painful truths with flourishes of humor, let not the laughs be conceived as

irreverence, God forbid. For woe to those bestselling authors who, for a few months on the bestseller list, made fun of Divine matters during their brief seventy years in this world, without thinking to give praise to their Creator, may God have mercy on their suffering souls.

This then is the story of Harry Walsh. That isn't his real name, of course. I don't want to embarrass him, which would be a big sin in itself. Harry is an everyman name, because this is an everyman's story. In a sense it's a fable, even though it's as true as can be.

Basically, Harry had a good soul, but as we shall see, to the extent that a person has a pure holy soul, he has a corresponding evil prompter to test him wherever he goes. That's the rules of the game. To make things clearer, let's call the evil prompter Satan. At first, Satan was an angel like me, but after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the evil fellow became a part of man's essence. It's always at war with man's better self. While it's really a part of the person, it's easier to picture it as a little red devil with a pitchfork, whispering in a person's ear. In summary, life is a tug of war between the good inclination and the bad, as they battle for control.

Harry, like zillions of other people, kept listening to the misleading advice of the crafty old devil with the pitchfork, so he ended up sabotaging his reincarnations again and again. His soul was one of my charges from the very beginning of Creation. That's why I remember his history particularly well.

So, to get on with the story, one bright heavenly day, not long ago, I was whisked down to Earth to enlighten Harry in order to save him from messing up his life once again. He had already flunked a dozen reincarnations, and God's almost infinite patience was fast running out. But before hurling a lightning bolt from out of the blue, and short-circuiting Harry completely, God decided to give him one final chance. That's how this whole story started.

Chapter Two

Harry's saga starts out just like it does in the Bible, "In the beginning, God created the Heaven and the Earth." You can read all the details of Creation in the Bible itself – that's not the point of this chapter. But to do that, you'll have to buy yourselves a copy. Once upon a time, you could have read the Book of Genesis in any hotel room, but people stole all the Bibles. As an angel, I always found that difficult to fathom. I mean, if you are tempted to steal, why steal a Bible? God doesn't appreciate that. You'd think people would have more sense than to steal Bibles. For that wrongdoing alone, if the thief doesn't return the holy book, or send a check to the hotel in remuneration, he'll have to suffer through a whole new reincarnation, and maybe dozens more, until he gives up stealing. If people would only think about the consequences of their actions, before they act, they would be saved from doing a lot of silly things.

Now I could have told you to find the text of the Bible on the Internet, but I won't do that. Sure, there are a lot of good things on the Internet – that's exactly how Satan catches you, by saying, "Look how good it is, and how it will make you wise," just like he said to Eve about the apple – but, let's face it, there is a lot of trash on the Internet too. Since I'm an angel, I have to be honest. It was the Internet that got me fired. One day in Harry's apartment, curiosity got the better of me. Checking out his laptop, the photo of some bikini-clad "apple" caught my eye, and one click of the mouse led to another, and another, and yet another, and I was hooked. That's how I lost my wings. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, one thing led to another, and here I am, living like a bum on the streets of Manhattan, instead of like a prince back home in Paradise.

Anyway, that's jumping 6,000 years ahead in our story. Let's get back to Harry.

After God created the Heaven and the Earth, the day and the night, the seas and dry land; after He created the sun and the moon and the planets; the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, all the animals and creeping things, He created man.

"And God said, 'Let us make mankind in Our image, after Our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the Earth.'"

Not that Harry was Adam, but since Adam was the first man, all people who were born after him share a part of his soul. Think

of it as spiritual chromosomes and it may make more sense. Chromosomes and their genes are passed down in families from generation to generation. Thus, people today have the genetic properties that originated with Adam. So too, everyone has a part of his soul.

It's a little complicated, and like I said, I can't disclose all of the secrets, so let's leave it at that. What's important to know is how the drama developed. Everyone knows the story, but since I was there, allow me to elaborate a bit. First, notice what it says in the Bible:

“And the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.”

You see. You are more than just a body. You also have a living soul. In fact, your soul is more the real you than your body. After all, the body lasts only some fourscore years, while the soul, hopefully, lives on forever.

So let's continue. Remember, this is the first time I have written a book, so you'll have to be patient.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’”

Test Number One. Like we said, you either obey the King's commands, or you get kicked out of the Garden. That's all of life in a nutshell.

So far so good, but here comes the complication.

“And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper to be a mate for him.’”

That’s how Eve arrived on the scene. They had their wedding in Paradise. It was beautiful. All the angels were invited. I don’t think there was a bird, a fish, or a zebra that didn’t shed a tear.

Except for the Snake, that is. He was jealous. Along with Adam, he was the only creature who walked around upright on two legs and could speak. He strutted around arrogantly, swaying his great tail, as if he were the king of the jungle. The Snake wanted the woman for himself.

Now things were different in those days, during those first hours of the new and pristine world. Like the Bible relates: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they felt no shame.”

Before the first sin, everything was as pure and innocent as two children holding hands. That’s the way it was supposed to be. God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. That was the holy purpose of their union. To procreate. To populate the world. Certainly, there was nothing shameful in that.

“Now the serpent was craftier than all the beasts of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God said that you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”

The wily beast. I wanted to call out and warn her, but God wouldn't give me permission. Talk about a pivotal moment of history! If only I could have stopped her, the whole world would be a different place today.

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and did eat – and gave also to her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked.”

Notice what got Eve into trouble. Her eyes. That's what I meant about the Internet. Sure, there's a lot of good stuff on the web, but a person can make a mess of his life if he follows after his eyes. That's always been Harry's main problem too, in almost all of his reincarnations, he always fell for a pretty smile. And I fell for the same old trick too.

Of course, there are many deep secrets to this first, world-shaking transgression. At this point of the story, for the sake of modesty, the Bible hides more than it reveals. What can I tell you? One sin led to another until Adam and Eve got themselves kicked out of Paradise. All I can say is that the union between a man and his wife is meant to be a holy act, for a holy purpose of having children and bonding their lives together in mutual enjoyment and love - not some bestial, lust-filled act, merely for personal pleasure, like it was in the eyes of the Snake.

Certainly, when it comes to that legendary forbidden fruit, there was more going on than the few scant verses recorded in

the Bible. Ever since The Garden of Eden, the “forbidden fruit” has been the world’s number one fixation. I don’t know if there are any official statistics, but if you ask me, out of every ten reincarnations, eight are due to this age-old inclination. Arrogance goes along with it and is probably second on the list. Harry suffered from both of them. He always wanted to be king of the jungle too.

When Adam and Eve ate the “forbidden fruit,” their eyes were opened, and they came to know the difference between good and evil. The Snake, which until then had been just some other creature in the Garden, now became a part of them. Moral conscience was born, along with the feeling of guilt that comes in the wake of transgression. Like the Bible says:

“And the man and the woman hid themselves amongst the trees of the garden from the presence of the Lord God.”

At least they felt ashamed. In the language of Heaven-sent social workers like me, there was something to work with. They knew they had a problem. The real trouble begins, like with Harry and so many others, when consciences become numb through excessive wrongdoing, until the soul is encased in sin, and the sinner no longer feels the disgrace of his actions. Let’s face it - when a man commits a sin a second time, it already doesn’t seem so bad. And by the third time, he is certain that he is doing some wonderful deed.

Nonetheless, my friends, man is not alone on this planet. On the contrary, he is merely a visitor here. As we learn from the

Bible, the world has a Creator, and He's the boss. As the Sages of the Talmud have written: the store is open, customers are free to come in and take what they want, but the Storekeeper writes everything down in His ledger, and He is certain to square up accounts.

Chapter Three

Thus God cast Adam and Eve out from the Garden of Eden, and mankind has been trying, like a blind man in the dark, to find its way back there ever since.

But let's get back to Harry. His soul's first appearance on Earth was in the body of Cain. Everyone knows the story. Cain brought an offering to God from some of the more mediocre fruits of his crops. His younger brother, Abel, likewise brought an offering, but his was from the most select sheep of his flocks. When God favored Abel's offering, Cain was jealous. After all, more than an offering was at stake. He was competing with his brother to be Adam's heir, to win the family inheritance and become magistrate of the world. So when God preferred Abel, Cain went berserk. And just between us, Abel was born with a twin sister, and Cain desired her for himself.

Like we mentioned earlier, a person isn't born with a nasty soul, and Cain's was no exception. But the evil inclination he inherited from his mother and father's encounter with the Snake got the better of him. Noticing his moody state, God

tried to cheer him up. Please don't get impatient with me for quoting the Bible again – it's only because these early years of world history are recorded there in black and white.

“And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you upset, and why has your countenance fallen? Certainly, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin rests at the door. Its desire is towards you, but you can conquer it.’”

Read the verses again. It's very important. We see from this that Cain wasn't predestined to slay his brother. He made the decision himself. Yes, his evil inclination drove him into a jealous rage, but he had the power to subdue it. He could have brought another, more heartfelt offering, from the choicest fruits of his crops. Instead, he rose up against his brother and killed him. From his own free will. That's what the Bible wants you to know.

Before Cain's fate was decreed, I spoke up, wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, it was the world's first murder. Cain could not have known that his blows would kill his brother, I argued in the Heavenly Court. No one had ever seen a dead man before. Cain was stunned when Abel fell to the ground and didn't get up afterward.

But the Court didn't accept my line of defense. The fact was that Cain pelted all parts of Abel's body with blows. He struck him again and again. He even bit him like a lion and smashed open Abel's skull with his staff. But what sealed his doom was

his lack of compassion. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” he called out when God asked him what happened to Abel. Like I mentioned, in addition to knowing his Maker, man was placed on the earth to benefit his brethren, as embodied in the rule, “Love your neighbor like yourself.” Cain acted in the very opposite manner. Hearing his harsh curse of eternal wandering, he cried out for forgiveness. The Court rejected his plea.

“But I only killed one man!” he insisted.

“No,” the Tribunal replied. “You killed billions and billions. All of the offspring that would have descended from Abel, you have slaughtered in your jealous wrath.”

Nonetheless, in consideration for the sparks of repentance which Cain had expressed, God lessened his punishment. Thanks to the mark that God placed on his forehead, no one was allowed to kill him. He lived the rest of his life as an outcast. One day, seven generations later, when the term of his wandering had expired, the blind Lemech killed him with an arrow shot, mistaking him for an animal in the woods.

Chapter Four

Harry’s first reincarnation was in the days of Noah, ten generations later. Of course, his name wasn’t Harry back then. It was something like Arphaxad. To tell you the truth, I forget. After all, it was 5,000 years ago.

Ever since Adam's colossal no-no, succeeding generations suffered a steady decline. In each generation, there were always one or two righteous men, but it wasn't enough to stem the tide. Like animals, humankind tends to follow the herd. Without a strong leader to keep people in line, it's pretty much chaos, with everyone doing just what he pleases.

The years leading up to Noah were like the Wild West. There wasn't any law, and even if there had been, there was no one to enforce it. The situation was so out of hand, even angels couldn't keep out of trouble. Like the Bible recounts, "And it came to pass that when mankind began to increase upon the Earth, and daughters were born to them, the angels saw that the daughters of man were of goodly appearance, and they took wives from whomever they chose."

You see, I'm not the world's first fallen angel. Now I don't mean to justify the behavior of my colleagues, but if you saw the beauty of the women at that time, and how they pranced around the way they did, you'd have to be a top-flight angel not to have fallen. The main culprits in the embarrassing affair were two acquaintances of mine, Uzza and Azael. One day, they overheard God lamenting that He had created mankind, since they were polluting the earth with their sins.

"What is man that You are mindful of him, the descendants of Adam that You think on them?" the angels asked Him. "It's a waste of Your time to bother with them."

God told them that if they lived down on Earth with mankind, and beheld the beauty of the women, the evil inclination would enter them too, and cause them to go astray along with everyone else.

In their arrogance, they answered, “We will descend to earth and not sin.”

So God let them descend. When they saw the beauty of the women, they requested to return to Heaven immediately.

“This trial is too much for us!” they pleaded.

But God answered, “You have already defiled yourselves with your arrogance, and you shall never again become pure.”

The rest is history. Uzza and Azael went a whoring, stealing other men’s wives, and raping whoever caught their fancy.

Now do you understand why I am writing this book? Nearly five-thousand years later, the same thing happened to me. Maybe by warning others of the dangers, I can obtain atonement and have my proverbial wings restored so I can get out of this hell.

Back to our story. Once the angels joined the orgy on Earth, there was nothing to keep mankind in check. In addition to all kinds of incest, there was rampant robbery, violence, and bloodshed. Finally, God had enough. As it says in the Bible:

“And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the Earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord repented that He had

made man on the Earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. And the Lord said: 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the Earth; both man, and beast, and creeping things, and fowl of the air; for I have reconsidered My having made them.'"

God decided that the only person worth saving was Noah. Like it says, "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation, Noah walked with God." Noah didn't steal, he didn't kill anyone, and most importantly, he didn't fool around with other men's wives. I say most importantly because even though there was violence and all kinds of corruption, according to those in the know, the thing that finally tilted the scale was the widespread adultery and sexual sin. I don't want to go into details, but men would do whatever they pleased whenever the urge hit them, and the corruption spread until even animals mated with whatever species that caught their fancy.

So God told Noah to construct a huge ark and to round up pairs of all the different animals, because He was going to wipe out the world with a flood. Immediately, Noah set to work, cutting down trees for lumber, smoothing the wood, sizing the planks, and the like. Given the size of the ship, it was a humungous project for a single worker. But that was a part of God's plan. He wanted the construction to take a long time so that people would have a chance to repent. All during the 120 years that it took Noah to build the craft, people would pass by and ask him what he was doing?

Back in those days, Harry made his living by selling fur coats. He picked up the trade because, ever since he was a youth, he loved to go hunting. In those days, before the Flood, people had a tradition, handed down from Adam, not to eat meat. Harry went hunting simply for the excitement of the chase and for the passion of the kill. He loved to hear the blade of his javelin ripping through flesh, and enjoyed seeing blood spurt out from a wound like a fountain. His eyes lit up watching a creature's last spasms before it breathed its last breath. He felt the same sense of excitement and conquest when he conquered women. All in all, he was a happy man.

Besides being a robust, athletic fellow, Harry had a keen mind. He figured that in addition to hunting down animals, he could skin them and make coats out of their fur. He offered a basic line of togas for men, and a more elegant design for women. Whenever a beautiful woman walked into his boutique, he would promise to give her a fur coat for free in exchange for her pleasures in the back room of the shop. Other times, he conned them with a phony promise, later saying he was out of stock when they demanded their half of the barter.

When he heard that Noah was building an ark, he made the trip on foot to see it for himself.

"Hey, Noah, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm building an ark," Noah replied, setting down his hammer for a rest.

"Why are you doing that?" Harry asked curiously.

“God is sick and tired of all the debauchery on Earth, so He is going to destroy the world with a flood.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” Harry laughed. “That’s a good joke!”

“I’m not kidding,” Noah assured him. “If you’re smart, you’ll change your ways now. There’s still plenty of room on the ark.”

“You’re crazy, Noah,” Harry answered.

“I’m warning you, Harry. Give up your erring ways.”

“You’re wasting your time, Noah,” Harry replied like everyone else. “God won’t ever destroy the world after He went to so much trouble to create it. Besides, didn’t God command Adam to be fruitful and multiply?”

“With his own wife - not with someone else’s.”

Like everyone else in his era, Harry didn’t pay heed to the warning. When heavy rains started to fall, and raging hot floodwaters burst upon the Earth from underground springs, Harry ran as fast as he could back to Noah. By the time he reached the prophet’s ranch, the hatch of the ark was sealed.

“Open up! Open up!” Harry screamed out. “I’m ready to come aboard!”

Like an angry tsunami, the waves of the flood surged over the earth, lifting Harry high into the air.

“I’ll give up my adultery, I promise!” he yelled.

But it was too late for Harry, and for the rest of mankind. The well-constructed vessel bobbed like a fisherman's cork in the water and floated out to sea. For forty days and forty nights, the revenging deluge flooded the earth, wiping out Harry and all of the recalcitrant mortals who had refused to listen.

Chapter Five

So God had to start out all over again. Harry's soul popped up a third time not long after the Flood in the body of Nimrod. Like the previous Harry, Nimrod was a fierce hunter, only ten times as strong. He was a powerful savage of a man, who scared people with his cruelty and prowess, and put them under his sway by sheer force. He was the first mighty man in the world, seizing power, and declaring that he was a god. Rebelling against his Creator, he demanded that everyone worship idols. Of course, this didn't win God's favor, but the Almighty, in His loving-kindness and patience, let Nimrod continue with his plan of world dominion. At least he was contributing to civilization by building cities. Whatever place he conquered, from Babylonia to Assyria, he built cities and great fortresses to glorify his name.

Whereas Harry in his previous reincarnation was a hunter of animals and women, Nimrod was a hunter of men, capturing them with his words, his wits, and his power, persuading them to join him in his rebellion against God. He handed out jobs and providing for people's needs until he was ready to exploit them.

He supplied people with meat and encouraged them to eat, now that meat was allowed. Knowing no fear, he slaughtered the terrifying carnivores that roamed the land, winning people's gratitude and allegiance. Keenly aware of mankind's fears and weaknesses, he propagated the myth that they could trust in him, thereby entrapping them, like the skillful hunter he was.

Of course, he didn't declare himself omnipotent all at once. At first, he hunted down animals, and with great outward piety, offered them upon altars to God, convincing the masses to follow him. Along with his public displays of saintliness, he adorned himself with the enchanted garments of Adam, which had been handed down to Nimrod's father, Cush, the son of Ham, the son of Noah. These unique clothes, embroidered with pictures of animals and birds, gave him a supernatural dominion over the beasts of the earth, which people attributed to his godliness. Men gladly surrendered their wives to him, believing they were pleasing a god. In this manner, it wasn't long before he proclaimed his deity and enlisted herd-like masses in his war against God. Making people dependent on his power, he convinced them that their security and fortunes rested with their allegiance to his empire, and not upon their allegiance to God.

I, for one, couldn't stand him. Neither could my angel friends. But until God gave us an order, we couldn't do anything to prevent Nimrod from growing in power and fame.

Then, against the will of the Creator, who desired that mankind spread out and populate the far reaches of the Earth, Nimrod, or Harry, gathered all of the peoples together, in the land of Shinar, in the region of Babylonia, and began to build a great tower, uniting mankind in a war against God.

Now you might rightly wonder, what was going on in Harry's soul to make him act in such a crazy fashion. I mean, did he really think he could win a war against his Maker? Especially since he had heard from his both his father and grandfather about the devastation of the Flood. But like we said in the beginning, every man has a little Satan inside him. If you don't keep the beast in check every minute, he'll get the better of you, and you'll end up serving him, instead of the other way around.

Now remember, Satan is an angel too. In doing his best to lead people astray, he's only acting on orders. Which brings us to the million-dollar question. Why would God create such a powerful, evil force which was bent, come hell and high water, on sabotaging God's very own plans to make the world a good and happy place? The reason is - to make the test more challenging, and to give man a chance to receive abundant reward for overcoming his baser passions.

Maybe I should have mentioned it before, but on that bright sunny day when Noah emerged from the ark, God gave him seven commandments that he and all of his descendents would have to obey from that time forth. What are they?

Not to engage in idolatry.

Not to murder.

Not to steal.

Not to engage in sexual immorality.

Not to blasphemy the Name of God.

Not to eat the flesh of a living animal.

To set up a court system to enforce these very basic laws.

A few of these things really bothered Nimrod. He was ready to refrain from eating the animals he killed before roasting them on the grill. But not to murder, and not to steal? Those were going to be tough rules to follow. And not to rape women was out of the question! Who could agree to that? So Nimrod declared war against God and His commandments, and nearly everyone else was glad to join him.

In the spirit of “all for one and one for all,” they set out to build their tower up to the sky, to make a name for themselves and wage war against their Creator. Sparing no pains, nor money, nor efforts, they labored around the clock, forging bricks in great kilns and cementing them with mortar. Standing on platforms of ladders and circular stairways, Nimrod’s forces handed the bricks one to another, in a common language and a common goal, higher and higher, as the tower rose up over the city of Babel. The edifice was so tall, it took a year to climb to

the summit. If a worker fell to his death, no one paid any attention; but if a brick fell down, the workers wept because it would take a year to replace it.

Harry drove them on, mounting the tower himself to shoot arrows into the heavens. When the arrows fell back down toward earth, God told us angels to splatter them with blood, to fortify the people in their delusion that they were more powerful than God.

“We are winning!” they shouted, seeing the bloodstained arrows. “We have slain the forces in Heaven!”

Just sitting around without doing anything was making me nervous. So I put in an emergency request to take action before Harry and his hoodlums could corrupt all of mankind by establishing a tower of idol worship so tall that it would stand forever.

In His great humility, the Almighty summoned all of His angels together, for God doesn't take action before consulting with His Heavenly Court.

“Behold,” the Master of the Universe declared. “They are a united people with one language for all, and this rebellion is their goal. Should not everything they propose to accomplish be withheld from them?”

I agreed. So did everyone else. If mankind succeeded in this, they would think they could get away with anything.

“Come, let us descend and confuse their language,” the Lord Almighty proclaimed. “so they will not be able to understand one another.”

And so it was. Given the green light, we sped into action. Before anyone on Earth knew what had happened, no one understood what the next guy was saying. One builder would ask for a brick, and the other builder would hand him some lime. In a rage, the first builder would hurl a brick at his partner and shatter his skull. Their frustration was so great, everyone drew out his dagger and began to fight with his friend. It didn’t take long before the tower, and everyone on it, toppled in a great crash and cloud of dust to the ground.

“And God dispersed them from there over the face of the whole Earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it is called Babel, because it was there that God confused the languages of the whole Earth, and from there God scattered them all over the globe.”

Thus ends the early chapters of “The History of the World According to Harry.”

Chapter Six

Harry didn’t believe me when I told him.

“I was Nimrod?” he asked in astonishment.

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

“And Cain?”

“The one and only.”

“You’ve got to be joking,” he said.

“Angels don’t joke,” I informed him.

We were sitting in the large and elegant living room of his Upper East Side penthouse in Manhattan. It was an expensively decorated pad, with big, white modular sofas, a large oriental carpet, marble floor tiles, a U-shaped glass coffee table, an impressive glass bookcase, and an assortment of voodoo masks, shrunken heads, and idols which he had collected from all over the world, including statues of monkey gods and snake goddesses from India, a fat fertility figurine from Peru, a life-size, jolly-looking Buddha, a crucifix of Christ nailed to a wall, a stuffed alligator lying on the floor, and all kinds of hashish pipes, incense burners, beads, and magical charms. There was also a large mahogany globe of the world, the kind you would have expected to find in Jules Verne’s study, enough plants and ferns to fill a jungle, a floor-to-ceiling bird cage filled colorful canaries, and a large aquarium housing a coiled cobra whose poison sacs had been removed, Harry later assured me. All in all, his apartment gave me the creeps.

I had arrived a half hour earlier. When no one answered the doorbell and my repeated ringing, I “transmorphed” my way into the apartment.

“Harry,” I called. “Are you home?”

I heard voices coming from the bedroom and some nervous commotion, occasioned no doubt by my unexpected visit.

Wearing a towel around his waist, and clutching a revolver, Harry appeared in the doorway of the bedroom.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked in an angry, belligerent tone.

He was a handsome looking man, around fifty-years old, with a distinguished streak of gray in his hair that looked a little like the tiara of a Roman czar. His torso was exercised and trim.

“An angel,” I answered.

“An angel, my ass!” he barked. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“I let myself in.”

“The door was locked,” he retorted, leveling the handgun in my direction. “You’re a burglar.”

“No, no, you’re quite mistaken,” I answered.

Of course, I couldn’t blame him for not believing me. After all, I was dressed up in a suit and tie, and not in my usual celestial splendor.

Behind him, an “apple” appeared, draped in a bathrobe. I’ll call her an apple because I want to keep this book as clean as I can. That means you won’t find any of the suggestive descriptions and erotic details that you normally find in cheap bestsellers. Angels aren’t allowed to titillate. Anyway, embarrassed by the apple’s appearance, I averted my gaze. Angels aren’t supposed

to look at apples. Too many of us have gotten into trouble that way.

“Who is it?” she asked in a cacophonous tone. While I wasn’t an expert on the accents of Americans, she didn’t seem to be a university graduate.

“An intruder,” Harry said.

“Well, get rid of the creep,” the apple told him, before she retreated back into the bedroom.

“I’m going to phone the police,” Harry threatened.

“Then I’ll have to tell her husband where I found her,” I replied.

“Maybe she’s not married,” he said.

“She’s married to a famous basketball player, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Are you some kind of blackmailer?” he asked.

“I told you. I’m an angel.”

“Then it won’t faze you if I put a bullet through your head.”

“Are you really sure you want a visit from the police? Isn’t the pungent odor I smell hashish?”

“It’s incense.”

“I suppose that’s also a stash of incense in the red shoebox in your wife’s closet? And the white powder in the corked jar inside your kitchen cabinet is really sugar?”

“How do you know so much?” he wondered aloud.

“I told you - I’m an angel.”

Harry lowered the revolver. “What do you want?” he asked.

“To talk to you,” I told him.

“How did you get past the doorman?” he wanted to know.

I don’t like to do tricks. We are not really supposed to do them. But sometimes angels have no choice. Usually, we need God’s permission before we can resort to supernatural feats. But occasionally, depending on the circumstances, we can act on our own, if it’s an integral part of our assignment.

So, to answer Harry’s question, I vanished. Poof! I disappeared. Pointing his gun in different directions, the startled Harry looked around this way and that, but I was gone. Then, without the wave of a wand, I reappeared, this time sitting on the couch.

“I hope you don’t mind if I sit down,” I said. “I’ve come a long way.”

The truth is that I hadn’t wanted to come down to Earth at all. I’d been there before. Several times. It wasn’t a novelty for me anymore. Plus, it’s a dangerous place to be for angels. Especially when you’re taking on a case like Harry’s. I mean, I knew that the guy didn’t have wings. In fact, I begged God to send someone else.

“It’s easy to be an angel in Heaven,” God said. “The real test is on Earth.”

“Why try to save such a rotten soul?” I asked.

“It isn’t a rotten soul,” He explained. “It’s a very powerful soul. Only its evil inclination is very strong also. Up till now, He’s always let the evil prompter win out. But if Harry were to fight it, and turn the evil to good, he could do great and wonderful things. When a good person does good, that adds goodness to the world. But when a wicked person gives up his wrongdoing, and re-channels his strengths into doing benevolent deeds, that causes an even greater illumination, lighting up the world’s darkness more than anything else.”

Given Harry’s history, I had my doubts that my mission had a chance to succeed. Unless God performed some kind of miracle to make the old, recycled Harry discover the light, I couldn’t see it happening. But a job’s a job, and with a Boss like mine, I couldn’t say no.

Seeing me reappear on the sofa, Harry seemed truly bewildered. Ordering the apple to get dressed and get lost, he went into the bedroom to put on some clothes. When the apple walked out the door, she gave me a surprised second look, like a double take. I glanced in a mirror. Sure enough, I was still shining with my heavenly glow. Like usual, it took a few hours on Earth before it faded.

“Can you open a window?” I asked Harry when he returned to the room. “I’m not used to the smell of incense.”

“I’m surprised,” Harry replied. “I love incense. It gives me a mystical lift.”

In a graceful yoga-like motion that he had obviously practiced, he unlocked his legs from their lotus position and rose from the sofa. He had changed into a long, flowing white caftan, as if he were some kind of holy man from India.

“How do I know that you are really an angel?” he asked, sliding the terrace door open. “Sorcerers can make themselves disappear too.”

Outside on the patio there was a high-powered telescope that pointed toward the high-rise across the way. Near the sliding glass door, with its view overlooking Central Park, was a large desk cluttered with mail, piles of his bestselling books, and a laptop computer.

“Do you want another sign?” I asked him.

“Why not?” he answered.

“What do you like to drink?” I asked.

“Off the record?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant.

“In my latest book, I recommend only natural juices and water, but, just between you and me, I still prefer scotch.”

“Scotch it is,” I said.

I did it with a little “PING!” sound effect to heighten the trick. Suddenly, a cocktail glass appeared on the desk. Then, miraculously, it filled up with ice cubes and two shots of scotch.

Harry tasted it to make sure.

“That’s a pretty good trick,” he said, with a nod of his head.

“I aged it a little.”

“How did you do it?”

“Trade secret,” I answered. “Maybe you would like some pretzels and peanuts to go with it?”

Suddenly, PING! PING! from out of nowhere, two small bowls of pretzels and peanuts appeared on the desk.

Harry downed another slug of the fortifying drink. “It’s a clever act,” he acknowledged with an approving nod of his head. “But it doesn’t prove a thing. Magicians versed in the occult arts can do stuff like that too.”

“Maybe you would like me to show you a few more of your past reincarnations?” I ventured to ask.

“Show me?”

“That’s right. When a person dies, and his soul leaves his body, he is brought up to the Heavenly Court to be judged for his good deeds and for his bad. In a split second of time, he is shown a movie of all the time he spent on earth, second by second, day by day, everything he did, and spoke, and thought, it’s all revealed before him and before the Heavenly Tribunal. ”

“You can show it to me now?” he asked.

“I’ve received permission.”

“Permission from whom?”

“From God.”

“Which one?” he asked, waving a hand around the room at his collection of statues. “There are so many. Every culture and religion has its own.”

“Many people have deities that they believe in, but they aren’t real. They’re merely the inventions of man.”

Harry opened a window of the aviary, trapped a small canary in his hands and, with a glow in his eyes, dropped it into the tank with the snake. At first, the hooded reptile didn’t move as the terrified bird flew around, smashing into the glass walls, trying to escape. Suddenly, faster than the eye could record, the cobra lunged forward and devoured its prey in a gulp.

“You don’t call that snake Yasser by any chance, do you?” I asked.

“Why should I?”

“That’s who it is – a reincarnation of Yasser Arafat.”

“That’s Yasser Arafat? My snake?” he asked in wonder.

I nodded.

Once again, the cobra spread out its menacing hood, as if it knew we were talking about him.

“A lot of people considered him a freedom fighter.”

“He murdered hundreds of innocent people – including women and children.”

Harry leaned back on the sofa, as if to cushion the weighty revelation.

“What about the canaries?” he asked.

“They are all reincarnations too,” I informed him.

“What did they do to end up being food for my snake?”

“Some of them poisoned people. Others fed people lies. Everyone with his own sin and necessary rectification.”

“Was I ever reincarnated as an animal?” he asked.

Before answering him, I took a small notebook out from my jacket pocket and flipped through the pages, just to be sure.

“For gazing too much at women, you came back for seven years as an owl, having to rotate your head back and forth, back and forth. Then, when you continued chasing after women in your next human appearance, you were reincarnated as a shark that never sleeps. Another time, for the same uncorrected flaw, you were transformed into a fly that hung around on brothel walls until you were swatted to death with a bra.”

“Buddhists believe in reincarnation too,” he said, undaunted. “I don’t mean to offend you, but I once studied a great deal about comparative religions, and it’s all a lot of bunk. To me, God is nature.”

“What people call nature, and the phenomena they think to be natural, are really God in disguise. He orchestrates everything. He is the one and only Creator, Master of the Universe, and King, and He has sent me down to Earth to give you one last chance.”

“Last chance? You mean, I’ve done something wrong this time around too?”

Our conversation was interrupted by a phone call.

“Oh shit!” Harry exclaimed. “I nearly forgot!”

Quickly, he rushed back to the bedroom and ran out clutching a long white turban which he wrapped hurriedly around his head.

“I’m booked on ‘Manhattan Live’ tonight, and I’m supposed to be there in twenty minutes,” he explained, facing a mirror as he adjusted the knot in the turban. “It’s been the top-rated talk show, coast-to-coast, for the last five years, and tonight’s appearance could mean selling another 50,000 books in one shot.”

Looking around the floor of the living room, he spotted his sandals by his desk and hurried to put them on. Then he shook out a couple of pills from a vial and gulped them down with the rest of the scotch.

“Come to the studio with me,” he said. “When we get back, you can show me whatever you want. But I want you to know - I don’t frighten easily. You can believe whatever you want to believe, but that doesn’t mean I have to agree. I’ve met all

kinds of characters claiming to be angels. They're all a lot of fakes. Me too. That's right. Don't think I don't know it. As Shakespeare said, 'All of life is a stage, and all the people are but players.' Life's all a big con game, that's all, dog eat dog, the survival of the fittest."

We rode to the TV studio in a limousine that was waiting outside Harry's luxury apartment building. As we were rushed into the make-up room, Harry told the show's producer that I was an angel and that it was worthwhile to put me on the show too.

"What kind of angel?" he asked.

"A real angel," Harry told him.

"What the hell's a real angel?" the pressured producer inquired.

"An angel from Heaven," Harry said.

"What can he do?" the seasoned showman asked.

"All kind of tricks," Harry answered.

"Two minutes!" someone called out.

I closed my eyes as a scantily dressed apple bent over me and powered my forehead and cheeks. Temporarily blinded, I let Harry drag me out to the set, as a five-man band welcomed us with a lively tune. Barry Barnett, the famous host of the show, stood up to shake our hands and welcome us to the program. He was a witty and amiable personality who could turn

anything into a joke. I should have known better and stayed in the apartment until Harry returned. But I guess I was tempted. Even angels like a little celebrity now and then.

The grinning host introduced Harry as America's # 1 bestselling guru, who had brought health and happiness to millions all over the world. Reading from a note that the producer had passed him, he introduced me as Harry's angel friend. That brought us a lot of applause. With the large spotlights shining our way, it was hard to make out the size of the audience, but there must have been at least five-hundred people out there in the glare.

Harry started out talking about the journey to India which had inspired his new bestseller, "The Guru in You." Studying with a swami in a Himalaya forest, he had learned the ancient wisdom of the Hindu gods and their teachings on karma. Shedding all of his material comforts and desires during his six-month stay at the ashram, he had undergone a profound spiritual epiphany, he declared.

"What's an epiphany?" the apple who was sitting next to him asked. She was a new country and western singer, not very modestly dressed. The evening's first guest, she had sung a few songs from her just-released disc, and now she was sitting out the rest of the show, moving this way and that, trying to look as delicious as a Mackintosh apple can be. I looked away into the spotlights which were a lot less blinding.

"An epiphany is a spiritual revelation," Harry told her.

“It’s sounds wonderful,” the apple exclaimed. “Your story gives me the goose bumps.”

“I wish I gave you the goose bumps,” Barry Barnett quipped, able to make a laugh out of anything.

“I discovered that people are unhappy in life because they simply lack love,” Harry related. “A lack of love can even bring about sickness and death. What’s the cure? The very opposite. A surplus of love. Giving others all the love that you can. But to do that, you have to first love yourself. That’s what my new book teaches in simple lessons that everyone can master.”

“It sounds groovy,” the apple commented.

“If you like, I’m ready to try out a few of Harry’s lessons with you after the show,” the master of ceremonies told the Machintosh with his famous, winning smile.

After a little pretend game of tug of war, he got the humble Harry to agree to demonstrate some yoga techniques on the stage. After stripping down to a loin cloth, Harry twisted himself into an inverted lotus and then into a bridge.

“Pretty good,” Barry Barnett said, clapping his hands. As if on cue, the audience applauded Harry’s yoga acrobatics.

“How about you giving it a try?” he asked the apple with a gleam in his eyes.

“Oh no,” she giggled. “I could never do that on TV.”

Then a board with nails was dragged onto stage. “Let’s see if you can handle the hard stuff,” the talk-show host said. Kicking off a shoe, he set a foot on the nails, let out a theatrical “Ouch!” and hopped around in pseudo pain to show the audience that the bed of nails was real. Of course, it had all been rehearsed. But in the glare of the stage lights, I couldn’t tell if they were really nails, or just fake rubber.

“Don’t do it!” the apple cried out in alarm.

Numbed by the super strong painkillers he had swallowed at home, Harry squatted over the board and slowly sat down. As the orchestra played a long drawn-out chord of suspense, the half-naked author lay back on the nails until his whole body was supine on his back.

“Now that’s the real thing!” Barry Barnett called out, clapping his hands once again.

The audience broke out in thunderous applause. Apple clapped her hands excitedly. Stagehands hurried out, lifted the board with Harry, and carried him offstage. Sitting back down at his desk, the host held up a copy of Harry’s new book, “The Guru in You,” and urged everyone to go out and buy it.

“Wow,” he said. “That was really something!” Then, turning to me, he asked, “What can you do?”

I was caught off guard. All of the eyes in the theater stared my way.

“I’m an angel,” I stumbled.

For some reason, everyone laughed.

“I’m an angel too,” the apple said.

That brought another chorus of laughter.

“Tell us why you’ve come down to Earth,” the host said. “Have you written a book?”

“No,” I answered.

“Then why?”

I couldn’t concentrate. I was careful not to look at the apple, who was sitting next to me now that Harry was gone, but her swinging leg kept getting into my line of vision. It got me all confused.

“To wake the world up to God,” I stuttered.

“To wake the world up to God!” the host repeated with a guffaw. “That’s hilarious!”

That brought a huge laugh from the audience.

“To wake the world up to God!” Barnett shouted again. He stood up, held his stomach and bent over laughing. “That’s the funniest thing I ever heard in my life!”

Encouraged by his mirth, the apple giggled along with him. The musicians in the band started to laugh too. Roars of hysterical laughter broke out in the audience. The cameramen rolled their cameras forward for close-ups.

“Can you prove you’re an angel?” Barnett asked with a challenging chuckle.

Usually, like I said, we don’t do tricks when we’re on an assignment. But the scoffing had gotten out of hand. So to teach him a lesson, I gave him the ears of a donkey. They sprouted out of his head like flowers. Then I gave him the snout of a donkey and long wide teeth. The joker was stunned, probably speechless for the first time in his TV career. The drummer was laughing so hard, he fell out of his seat. The audience screamed out with folly. Apple stood up and backed away from the stage, not knowing whether it was a gag or real. Then I gave the startled host a coat of fur on his hands and a tail. Showman till the end, he pranced around the stage like a donkey, then faced straight into camera, on coast-to-coast TV, and said, “Don’t go away. We’ll be back after a short break for commercials.”

Then, like a satyr, half man and half beast, he hopped off backstage.

“Get this off of me!” he snorted angrily. “Make it go away!”

I tried, but it didn’t work. The apple’s swinging legs had mixed my mind up completely. I couldn’t think straight. Angels are sensitive creatures, as delicate and high-strung as harps. After spending most of my five-thousand years in Heaven, I wasn’t prepared for a surprised guest appearance on “Manhattan Live.”

“Now!” the comedian shouted. “Get this shit off of me now!”

I tried, but I couldn't do it. I simply forgot the code.

"One minute to air time," a voice called out.

"Reverse it! Take it away! Reverse what you've done!" the show's unnerved host demanded.

"I think you should leave it," the producer said to his star performer. "It's a riot. They love it out there."

I started to head for the exit.

"Grab him!" someone yelled.

Stagehands rushed forward, but I put up an invisible shield so no one could touch me. Normally, when we're sent on a mission, we're allowed to use a few special effects, and I had already used up five or six. I knew the allotment wasn't unlimited, and who could tell when I would need to resort to a little help from Heaven again? So instead of "warping" through space back to Harry's apartment, I took a taxi.

Harry was already there, spread out on his stomach on his huge circular bed. His back was covered with bruises. Even though the heads of the nails had been cut off and covered with transparent glue, there were little holes all over his skin.

"Why did you do a stunt like that?" I asked.

"My agent said it would double book sales."

"It must have hurt like hell."

“Not when I did it. The painkillers I took before the show numbed me out completely. But now it’s killing me. There’s some massage oil on the dresser. Rub some of it on me, will you?”

That was the least thing an angel could do. I scooped up a few finger swabs of glop from one of the vials on the dresser. When I spread it over Harry’s back, he let out a scream. Leaping up from the bed, he hopped around in his loincloth.

“That’s not massage oil!” he shouted. “That’s hot Chinese balm!”

Served him right, I thought. Quickly he ran into the bathroom and jumped in the shower. Then, screaming, he ran right out and raced out of the bedroom. “Water makes it worse!” he cried. Feeling sorry for him, I did him a favor, and made the pain go away. But I was using up my miracles.

With a breath of relief, he collapsed into the chair by his desk.

“Feel better?” I asked.

“Did you make it stop with one of your tricks?” he asked.

“I had compassion on you.”

The telephone rang. It was his answering service. They screened all of his calls, and only let the most important ones through - otherwise, with fans phoning him from all over the world, he wouldn’t have time for anything else, he told me.

The answering service had received a hysterical call from the host of “Manhattan Live.” He wanted to know where he could locate the angel? Barry Barnett was frantic. He had locked himself in his dressing room and wouldn’t come out. Harry had a good laugh when I related what had happened. I assured him that the donkey ears and tail would fade away by the morning. Now that my mind had calmed down, I was able to remember the code and reverse the spell.

“You know, with your powers, we could make a lot of money together,” Harry commented.

“That’s not why I came here,” I told him.

“I have to go on a book-signing tour in California next week. Why don’t we team up together?”

“I don’t think you realize the seriousness of my mission,” I said.

“Come with me and we’ll split the profits fifty-fifty.”

“I haven’t come here to do business,” I assured him.

“Look, we’ll talk about things on the road. I’m sure we can work out a deal.”

Again the phone rang. In the last half hour, the phone answering service had been inundated with calls for Harry’s angel friend, including people with all kinds of problems, five other TV shows, a movie producer, a reporter for “People” Magazine, the director of New York’s top advertising firm, the world sales manager of Chanel perfumes, and the coach of the New York Knicks.

“I don’t know how to play basketball,” I said, picking up one of the books on his desk, entitled, “How to Voodoo Friends and Influence People.”

“That was my previous bestseller,” Harry informed me. “Over ten million copies in paperback. I did a little research on the subject, went to Haiti to interview a few witchdoctors, and put together a layman’s guide to voodoo. It sold like hotcakes right from the start. For two years, I traveled around the world, giving lectures and seminars on voodoo, and how simple voodoo techniques can improve people’s lives. For each lecture, I got \$50,000 a pop. For a day-long seminar, \$150,000. Then I hooked up with an upstart businessman, built a factory in Haiti with dirt-cheap labor, and we worked around the clock to manufacture a line of voodoo dolls, voodoo masks, voodoo perfume and cologne, voodoo sweatshirts, and voodoo school bags. All together, our voodoo products have brought in over 150 million dollars in revenue. When I got burnt out with the voodoo bit, I decided to write my new book.”

“How long were you in India?” I asked.

“Two days,” Harry answered.

“They said six months on the show tonight.”

“Yeah, that’s what it says on the book jacket. But on my first day in Calcutta, I pigged out on Indian food and had a deadly bout of diarrhea. I thought I was going to die, so I flew to London to recover and never went back.”

“What about learning with the swami in the Himalayas?” I asked.

“I made it all up,” he admitted. “I read some articles on the web about the religions of India and wrote the book in my hotel suite in London.”

“Don’t you feel guilty about deceiving your readers?” I asked.

“Not the least bit,” he retorted. “Why should I? What difference does it make if I was actually there, crapping my brains out with diarrhea, or in an air-conditioned hotel suite in England? The point is that I am giving lost souls a genuine treasure, a way out of their unhappiness and despair. Ask people who have read my books if they have improved their lives or not. They’re happier for having read them, and that’s what counts.”

“But you’re just leading people from one darkness to another,” I argued.

“That’s not what they feel. Let’s face it – in this screwed up world, even with all of its conveniences and easy pleasures, most people are miserable, anxiety-ridden, lonely, confused, and depressed. Everyone feels something is missing from their lives. So if I can fill up their existence with some hope and direction, what’s the matter with that?”

“With voodoo dolls and monkey gods?”

“You have anything better to offer?”

“The truth,” I replied.

“Look, if you really are what you are, and if you know about my previous reincarnations, then you also know that I started out this lifetime as a real gun-ho idealist of a guy. I got top grades in college and grad school, learned everything there was to learn about history, psychology, and comparative religion, and went on to get a doctorate in philosophy. I taught philosophy in a respected university, and yes, busted my share of co-eds, but the pay of a philosophy instructor was lousy, so what do you expect? I published two books, “The Existential Dilemma of Modern Man,” and “Psychology at a Crossroads,” and neither one sold even five-thousand copies. So I got hip to the game. My next book, “Conversations with the Devil,” was based on the philosophy of Nietzsche, dressed up in the language of today. Only this time, I used a gimmick, pretending that the Devil had appeared to me in my dreams, which I recorded the following mornings, proving that God was dead, and that each person must become the god of his own life instead.”

“That’s a big no-no,” I said.

“The book topped the New York Times Bestseller List for over a year.”

“That doesn’t make the transgression any less serious. One of the seven commandments of the sons of Noah is not to blasphemy God.”

“Every religion has commandments, so what? I started a new religion – what’s the matter with that? The point is that I gave my readers hope. I gave them a path out of the guilt trips they

were living, precisely because of all those moldy, cobwebbed religions that suppress man's most basic drives. I offered them a religion without do's and don'ts, where a person was morally free to be his own god, to do his own thing, without hang-ups and guilt feelings, without bad guys and victims, where whatever you feel is the truth for you, and whatever you do is exempt from moral judgment, because in expressing your deepest desires you are bringing to fruition the deepest drives of Creation, advancing the world and bringing it to fulfillment."

"It sounds like the same kind of well-written double talk that led the way to Adolf Hitler."

"It was what millions of people wanted to believe."

I kept silent, hoping he would hear the emptiness of his words.

"Look, I didn't tell anybody to go out and kill, or to exploit anyone else. I just did away with the fairytale of villains and victims. Take the wife of the basketball player who was here when you came. If a married woman goes to bed with you, as long as you don't force her, it's her decision, right? You haven't done anything wrong."

"That's not what God says."

"In Nietzsche's world, God is dead."

"For your information, it's Nietzsche who is dead. God is very much alive. At the end of his life, Nietzsche suffered from syphilis, mental illness, manic-depression, psychosis, dementia, and had two severe strokes which left him unable to walk or

speak. He departed from the world at the age of fifty-six. And Sigmund Freud, who you also quoted in your book, ended up no better. For saying that God was just a fable invented by man to deal with his primitive fears, God had an angel friend of mine teach Freud a lesson by striking him with a very slow and painful cancer of the mouth. After thirty operations, he finally persuaded his doctor to put an end to his misery by administering an overdose of morphine. Subsequently, his body was cremated and his soul was snuffed out of existence with the ashes.”

“God did that to both of them?” Harry inquired, a little more sheepishly.

“To them and to many, many more self-proclaimed prophets who were convinced, just like you, that they had all the answers.”

Chapter Seven

Harry instructed his answering service to tell callers that the whereabouts of the angel was unknown and not to call back. Then he changed into some casual clothes and returned to the living room to watch the movie of his past, which I projected on the large plasma screen on the wall.

The film had all the Technicolor, wide-screen impact of the Bible movies of old. Harry next appeared down on Earth as Bilaam, the sorcerer. To catch up on our Biblical narrative, a

famine in the Land of Israel forced the Jews to descend to Egypt, where they became slaves to the wicked Pharaoh. Then, with miracles and great wonders, God sent Moses to lead the Jews out of bondage. Devastating the empire of Egypt with ten Divine plagues, God drowned Egypt's army in sea, as He brought the Jews through the parted waters to freedom. Fearing that the Jews marching back to Israel would conquer his land on the way, Balak, the King of Moab, sent for the evil sorcerer, Bilaam, to come to his aid. Knowing that his military forces could not overcome the Heaven-helped Jews on the battlefield, he hoped that the magician's famed curses would stop them in their tracks.

"I read about Bilaam when I was doing research on my voodoo book," Harry related.

"Did you know that after polluting himself by performing bestial acts with his donkey, Bilaam would draw down an evil spirit of impurity upon himself and engage in supernatural arts," I asked.

"Can't say that I did," Harry confessed.

"He learned these occult practices in the mountains of the east from the fallen angels, Uzza and Azael. Possessed by evil spirits, Bilaam was a master of all divinations and enchantments, and he could even fly. But God turned his curses against the Children of Israel into blessings, and so the Jewish people remained unscathed by his nefarious machinations and evil eye."

“He does look a little like me,” Harry admitted, staring up at the screen.

“Humiliated by his failure to weaken the Jews, Bilaam returned to his home. But, unwilling to give up so easily, the wicked soothsayer advised Balak to adopt another strategy - to send thousands of immodestly dressed Midianite and Moabite women into the encampment of the Israelites in the wilderness, to lure them into temptation and seduce them into worshipping their idols. Sure enough, when the Jews took the foreign women into their tents, provoking the wrath of Heaven, a plague broke out and twenty-four thousand Jews were slain. Then, in view of all the nation, the head of the tribe of Shimon took a Midianite woman into the Tabernacle of the Lord and brazenly conducted relations with her. Pinchus, grandson of Aaron the High Priest, rose zealously up from the congregation, took a javelin in his hand, and hurried into the holy chamber. Like a skewer of shish kebab, he thrust both of them through with his spear in their loins, and the Divine anger was stayed from the Children of Israel.”

On the screen, the spear pierced through the loins of the fornicators with a loud, Dolby SPLAAAAAAAAAAT!! Harry shivered.

“Hearing that Bilaam had gone to Midian to collect his reward for the twenty-four thousands Jew who had died in the plague, Moses sent Pinchus to assassinate him. Catching site of the zealous Israelite in pursuit, Bilaam used his magical arts to fly off into the air. But Pinchus was ready, armed by Moses with

the holy forehead plate worn by the High Priest, and engraved with the secret Name of God. Using it to fly, Pinchus sped into the air after Bilaam.”

The special effects up on the living-room screen were equal to “Star Wars.” Even better. Instead of mere 3-D animation, the fantastic flying scenes were absolutely real. To enhance the excitement, I caused Harry’s seat to rock back and forth like in a U-Max theater.

CUT TO:

PINCUS

He flies through the sky in a swooping backward circle, grabs a hold of Bilaam, and hurls him back down to the earth.

CUT TO:

BILAAM

He crashes down on the ground in a cloud of dust.

ANOTHER ANGLE

Pincus lands beside Bilaam, raises his laser-like sword, and slices the sorcerer into pieces. WAP! WAP! WAP!

CUT TO:

SNAKES

They spring to life out of the amputated limbs.

“Because Bilaam lured the Jews to engage in sexual sin and squander the holy fluid of life, he was sentenced to spend his afterlife in unending purgatory, immersed in a vat of boiling semen.”

“In a vat of boiling semen?” Harry asked sheepishly. “That was his punishment?”

“Measure for measure, that’s how it works,” I replied.

You would think that Bilaam’s unpleasant fate would have caused Harry to think twice in his next go around on Earth.

But it didn’t.

Chapter Eight

Some people never seem to learn. At least that’s the way it was with Harry. Or with his soul, to be more precise. It was a big soul, that’s for certain. In each of his reincarnations, he could have been a great leader, or a creative artist, a pioneer philosopher, a path-breaking scientist, or a devout theologian, but he chose to be a Don Juan and cold-hearted marauder instead.

It’s true that souls have different tendencies that can influence a person’s character. Some souls may possess more artistic inspiration or religious fervor than others. Some souls may possess more bravery and valor. Others souls may be studious by nature, while others may be lethargic and dull. Nonetheless,

while a person is born into this world with a hereditary blueprint, and with traits that lean this way or that, in the matter of good and evil, free choice is granted. I explained all of these matters to Harry.

For example, a person born with a violent nature can channel his attraction to cruelty by becoming a ruthless highwayman, or by becoming a skillful surgeon, or meat-shop butcher, instead. A person with a powerful dominating personality can end up a hated dictator or a benevolent king. Of course, God knows everything, and everything comes from Him. He knows in advance how people will act, and what they will turn out to be. Difficult though it is for mortals to understand this seeming dichotomy, the omniscience of God doesn't preclude a person's free choice. God doesn't pre-determine whether someone will be good or bad. That's up to each and every soul.

So, in His infinite loving-kindness, after Harry's first few failures on Earth, the Almighty gave him another chance. His next reincarnation, Nebuchadnezzar, the infamous king of Babylon, was a descendant of Nimrod. If you take Harry's first early personae and multiply them together, you get the wicked Nebuchadnezzar. In addition to his renowned Hanging Gardens and architectural splendors, he was one of the cruelest, murderous, sadistic, power-hungry tyrants who ever lived. Every day women were rounded up and brought to his palace for his pleasure, but he preferred sodomizing the kings that he conquered, and the ministers of their courts, to prove his supremacy and dominance. I'm not a psychologist, but maybe

his being so short had something to do with his uncontrollable megalomania.

Having a master's degree in history, Harry was looking forward to see this next installment, even though it was well past midnight.

"Want some popcorn?" he joked before we got underway.

"Cynicism is a vile trait," I told him. "A man steeped in cynicism takes nothing seriously. Everything to him becomes a frivolous joke. It is like the warriors of old who would grease their shields with oil to make enemy arrows slide off. Cynicism is like oil that stops the arrows of truth from penetrating."

"I think I'll pop a bag of popcorn into the micro anyway," he said, standing up, unaffected by all my moralizing.

"Let's hope that the popcorn doesn't get stuck in your throat while you're watching the movie," I said wryly, with a little sense of humor of my own.

"Can I be frank with you?" he asked.

"By all means."

"I want you to know that this is the first night in years that I've spent without a woman."

"I am flattered," I said.

"Isn't it written in the Bible, 'It is not good for a man to be alone?'"

“I don’t think the intention was quite the same. But if I may venture to ask, just like the angels of old asked Abraham, where is your wife?”

“To tell you the truth, I really don’t know. She vacations a lot. Europe, Africa, Tahiti, who knows? Usually she phones from the airport when she gets back to town, so that I can get rid of any visitors I might have before she shows up.”

“Why have you stayed married?”

“Habit, I suppose. She goes her way and I go mine. When I was in graduate school, she supported me financially, and I’ve always felt indebted to her for that.”

“That’s quite noble,” I noted.

“Right it down, please, in your notebook” he said. “It looks like I am going to need all the brownie points I can get.”

Please be patient, dear Reader. We will finish with the Jews in another few chapters. While they will resurface from time to time, as Jews are wont to do, right now, as God’s chosen nation on Earth, they are integral to our story.

Of course, the movie was edited according to my narration. Only the main scenes were shown, and those were presented in the most modest way possible, given the immorality and barbarism of the ancients.

Like Nimrod, his ancestor, Nebuchadnezzar subdued the world of animals just like the world of men. His charger was a lion, on whose neck hung a snake. No one dared laugh in his presence.

Later, when he descended to hell, the other inmates trembled, fearing he would rule over them there as well.

Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in the year 597 before the Common Era, deposed the Jewish King, Jehoikim, dragged his body through the city's streets, and cast him into prison for life. That was the Jewish monarch's reward for voluntarily opening the gates of the city to the Babylonian emperor, who had made a previous peace pact with Israel in order to facilitate his craving to conquer the neighboring Egypt. Once he was inside the palace, he ordered his troops to seize control. Ten years later, he razed the city and destroyed the holy Jerusalem Temple, bringing spiritual darkness to the world. He exiled the city's most prominent citizens, nobles, and scholars, along with a sizable portion of the Jewish population of Judea, to Babylon.

I should add that Nebuchadnezzar had nothing specific against the Jews. He conquered Jerusalem just like he wanted to conquer everywhere else. True, monotheistic Judaism, the holy city of Jerusalem and the magnificent House of the Lord, were all living symbols of God's undivided rule in the world, and Nebuchadnezzar wasn't very keen about that. But he wasn't an anti-Semite per say, in the usual connotation of the term. He was anti-everyone.

With the keen, perceptive intuition of a hunter, Nebuchadnezzar knew that it wasn't his power alone that had toppled the walls of Jerusalem, but rather the sins of the Jews, who had fallen into the prevalent idol worship of the times. Thus, dragging them into captivity, Nebuchadnezzar would not

allow the exiles to rest, fearing that they would take the opportunity to pray for salvation, and that God would rescue them as soon as they repented. With paranoia familiar to many despots, Nebuchadnezzar did not feel safe until the exiles reached the Euphrates, one of the borders of Babylon. Then he made a grandiose feast on board his ship, while the humiliated princes of Judea lay chained and disgraced by the river. When the singers from the Jerusalem Temple refused to perform at his celebration, he slaughtered them before his guests, as a form of lively entertainment.

Thus the Psalmist mourns:

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, indeed we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in its midst. For there, they who had carried us away captive asked for a song, and they who plundered us asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its strength. If I do not remember you, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

In order to magnify their suffering, Nebuchadnezzar had Torah scrolls torn and made into sacks, which the Jews had to fill with sand and carry. Even when the downtrodden captives reached Babylonia, they had no rest from the tyrant. When Nebuchadnezzar saw that Babylonia women were attracted to the handsome Israelites, he ordered his troops to slaughter ten

thousand, and afterward stamp on their bodies with their boots to mutilate their corpses. Even the Jews who had fled and found refuge in other lands were tracked down by Nebuchadnezzar's mercenaries and carried off to Babylonia, so that Israel would never again turn into a world power as it had been during the rule of King Solomon.

"I remember reading about some of these things briefly," Harry noted. "But I forget what happened to Nebuchadnezzar in the end."

So, I showed him. His eyes remained glued on his double on the screen. Now, angels aren't the only messengers that the Almighty uses to give sinners a chance to repent and be saved from doom. He uses people too. How? To better govern over his new servants, Nebuchadnezzar had gifted, attractive, and prominent Jews trained to be courtiers and members of his court. One of them, a youth named Daniel, especially stood out for his good looks, wisdom, courage, and leadership abilities. Being a member of Nebuchadnezzar's royal entourage was no simple matter. No youth could be sure that the noted pederast wouldn't turn his perverted glance at him. And there was always the threat of being castrated like the eunuchs who staffed the king's palace. But Daniel was not about to be badgered into a path of trepidation and submission to the Babylonian king, who demanded that the Jews assimilate into Babylon's idolatrous culture. First, Daniel decreed that all of the Jews in Babylon had to continue to eat only kosher food. Then

he continued to pray three times a day, even after the palace court persuaded the king to make praying a capital crime.

When Daniel's judiciousness, and the sagacity of his three Jewish friends, Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah, stood out from all other courtiers, Nebuchadnezzar took them for his personal counselors. He gave them Babylonian names, but they held fast to their Jewish identity. It came to pass (God brought it about) that Nebuchadnezzar began to have agitating dreams that he couldn't remember. Under the threat of death, he demanded that his wise men, astrologers, sorcerers, and necromancers recall his forgotten dreams to him and explain their interpretation.

"There is no one on Earth who can do this!" they replied, quaking in terror. "Only angels can discern the unknown."

Furious by their reaction, the tyrant ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. As the decree was being implemented, Daniel and his friends were sought out for the chopping block. Inquiring into the matter, Daniel approached the chief executioner and requested a brief extension in order to answer the emperor's request.

Now, if you are wondering why I was relating to Harry such a long account, this is where I enter the picture. After Daniel went home and related the story to his companions, they all began to pray to God to have mercy by revealing the secret of the dreams, so that they wouldn't be slain with the others. In accord with their request, God sent me down to Earth while

Daniel was sleeping to tell him the dreams, along with their interpretations. Praising God profusely for bestowing this secret knowledge upon him, Daniel hurried back to the chief executioner and asked him to stop slaying the wise men. Quickly, the Jewish youth was ushered into the king's chamber, where the skeptical monarch asked if he could really recall the dreams and their meanings.

“Indeed, no sage, nor astrologist, nor demonist can know such hidden things,” Daniel replied. “But there is a God in Heaven who reveals secrets, and He has informed King Nebuchadnezzar what will be at the end of days.”

Then, without leaving out any details, Daniel related the dreams and their interpretation, describing how Nebuchadnezzar's empire would crumble and other empires would rise up in its stead, one after the other, until the Kingdom of God was established on earth.

But why am I working so hard to type all of this? It's all been written down already in the Book of Daniel:

“Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face, and prostrated himself before Daniel, and with sacrifices and incense, he wished to exalt him. The king spoke to Daniel, and said: 'Of a truth it is, that your God is the God over gods, and the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing you have been able to reveal this mystery.'”

“Then the king promoted Daniel, and gave him many great gifts, and made him the ruler over the whole lands of Babylonia, and chief officer over all the wise men of Babylon.”

So you see, angels aren't the only means God has of making His glory known in the world. God can do it through his devout ones like Daniel, or through the repentance of the wicked. Unfortunately, with all of Nebuchadnezzar's prostrations and pontifical words, he didn't really catch on to the truth. The megalomaniac was so caught up with himself, it was going to take more than a few dreams to drill the message into his brain.

With your indulgence, I will continue on with the story because I'm one of the stars. Not that the fanfare means anything to me, my being an angel and all, but, like I said, who doesn't like showing off once in a while?

From the interpretation of his dreams, Nebuchadnezzar, or Harry, to remind readers who we are really concerned with, realized that his glorious empire was about to fall off the revolving stage of history. So, he constructed a towering gold idol in the plain of Dura, figuring that if he could force the Jews to worship it, along with everyone else, he could strike a devastating blow to the Kingdom of God and maybe ward off his prophesized downfall. Sending Daniel off overseas on a government mission, he seized the opportunity to invite all the people and governors of the surrounding lands to the dedication ceremony. He wanted Daniel out of the way, fearing that his influence would rally the Jews to boycott the festivities.

When the day arrived, he ordered a herald to proclaim to the vast crowd:

“To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, when you hear the sound of the horn, the whistle, the tambourine, the drum, the cymbals, the flute, and all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar, the king, has erected. And whoever does not fall and prostrate himself before it will be cast instantly into a flaming furnace.”

Immediately at the tumultuous signal, the masses bowed down to the gigantic idol that Nebuchadnezzar had built, except for the representatives of the Jews, Daniel’s fellow court advisors, Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah.

Furious, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the rebels be brought before him. Threatening to hurl them into the raging furnace, he commanded them to bow down to the idol when the music played again, arrogantly scoffing, *“And who is the god that will save you from my hands?”*

Not intimidated by his threats, the three devout Jews declared, *“Behold, we have our God whom we worship. He is able to save us from the flaming furnace, and from your hand, O king, He can rescue us. But if He does not, let it be known to you, that we will not worship your god, and before the golden idol you have set up, we will not prostrate ourselves.”*

More enraged than before, with his face contorted in fury, Harry commanded that the furnace be heated up seven times

more than usual. Then he ordered his strong men to throw the three bound Jews into the flames. The executioners themselves, just by approaching the edge of the furnace, were burnt alive to a crisp. Then the king stood up in bewilderment.

“Didn’t we throw three bound men into the fire?” he asked his ministers.

“This is true, my king,” they answered.

“I see four figures walking unbound in the fire, and there are no wounds on them!” the king exclaimed in wondrous fright. *“And the form of the fourth is that of an angel’s.”*

That was me. God sent me down to Earth to save them.

Talk about a catharsis! King Harry freaked out! *“Blessed be the God of the Jews who sent an angel to save His servants!”* he exclaimed. *“I hereby issue a decree that anyone who will speak amiss about the God of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah will be cut into bits, and his house will be turned into a dunghill!”*

If you ask me, his newfound piety was all a big act. Because of his impulsive nature, one minute Harrychadnezzar could be this way, and the next minute, the exact opposite. In the same breath that he acclaimed the God of the Israelites, he ordered his henchmen to slaughter the 600,000 Jews who had obeyed his command and bowed down to his idol, rather than having trusted in God. True, on Daniel’s advice, to make up for the atrocities he had committed, he started to dispense a lot of charity. The money he used to steal from the poor, he now returned with interest, but his bout of philanthropy didn’t last

long, and soon he returned to being the arrogant Nebuchadnezzar of old.

Then, in fulfillment of another dream, he went mad. Already crazy to begin with, he lost his senses completely. The berserk king was bound up in chains. He refused to eat food and would only munch on grass. Escaping from his lock-up, he fled to the forest where he lived for seven years amongst the wild beasts. His hair and his nails grew as long as an eagle's. People coming upon him, if they escaped his clutches, described him as having the upper half of an ox and the lower half of a lion, which made it easy for him to kill hapless wanderers in the woods. The palace physicians claimed that his insanity resulted from syphilis, but the truth is that while he did have a severe case of syphilis from his endless debaucheries, God sent me to strike him with madness and take away his Divine likeness, which distinguishes mankind from beasts.

As the Bible says regarding the creation of man, *“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him.”* Stripped of his Divine likeness, the animals didn't fear him. Taking him for a female of their species, they would have their way with him, debauching him just as he had raped and humiliated so many victims in his past.

Harry watched the movie in uncharacteristic silence. With eyes widened like moons, he stared at the screen in a combination of excitement and horror. Even the censored version that I was allowed to show him was too much for my celestial

sensitivities, and I averted my gaze during the more bestial episodes.

Humbled beyond recognition, Nebuchadnezzar declared that God was the one and only king. Several years later, after I was sent once again to restore his sanity and wits, he returned to his palace, allowing a tribune of judges to rule in his stead. Nevertheless, to safeguard his throne, he imprisoned his son, Evil-Merodach. When he died a lonely, loveless death, the nobles of the court released his son from prison, but, fearing that his father was invincible, he refused to accept the throne until he personally exhumed the corpse of his father. To show the people of the land that the dreaded tyrant was really dead, and that he had not simply disappeared to the forest like before, Evil-Merodach had his father's body dragged through the streets so that everyone could see it. Stoning and stabbing the dead king with swords to make sure that Nebuchadnezzar never returned, the populace hailed their new ruler. This was the ignominious end of the world's most powerful emperor, a lesson for all of posterity that God was the one and only ruler of the Earth - a lesson which the world would soon forget, once again, as we are about to see.

"I'm going to sleep," Harry said, coldly, and obviously offended, when the movie came to an end.

For the moment, at least, his cynicism and sarcasm were silenced. Without bothering to engage in further small talk, he stood up and walked out of the living room.

“If you plan on staying the rest of the night, you can sleep in the guest room,” he said.

The bedroom door closed, and a lock clicked with a definitive, and not very friendly, goodnight.

Chapter Nine

In the morning, after working out for a half hour on a running machine while watching the TV news, Harry headed off for his office, insisting that I come along. We took a taxi down to Chinatown, where he had purchased an entire floor of an old warehouse building, at what he called a “Chinaman’s price.” I was intrigued as the taxi drove through the busy oriental neighborhood. All you could see were Chinese people and Chinese script on the stores. Harry’s “New Age Enterprises” office was located on the fifth floor, and while the building didn’t look like much on the outside, Harry had obviously put a lot of money into renovating his loft. He had partitioned the space into a reception room, offices, an editing room, film and recording studios, storage area, and packing room. A gift shop sold his books and videos, his personal line of “New Age” clothing and products, including yoga wear, yoga mats and towels, yoga jewelry, Calcutta sandals, and meditation DVD’s. Toward the back of the shop were voodoo kits and dolls, leftovers from his previous bestseller.

The apple at the reception desk wore an Indian sari, like all the apples working there. She had a red dot in the middle of her forehead, even though she didn't look Indian at all. Being an angel, I modestly averted my gaze.

“Good morning, Swarmi Harry,” she greeted her boss.

“Namaste, Rain Flower,” he answered, using a Hindu expression.

The reception room was filled with ferns and palms and cage-free canaries that tweeted happily and flew through the air. Water flowed out of a plastic boulder and cascaded into a pool. The pungent aroma of incense filled the air, just like in Harry's apartment. Only the snake, Yasser, was missing. Mystical chords, blending the sounds of triangles and distant harps, completed the peaceful Nirvana environment.

“Remember, master Swarmi, you're scheduled for “Books and Books” at noon, Fourteenth Street and Fifth Avenue,” a voice called out from one of the side offices. “And we had to close registration for your Santa Barbara Yoga and Massage Weekend due to over-bookings.”

“Don't turn anyone away,” Harry called out. “Put people in tents outside if you have to.”

The male employees were all dressed in yoga pants. Senior personnel wore more formal Hindu tunics or white Nehru suits with high neck collars. In a large exercise room, lined with wall-to-wall mirrors, a karate instructor was teaching self-defense techniques to a class of apples. Harry walked straight into a

dressing room and plopped down in the waiting chair. I stood outside in the corridor while the make-up apple got him ready for a photo shoot. Changing into a tunic and turban, he hurried to the photography studio where a group of scantily-dressed apples were waiting to pose with him while modeling the new line of “New Age” fashions. Once again, I waited in the corridor, staring down at my shoes, until the shoot had ended.

“Hey, Angel, where are you?” Harry called out.

“Here, Harry,” I said from the door.

“Come here. I want you to taste something.”

Stagehands were stretching a blue curtain across one of the walls. A lighting man adjusted the powerful spotlights shining down from the ceiling. While a cameraman set up a video camera on a tripod, a director explained to the crew what he wanted to capture.

Harry was sitting in a director’s chair, getting a last minute powdering. A worker was standing by his side, holding a small pitcher on a tray.

“Drink this,” he said to me, holding out a glass. “It’s a lemon juice that we are going to can and market. All natural. The lemons are imported from India. Unlike all of those sugar-filled, energy drinks, this is designed to make people calm. Just the opposite, get it? I think there’s a huge market out there.”

Trying not to look at the apple as she attended to Harry, I took the glass and sipped on the beverage.

“I’m not a connoisseur of foods,” I told him.

“Just tell me what you think.”

“It tastes bitter.”

“That’s good. I want it to taste bitter. That way people will think it’s for real.”

“We’re ready,” the director said.

He positioned Harry in front of the blue curtain. After the soundman adjusted the wireless microphone under Harry’s lapel, the filming started. Harry read a written lecture off a teleprompter screen so that it looked like he was staring into the camera. The subject of his spiritual sermon was “The River’s Power.” The main idea was that the power of the river comes from its unceasing flow. So too, Harry promised, each and every person can maximize his or her innate powers by opening inner channels and allowing them to flow. This could be achieved through what Harry termed “the river meditation,” which was available on CD or DVD. Sitting on a blue cloth in front of the blue curtain, he twisted into a lotus position and led his viewers through the breathing techniques of the meditation, reminding them to concentrate on the river and its never-ending flow. Later, in the editing room, I watched as the computer editor removed the blue background and isolated Harry, whom he then transported to a shady green glade by a running stream in India. It looked like the old faker was actually there.

Harry worked at a furious pace. During the editing, the “New Age” guru devoured a half-dozen egg rolls, which he dipped in a

dish of monosodium-glutamate-rich sweet and sour sauce, which a little Chinese guy brought up from a restaurant down the street. Harry washed it down with two Chinese beers. Then I sat with him in his office as a young computer wiz showed him renovations on the “New Age” website. An advertising pro was brought into the office. Opening his briefcase, he laid out four brochures-in-progress, each with a different cover, describing the “New Age” membership program, which, for a monthly fee, enabled members to view a daily online lesson. Harry chose the cover which pictured him petting a docile lion. He said most people felt like wimps and dreamed of being Tarzans. If that’s what they wanted, he was happy to sell it to them.

Then we rushed off to his book signing. It was a gigantic, multi-floor bookstore with a coffee shop and lounge in the middle of the ground floor. Two of Harry’s yoga-wear employees were already there, writing personal inscriptions in the books piled high in front of them. A long line of book buyers waited their turn to relay their requests. That way, Harry would only have to sign his name when he met with each customer after he delivered his lecture. Once again, he spoke about the river meditation. Bored, I wandered down a long aisle, past the books on sports, automobiles, and personal beauty, to a large section of bookcases called “Self Help and Spirituality.” There were hundreds and hundreds of hard covers and paperbacks. All of them promised to lead the reader to a happier, healthier, more spiritually enriching life. Judging by the titles, there were a lot of unhappy and unfulfilled people on Earth. Featured on a table were Harry’s three bestsellers.

“It’s the angel!” someone called out. Obviously, he had seen my TV debut on “Midnight Live.” A crowd of people gathered around me, clamoring for my autograph. Harry’s bodyguards had to push them away. When the event was over, Harry’s helpers herded us into the limousine waiting outside.

“Five hundred books in less than two hours,” he reported. “Not bad at all.”

A little way down the street, the limousine stopped alongside the sidewalk. Harry opened the rear door and two young, giggling apples climbed inside. Both of them were holding his book. When they stretched their legs out in the roomy limo, I quickly stared out the window.

“I can’t believe it!” one of them said. “I can’t believe it!”

“This is a friend of mine,” Harry told them. “He’s an angel.”

“I’ll say!” the other one exclaimed.

Maybe my aura was still showing. I nodded my head and kept my gaze glued to the window as the limo sped uptown.

“He’s new to the city,” Harry explained. “And he’s shy.”

“I like shy guys,” one of the groupies said.

“I can’t believe you invited us!” the first one repeated. “I’ve never ridden in a limousine before. And with the world’s most famous, best-selling author. It’s too colossal to believe!”

Harry told them to help themselves to the drinks in the car’s mini-bar as the limousine cruised up Park Avenue. When we

reached Harry's building, I refused to go upstairs with them. He ushered the two giggling apples into the lobby ahead of us.

"I brought one along for you," he insisted.

"I appreciate it, Harry, but that's not why I'm here," I told him. "You have to understand that."

"Don't be such a prude," he answered. "You know what they say – when in New York, do as the New Yorkers do."

"I'll see you later," I said.

Waving, I walked away, determined to get away from there as fast as I could. True, I was an angel, and I had thousands of years of experience and training in combating the Satan, but I knew that if you succumbed even one millimeter, he would cast his net over you and drag you after him for kilometers on end.

So I walked around the city. Eventually, I came to Central Park. Happy to escape the roar of traffic, I wandered along one of the unexpectedly pastoral paths. What genius thought to plan such an expansive park in the middle of such a bustling city, I wondered? Surely an angel had been whisked down to Earth to switch on the light bulb in his mind and give him the idea. Joggers and bicycle riders sped by me. Then, around a secluded bend, I heard a muffled scream and rustling in the woods. Walking closer to get a better look, I saw what looked to be a rape in progress. In the middle of Central Park, in broad daylight, just like in the days of Noah before the Flood.

"Hey!" I yelled out. "Stop what you're doing!"

There was a panicked scuffle in the bushes. A man appeared out of the brush in his underwear, his pants down by his shoes, the gun in his hand pointed my way. Not wanting to take any chances, I froze him on the spot. Talk about being caught with your pants down! He looked like the statue of Hans Christian Anderson at the entrance of the park. His disheveled victim came out of the bushes sobbing. When a policeman showed up, I unfroze the rapist and made myself invisible. Before the pervert could take aim, the cop blew him away. It served the savage beast right.

Gradually, I made my way back to Harry's building. I waited across the street until the apples left. They ran off laughing drunkenly down the block. Just as I was approaching the entrance, Harry appeared dressed in a casual golf jacket and slacks.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "I was beginning to worry. I actually thought of calling the police, but what would I tell them – that an angel friend of mine was missing?"

A sports car made a rumbling noise and screeched out of the building's underground parking lot. It braked to a stop on the sidewalk in front of us and a bellhop got out.

"Climb in," Harry said.

"Where are we off to now?" I asked him.

"To visit my mother," he said.

I had to double myself up to get into the low, two-seater MG. Harry sped off like a seasoned racecar driver. He swerved skillfully in between other cars and always seemed to beat the red lights. Soon, we were speeding along a riverside highway up to Riverdale, where Harry's mother was living in a nursing home. She suffered from Alzheimer's disease, he said, and hadn't spoken a coherent word in two years.

"With my travels, it isn't easy for me to see her all the time," he said, "but when I'm in the city, I try to visit once a week. I'm never sure she's aware that it's me, but I come all the same. At least having dementia spared her the pain of knowing about my father's passing away, just over a year ago."

I suppose it was a decent place as far as nursing homes go. The lobby was clean, the guard at the door was pleasant, and there wasn't any kind of hospital smell. But the floor where Harry's mother lived, along with other elderly residents, was a real shocker to me. I don't know if you would call them patients or inmates. They all suffered from one kind of dementia or another, and though they were all neatly dressed and well cared for, their catatonic features and faraway expressions pulled at my heart, as if they were all one, short breath away from Heaven. A large TV set was turned on, but no one paid attention. Harry said that they could linger on that way for years.

Maybe the visit to Harry's mother in the nursing home was God's way of showing me that even the most rotten of souls has some good in it. Honoring one's parents was one of the Ten

Commandments. It explained to me why Harry was being given a special Divine warning, and a one-month dispensation to put his life in order, instead of being terminated immediately, as strict justice demanded, considering his errant ways. In any case, I was touched – touched by a human. I can't speak for all of my celestial compatriots, but I had a sentimental streak that sometimes interfered with my work. I had been sent down to Earth to help Harry, not his mother, but what could I do? Let her continue on like a vegetable, wasting away? So I used up another one of my miracles.

“Hello, Harry,” she said, when he drew up a chair beside her.

It's hard for me to describe his reaction. Like I said, I'm not much of a writer. His head twitched, and he did an astounded double take.

“How's everything at home, son?” the old woman asked, speaking for the first time in two years.

“Mom, is that you?” he asked in shock.

“Of course it's me,” she replied. “Who did you think I was? Queen Elizabeth?”

Harry's mouth hung open. He gave me an astonished look, as if suddenly realizing what had happened. “You did...” but he couldn't finish. Bursting into tears, he leaned forward and hugged his mother.

“Mamma, Mamma,” he sobbed.

I shed a tear too.

“What are you crying about?” she asked him. “Is everything all right at home?”

“Yes, Mamma, everything is fine,” he said, unable to tell her about his father. I tell you, it was something to see, Harry, the cynic, crying with genuine emotion.

“I’ve become a famous writer,” he said.

“If that’s what you want, I’m happy,” she said. “But what’s really important, Harry, is to be a good person,” she told him. “Like the song says, ‘Fame if you win it, comes and goes in a minute.’ Be a good person, Harry. And don’t worry about your father. He’s spoken to me from Heaven. I know what happened to him.”

I don’t know who was more dumbfounded – Harry, or the nurse who was standing nearby with an unbelieving expression on her face.

As a magnanimous gesture, I healed the other catatonic patients who were sitting in the ward. With a puff, I blew away the evil spirits that had taken up residence in their heads. Soon, all of them were talking. More staff workers gathered to see the unexplainable event. “Call the doctor!” one of nurses exclaimed. It wasn’t long before the old timers were arguing about which television program they wanted to watch.

I think that upped my esteem in Harry’s eyes. “You really are an angel,” he said when we were back in his apartment. “Up till now I wasn’t sure.”

Now, maybe he would listen to me, I prayed.

“But what am I going to do about my mother?” he asked aloud.

“I can’t have her move in with me.”

“You have a guest room, don’t you?”

“My lifestyle would just drive her crazy again.”

“Not if you change,” I told him. “Anyway, I’m sure you can find her a suitable arrangement at some other home for senior citizens. Or get her an apartment nearby with a live-in worker. I hear they do a good job.”

“She’s too proud and stubborn for that,” he answered.

Anyway, I had my work to do, and time was running out. I told Harry that it was time for another movie.

Chapter Ten

Once again, Harry’s saga returns to Jerusalem, this time during the Greek conquest of the Fertile Crescent, where civilization began. After Nebuchadnezzar’s ignominious downfall, a portion of the exiled Babylonian Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt their holy Temple. With the passing of time, the wave of Hellenism sweeping the globe had found its grasp on the Holy Land too. Unlike the Jews who believed fervently in monotheism, the Greeks worshipped a pantheon of lustful and jealous gods. To the Greeks, aesthetics, philosophy, arts, and the celebration of the human body were the highest ideals of

mankind. The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty, while the Jews believed in the beauty of holiness. The stubborn belief of the Israelites that God ruled over the physical world, as well as the spiritual, was something that the hedonistic Hellenist culture could not endure. Bluntly speaking, the Greeks did not want the God of the Jews interfering in their orgies. Their culture of wanton permissiveness could not tolerate a Divine, co-existing culture that outlawed sexual freedom. So after conquering the Land of Israel, the Greeks forbade the Jews to keep the commandments of the Torah, set up their brothels and bawdry theaters in Jerusalem, and hung up bright signs reading: JEWS ALLOWED.

“OK,” Harry said. “They wanted to get the Jews to assimilate and be Hellenists like themselves. It makes perfect sense. Where do I fit in?”

“We’re getting to that,” I assured him.

“Was I Alexander the Great?”

“Nope.”

“Too bad. That’s a really juicy role.”

“There are other souls in the world, you know. One man can’t be everything.”

“Then who was I?”

“A wicked fellow named Antiochus the Fourth.”

Harry did a double take when the image of the Greek commander and king appeared on the screen. Generally, reincarnated souls reappear in bodies that share little or no physical resemblance to previous incarnations. But the case of Antiochus was different. He looked exactly like Harry. The same nose, the same blue eyes, the same high forehead and streak of silver hair.

“Antiochus orchestrated the Greek conquest of Jerusalem,” I continued, as the pictures flashed up on the screen. “For the majority of Jews, the encounter with a culture that glorified the flesh, while lauding the arts and lofty intellectual expression, proved to be too much of a temptation. Young Jewish males stripped off their clothes and rushed to compete in the nude Olympics. Craving to be like the Greeks, they even stretched their circumcised foreskins back over the sign of the Covenant of Abraham, in order to look like the Hellenists. Enraptured by the tantalizing synthesis of Greek intellectuality and unbridled bohemianism, Jews abandoned the synagogue and study halls, adopted Greek names, dressed up in Greek tunics, flocked to Greek theaters, bathed in Greek spas, and drank alongside the enlightened foreigners in their libertine pubs dedicated to the Greek god of wine, Dionysus.”

“Sounds pretty good to me,” Harry quipped.

“Indeed. You weren’t content to merely defile the men. Among the harsh decrees that you imposed on the Jews was the ravaging of Jewish daughters. Before Jewish brides were

allowed to marry, they were first forcefully taken to your palace for you to satisfy your lust.”

“That wasn’t very nice, was it,” he reluctantly agreed.

“In response to an early rebellion, you flew into a rage that earned you the nickname, ‘the Mad One.’ After three days of venting your fury, forty-thousand Jews were slain without mercy, woman and children included, and another forty-thousand were sold into slavery. Jews who refused to worship Zeus as the supreme deity were hunted down and slaughtered. To humiliate the Israelites, you ordered statues of Zeus erected in the Temple, and had pigs, which were abominable to the Jews, offered on the sacrificial altar. Then, declaring yourself to be a god, you personally brought a whore into the Holy of Holies and violated the most sacred site of Judaism.”

Hearing my narrative and watching the gory scenes on the screen, Harry was sweating. The powerful music accompanying the film, blasting out over his Bose speakers, heightened the impact. Transported back through time, he sat in nervous silence, staring up at his look alike, Antiochus the Fourth, as he ransacked the city and the people of God.

“Anyone refusing to sacrifice to the gods of the Greeks was sentenced to death. When you heard that two Jewish women had circumcised their children in violation of your decree, you ordered the babies slain and hung from the breasts of their mothers, whom you had thrown to their death from the

ramparts of the citadel fortress you had built to house your garrisons in the city.

“Finally, Judith, the beautiful daughter of Mattitiah, the Jewish High Priest, appeared immodestly before her father and brothers. Enraged, they cried out that she must be sentenced to death. ‘You are ready to kill me,’ she answered in a voice of challenge, ‘But not the wicked Greek occupiers who are polluting all of the daughters of Israel and turning them into whores!’”

“Shaken by the words of his daughter and by the horrible disgrace, Mattitiah and his sons, known as the Maccabees, rose up like lions against the Greeks, just as Pinchas had done in the days of the wicked Bilaam. Mattitiah cried out in a loud voice to rally the people: ‘Let everyone who is zealous for the Torah and who guards the Covenant, follow me!’”

Careful not to look at the gorgeous celluloid apple up on the screen, I added resonance to my voice as I approached the climax of the story.

“Bravely, the irresistible Judith invited you to a secret rendezvous and offered herself for your pleasure. She fed you cheese to make you thirsty, then gave you strong wine to drink, encouraging you to demonstrate your manliness by imbibing a great amount. When you collapsed in a drunken stupor, she lifted your sword and severed your head, which she carried to Jerusalem and paraded through the streets, spreading panic and fear throughout the garrisons of the Greeks.”

Seeing a decapitated head that looked just like his head, with a face that looked just like his face, being paraded on a pole around the streets of Jerusalem, made Harry lose his fortress of cynical humor. Choking, he spit out the mouthful of popcorn he had been munching. Otherwise he might have choked to death.

“Are you implying that I am heading for a similar fate if I don’t make some changes in my life?” he asked.

“That’s pretty much the message. You have one month to get your act in order, and if you don’t, it’s curtains.”

“One month?” he asked in alarm.

“That’s all.”

“Look, if you’re an angel, you know what’s going to be in the future, right?”

“Wrong. That’s not up to me.”

“OK. You don’t know, but God knows.”

I nodded.

“So if He knows how the movie is going to end, why bother to burst into my life and try to scare me to death? *Kay sara sara*, what will be will be.”

“God knows the outcome from the beginning, but He doesn’t determine whether the story will have a sad or happy end. That’s up to you. God takes no pleasure in punishing the wicked. He far prefers that they improve their ways. You’re the

scriptwriter. It's your soul. It's up to you to decide what your character, Harry, will do."

"Assuming I did decide to change, just what would I have to do differently?"

"To begin with, give up your whoring and leading people astray with all of your falsehoods and lies."

"That's pretty much means changing my whole life, doesn't it?"

"Sorry," I said, "but I didn't make up the rules."

"What else?"

"Correcting bad habits is doing a great deal, in and of itself. If you can do that, I'll go my own way back up to Heaven, and you'll get to live happily for the remainder of your sojourn on Earth. But if you want to earn some bonus points, and make up for your past, then you should fess up to your sins and teach people the right way to live, using your talents to serve God, rather than making war against Him."

The Antiochus of old thought for a moment, as if weighing his life in a scale. "You know something," he quipped. "It might make a new bestseller."

Chapter Eleven

After the Greeks came the Romans. The target was the same – Jerusalem. But the strategy was different. While the goal of the

Greeks was to spread the culture of Hellenism, the goal of the Romans was to conquer and destroy.

“Was I Julius Caesar?” Harry guessed.

“No.”

“Anthony?”

“Wrong again.”

“Brutus?”

“I see you’ve read your Shakespeare.”

“Claudius?”

“Three strikes and you’re out, isn’t that the way it goes?”

“Caligula?”

“Worse than all of them.”

“I give up,” Harry said.

“Titus, the destroyer of Jerusalem.”

“Jerusalem seems to have been the center of all the action,” he noted.

“Just as it is today,” I observed.

“Maybe,” he conceded. “Depends on your viewpoint. For a historical theologian, yes. For an economist, no.”

Our conversation was interrupted by a roaring lion on the screen.

“To understand the empire of Rome,” I began, “we have to go back to the prophecy of Daniel in the days of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Daniel dreamed of four great beasts which would conquer the world. They represented the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Daniel describes the fourth beast as *‘dreadful and terrible, and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth which crushed and devoured its adversaries and trampled the residue with its feet. It had horns, and a horn with eyes like a man, and a mouth speaking haughty things.’* This fourth beast is the Roman empire. Its conquering spirit continues till today, in its different metamorphoses, whether it be the crusading Christians, Spanish imperialism, English colonialism, Nazi supremacy, Soviet communism, or the export of American capitalism and Western culture to the world.”

“You could have been an excellent history professor,” Harry noted.

“This iron tooth monster devours everything it encounters in imposing its dominance over others. The audacity and blasphemy of this fourth kingdom arouses God’s wrath until the Day of Judgment arrives and the beast must be destroyed, in order to establish a new world order based on the foundations of holiness, Divine justice, and truth.”

“Truth can be very subjective,” Harry interjected.

“From man’s point of view. But there is only one Divine truth.”

“What’s the haughtily speaking horn?”

“The Church,” I told him. “But we’ll see more of that in your soul’s next reincarnation.”

“Who is that going to be?” he inquired.

“Julian the Apostate.”

“I was Julian the Apostate?” he asked, astounded.

“That’s right.”

“Well, I guess that shows I’m not all bad.”

“No one is all bad, Harry. In fact, unlike the false doctrine that people are born in original sin, a person’s soul is intrinsically good. It’s just that people let their evil inclination get the upper hand.”

“What’s all this have to do with Titus?” he asked.

“Rome waged war against Jerusalem for over two hundred years, but it took the ruthless Titus to raze the city and wipe out the Jews from the Holy Land. It wasn’t just the palaces and buildings of Jerusalem that Rome wanted to destroy. Jerusalem was the city of God. Like in the days of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel, the empire of Rome, with its gallery of drunken and unfettered gods, wanted to do away with the notion of one supreme holy Creator which the Jewish People clung to with all of their indestructible faith. They understood that Judaism was anathema to Roman life. Not only was the prohibition against idols foreign to Roman culture, among the laws that Moses had received from God on Mount Sinai were the commandments not to murder and not to steal. In contrast, the imperialistic

Roman empire was founded on murder and theft! And Judaism's laws forbidding licentiousness and rape were particularly annoying to the riffraff legions of Rome and the Caesars commanding them. Thus, Jerusalem and the Jews were thorns sticking in Rome's iron-clad armor."

"Interesting," Harry remarked. "In all of my college courses in history, I don't remember learning in depth about this period."

"I am giving you an angel's point of view, not a historian's."

To make Harry realize the importance of the conflict, I showed him a lot more on the screen than I'm mentioning here, a gory pageant of fraternal rivalry, poisonings, back-stabbings, whoring and wholesale murder. Initially, the democratically elected emperor, Pompey, conquered the Holy Land and renamed the Jewish kingdom of Judah – Judea, to erase all traces of Jewish rule. But Rome's flirtation with democracy soon gave way to corruption, dictatorship, and a ruthless barbarism. Opponents to the latest Czar were butchered and their heads placed on mantles in the Senate. The crucified corpses of political, military, and ideological adversaries paved the streets and hillsides. Julius Caesar ordered Pompey's assassination, and while Cleopatra distracted Caesar with her wiles, Brutus' dagger pierced through his heart from the back.

"This could make a great movie," Harry observed. "But it's going to cost a ton of money. New Age Enterprises could never pull it off alone."

“Herod, was appointed by Rome to be king over the Jews. After killing his closest rivals, Herod slaughtered half of the judges of the Jewish Sanhedrin, then murdered all of Jerusalem’s rabbis save one, Rabbi Baba ben Buta, whom he merely blinded. Fearing a conspiracy against his rule of Roman Judea, he murdered his wife and the sons of his concubines.”

Like the movie-house newsreels of old, I showed him the long line of corrupt and small-minded Roman governors who ruled over Judea after the wicked Herod’s prolonged and painful illness and death. While, on paper, the small Jewish nation was no match against pagan Rome with its powerful war machine, the flame of its invincible faith could not be quenched. Inspired by the religious passion of its zealots, the Jews staged successive small rebellions against the governorships of Croesus, Cassius, Sussius, Archilaeus, Varus, Sabinus, Felix, Festus, Pilate, and the Jew-hater Gessius Florus, even when thousands of their guerrilla fighters were slaughtered.

“It’s a gigantic cast,” Harry observed. “I can see it sweeping the Academy Awards.”

“Hampering the Jews was their own fraternal struggles, when a peace camp, led by a pragmatic, materialistic, Jewish aristocracy, who controlled the doings of the Temple, opted to acquiesce to Roman rule and oppose the Zealots. Hoping to strike a bargain with Florus, the peace lovers welcomed his bloodthirsty legions into the Upper City to uproot the Zealots. From their bastions in the lower City of David and Temple Mount, the freedom fighters stuck at the Roman garrisons and

the Jewish brothers who had betrayed them, taking control of the Upper City with their daggers, javelins, and primitive catapults. They burned the palaces of the elite peace-mongers and lit fire to the tax building, where all deeds of debts and Rome's oppressive taxes were recorded. Led by the fearless, Menachem, who wiped out the Roman fortress on Masada, the rebels drove their enemies out of the burning city. But Menachem was killed during a mutiny in his own ranks, and his followers fled Jerusalem to take refuge on the peak of the Masada mountain stronghold, where, led by Elazar ben Yair, they raised the flag of Jewish resistance and independence until all the armies of Rome were sent out to crush the rebellion."

"Isn't there an intermission?" Harry asked. "This is one hell of a saga."

"Here's where you enter the picture," I told him. "Vespasian was appointed Commander General of Judea in place of the disgraced Cestius Gallus, who failed in his attempt to conquer Jerusalem. Brought in from the battlefields of Germany, he put his son, Titus, in charge of the Roman war machine. Promising to wipe out the Jews, the skilled, young military genius, Titus, took his time before he attacked, enlisting troops and battle-proven horsemen from all over the region. The careful and cunning Titus stocked up endless shiploads of equipment and food to ensure that his siege of Jerusalem would not be called off for a lack of supplies. Cautious not to confront the main force of Zealots camped in Jerusalem and its outskirts, the legions of Titus marched from their Mediterranean bastions in

the seaports of Caesarea and Acco to squash out smaller centers of Jewish resistance in the forests of the Galilee and at the mountain stronghold of Gamla in the Golan, where Jewish defenders leapt defiantly to their deaths, rather than surrender to the overwhelming Roman force.

“Turning south, Titus and Vespasian swept toward Jerusalem, smashing all resistance, and leaving no survivors behind.”

“I read the account in the writings of Josephus,” Harry said, interrupting the narrative. “But your version is just as gripping.”

It wasn't just my account that got to Harry. The clashing of steel up on the screen, the roar of battle-crazed troops, the pounding of hooves, the steam pouring out of the nostrils of charging horses, decapitated limbs flying through the air, the streams of bloodshed, the cold, ruthless looks of the conquerors, and the prayer-filled, seemingly hopeless sorties of the Zealots, were what gripped Harry to his seat, waiting to see how his soul-brother, Titus, would finish off the Jews.

“With the momentum turning toward the centurions of Titus, a respite from Heaven postponed the downfall of Jerusalem. An insurgence broke out in Rome. Vespasian's armies were needed at home. It was his chance to overcome his rivals and declare himself emperor of the realm. After Vespasian's departure, Titus took the opportunity to strengthen his supply lines and the army of battering rams and siege machines that would be needed to break down the walls of Jerusalem. For entertainment, he turned captive Jews into gladiators and

forced them to fight one against the other until death. Other Jews were thrown into cages with hungry lions. When the insurgence was crushed in Rome, Vespasian's choicest battalions sailed back to the Holy Land. Waiting in the eighty-thousand-strong Roman camp outside of Jerusalem were the Commander-in-Chief, Titus, his Jewish mistress, Bernice, along with her brother, Agrippa, deposed King of Judah, and the Jewish turncoat, Josephus Flavius, chronicler of the war.

"In the year 70 of the Common Era, the archers, infantrymen, cavalry, centurions, spear throwers, siege machines, catapults, battering rams, flag bearers, wagons and transport mules headed for Jerusalem, followed by Titus and his bodyguards. Of the million Jews gathered in the city, only twenty-five thousand were armed. Led by the valiant Shimon bar Giora, thousands of Zealots surprised Titus in a stunning ambush, cutting off his unit from the main Roman force, but he valiantly fought his way out of the ambush back to his troops.

"Denuding the forests of Jerusalem of its trees, he built ramparts and archer towers around the city. Once again, the Jews surprise the Romans, daring to venture beyond the walls of the city to strike at the unarmed labor forces and send the siege ramparts up in smoke. In a panic, the invading battalions fled from their camps, but Titus, galloping madly about on his steed in every direction, rallied his troops back to their positions."

I could see Harry sweating, as if he himself were rallying his troops back into action. His eyes were glazed from the fight.

After all, it wasn't some stunt rider racing around on Titus's horse – it was Harry himself!

“Vastly outnumbered, the brave freedom fighters couldn't stop Titus from surrounding the city. At night, fires burning in the Roman camps formed a flaming ring around the towering walls of Jerusalem. Zealots snuck out from the city to destroy siege machines and set fire to newly-built towers, but the odds were stacked against them. As battering rams smashed into the walls like thunder, the Jewish defenders put up a gallant resistance, but internal debate was waging in every quarter of the city, whether to surrender, or fight on unto death. As the weeks of siege went by, their hopes for a miraculous victory began to fade. It was only a matter of time till the walls were breached and Roman soldiers poured into the city. Bitter battles were waged in the streets and alleys, but the dice had been tossed. Parading his eighty-thousand soldiers in a chain around the city, Titus, descendent of Nimrod, sends Josephus to the wall of the besieged city with an offer of peace. A barrage of stones sends him running.

“But Jerusalem's defenses were cracking. Inside the walls, pestilence was rampant. A few wealthy aristocrats had stored enough grain and food to sustain the populace for several years, but internal rivalries and political disagreements sent the precious warehouses up in flames. Famine grasped the city. Corpses were lying unburied everywhere. When the Jewish peaceniks demanded surrender, the Zealots threw them over the city ramparts. Jews caught sneaking out of the endangered

capital by the Romans were crucified on crosses, up to five hundred a day, in plain sight of their hard-pressed Jewish brothers in the guard towers along the walls.

“All of this carnage over one single city?” Harry observed.

“Not over the city,” I corrected. “Over Jerusalem.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Jerusalem is more than a city – it’s an idea.”

Harry took a moment to ponder, but I raced on with the account while I had his undivided attention.

“With all the odds against them, the Jews continued to fight, mocking the vaulted armies of Rome. Realizing that he couldn’t overcome them militarily, Titus tightened the siege, determined to starve them to death, even if it took him several years.”

“Why prolong the inevitable?” Harry said. “Get on with the climax already.”

“Delivering a stirring speech to his troops, Titus sends his full force of crazed and bloodthirsty soldiers into the city. Around the Temple Mount, all but the Western Wall is breached, so that generations to come could see a remnant of what was the glory of Jerusalem. The slaughter on both sides was staggering, including over one million Jews. Finally, all Jewish strongholds were taken, and you triumphantly entered the Holy Temple. ‘Where now is the God of the Jews, the rock in whom they sought their bastion?’ you haughtily declared.

“Hey, don’t you blame it on me.”

“You and Titus are one. Taking a whore by the hand, you entered the Holy of Holies, spread a Torah scroll open on the floor, and vented your rage and wild lust. Then you took your sword and sliced the curtain guarding the inner sacred chamber. A miracle transpired, and blood spilled out from the fabric. Thinking that you had killed God, you arrogantly exclaimed, ‘I have fought the King of the Jews in his own palace and slain Him!’”

“What a bastard I was,” Harry remarked.

“Ripping down the curtain, you gathered up the holy vessels of the sanctuary and removed them from the Temple. Then you ordered that the city and the Temple be burnt. After three days, the whole of Jerusalem was razed. Any Jews still living were either slaughtered or taken captive. Roman idols were set up where the Temple once stood, and after banishing all Jews from the Holy Land, you packed up the Temple’s stolen booty and sailed back to Rome.”

Harry was trembling.

“If you keep saying it was me, I’m going to throw you out of my house,” he threatened. “Besides, according to you, God does everything. Titus was only a pawn in His plans.”

“It’s true,” I concurred, “that it was the sins of the Jews against the Torah, coupled with their in-fighting, and the corruption surrounding the Temple service, which destroyed the foundations upon which Jerusalem stood. Titus merely knocked

down walls that had already fallen in the Heavenly Jerusalem above. Nonetheless, God was not to let the wicked Titus go unpunished for all of his extravagancies and excessive cruelties. So, he sent one of the boys to stir up a storm at sea, which threatened to capsize the returning Roman fleet and Titus along with it.”

“One of the boys?” Harry questioned.

“An angel,” I explained.

Harry nodded his head.

“As the sea raged around his ship, lifting it into the air like a toy, Titus stood on deck and shouted up at the Heavens: ‘Maybe You can defeat me on water, like You did with Pharaoh in the Red Sea, and Sisera in a flood, but when I was in Your own land, You could not destroy me. If You are truly strong, let me go up on dry land and wage war with me there!’

“Then God sent me to teach him a lesson. ‘Evil one, son of a wicked man, great grandson of the wicked Esau, there is a tiny creature in God’s world called a fly. Go up on dry land and wage war with it,’ I told him.

“When Titus reached Rome with the vessels of the Jerusalem Temple, the city came out to sing his praises. ‘Conqueror of the barbarians,’ he was called. Vespasian died of an acute intestinal infection with constant bouts of diarrhea that left him more in the bathroom than out of it, until he had to give up his throne for his toilet. A short time later, Mount Vesuvius erupted, burying the city of Pompey. A terrible plague and devastating

fire swept over Rome. Still, Titus, the new emperor of the realm, blasphemed God. That's when God turned me into a fly and blew me into his nose, where I bored into his brain for seven years."

"Seven years?" Harry asked.

"Seven years. Don't think it was easy for me. But it was a lot worse for Titus. From that day forth, he was tormented by terrible headaches. One day, he passed by the shop of a blacksmith. Hearing the clanging of the hammer on the anvil, the fly became silent. Thinking he had discovered a cure for his unrelenting migraines, Titus had the smithy brought to the palace each day to sit by the throne and beat with his hammer. For a month, the treatment worked, but when I got used to the hammering, I began to bore into his brain once again. Finally, he went out of his mind. On his deathbed, he ordered that his body be burned and his ashes be scattered over the seven seas, so the God of the Jews could not subject his soul to judgment. When Titus died at the age of forty-two, his doctors opened his skull and discovered a fly the size of a crow in his brain. Its mouth was of bronze and its nails were of iron."

It was too much for Harry when up on the screen, the terrifying creature was removed from his head. He fainted in a swoon to the floor. Only after I splashed a glass of cold water on his face did he awaken.

"That fly was really you?" he asked when he was sitting once again on the sofa.

“The one and only,” I said.

“And Titus was really me?”

“As real as the real Harry now.”

“That’s the end of the story?” he asked, with a sigh of exhaustion.

“There’s still the denouement. As Titus had requested, his body was burned to a crisp, just like he had burned down Jerusalem.”

“Measure for measure,” Harry observed. “Just like he did to others, the same was done to him.”

“That’s right, Harry. Measure for measure. You’re finally catching on.”

Chapter Twelve

“Oh, no!” Harry exclaimed, jumping up to his feet. “It’s seven o’clock, and I’m way behind schedule.”

Sure enough, when I looked out the window, morning light was streaking down the cross streets of the city. The night had passed without our noticing the hours slipping away. Being an angel, I was used to not sleeping, since angels, in their angelic form, don’t ever get tired. But now that I was stuck in a body, the night-long vigil had me feeling a little heavy and groggy, especially since I hadn’t yet adjusted to the shock of entering the Earth’s polluted atmosphere. While our special Earth suits were designed to minimize side effects, like the re-entry shield

of a space capsule, their effectiveness was not foolproof, as my weariness attested.

“I have a limo coming to take me to the airport,” Harry explained. “It’s probably already waiting downstairs. I’m supposed to be in Chicago this morning for a day of book signings in all the stores. I won’t be back till late this evening.”

Quickly, he rushed into his bedroom to dress.

“Want to come with me?” he called.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m a little knocked out from the last few days. I’ll take the opportunity to rest.”

Actually, after my previous experiences with Harry, I was hesitant to face the temptations I would surely encounter accompany the bestselling author on a publicity tour.

Dressed in a sporty Nehru jacket and white slacks, he hurried out of the bedroom, stuffing his more casual guru costume into a small traveling bag.

“Make yourself at home,” he said. “There’re some leftovers in the fridge. If there’s something else you want, you can charge it to my account at the grocery store on the corner. I’ll leave you the key,” he added, flipping a key chain onto his desk. “Not that a Houdini like you needs it.”

He opened a closet door and pulled out a raincoat. “It always rains in Chicago,” he explained. “And feed the snake for me, will you? One canary a day is enough to keep him happy.”

With that, he was out the door.

He left me standing by the cage of canaries. The pretty creatures flitted around and chirped, singing their prayers of thanksgiving to God for having granted them another day of existence. There was no way that I was going to sacrifice one to the snake. After all the damage he had caused the world, it wouldn't hurt him to fast for a day, I decided.

Wandering out to the terrace, I bent over the railing in time to see Harry get into a long black limousine, which looked like a miniature toy car down below on the street. His apartment was on the sixtieth floor and the height made me feel dizzy. As an angel, it shouldn't have bothered me, but when we are encased in earthly garbs, we experience all the regular sensations that bodies feel. Stepping away from the railing, I sat down in a plastic patio chair by the telescope, suddenly feeling a little lonely and homesick. After all, outside of Harry, I didn't know anyone else in New York. Maybe, I thought, with the high-powered telescope, I could get a glimpse of some of my friends up in Heaven. But when I peered through the lens, I got a terrible shock. It was focused on the bedroom of an apartment across the way, where an apple was getting dressed. Startled by the sight, I fell over backwards in the chair. It served me right. If angels have one big failing, it's curiosity. As we say up in Heaven, "Curiosity killed the angel."

Walking back inside, I picked up the key that Harry had thrown on the desk. The lid of his laptop was opened, and my curiosity got the best of me again. I had never used a computer. The last

time I had been on Earth was a few decades before the age of Windows, when I had been sent to help General Montgomery overcome Rommel's blitzkrieg through North Africa on his way toward the Holy Land. There was a picture of Harry's new book on the laptop's screen, and all kinds of little files and symbols. Curious to see what all the fuss was about, I took a hold of the mouse and held it this way and that, trying to figure out how it worked. In a flash of intuition, I moved it around the table and followed the little arrow around on the screen. At the very bottom was the outline of a rabbit. Curious, I clicked on its ears. Like I said before, I'm not going to go into details. But to say that my eyeballs popped open when an apple as big and bare as life leaped out at me would be the understatement of the century. I jumped up, and backed away from the desk, experiencing the same vertigo I had felt peering over the terrace rail. Unable to believe what my eyes had seen, I walked back to the desk, sat down, and clicked on another icon. It's hard to describe what went on in my brain. It was like the famous blackout decades ago in Manhattan when all of the lights had gone out. All the air left my body. I felt repulsion and attraction at the very same time. Quickly, I clicked on the third little box, and the apple that appeared made me blush all over. I glanced around to make sure that no one was looking. My heart started beating so fast, I was afraid someone would hear it. But aside from the birds and the snake, and all the statues around the room, I was alone. No one could see me. Just to make sure, I stood up, hurried to the door, and swerved the lock. With a racing heart, a sweating forehead, and trembling

fingers, I sat back down at the desk and clutched the mousy contraption. I don't know what happened, but I forgot about God. Well, not completely. I knew He was there. I knew I was doing something forbidden. But I did it all the same. I can't explain why. Like Adam in the Garden, I bit into the apple, and the rest of the story is history. One apple led to another, and another, and another. Before the terrible spell had broken, the entire day had passed. Outside, darkness had already fallen. The canaries were chirping loudly, probably wanting to be fed. Pushing myself away from the computer, I stood up, feeling totally soiled and ashamed. A sense of self-loathing spread through my being. I hadn't been seventy-two hours down on Earth and I had already blown it.

What can I say? My head was discombobulated and confused. Concentrating, I tried to make a heavenly connection with the switchboard in the Angel Command Center, but all I got was static. I closed my eyes tightly and tried again, but instead of seeing my fellow angels, all I could see were apples. Terrified, I opened my eyes wide. All the primitive idols and statues in the room were staring at me. "How would I ever get out of this mess?" I wondered.

The cobra in the aquarium raised its head, spread wide its hood, and looked over at me with a smile. In an uncharacteristic temper, I unlatched the aviary, swung its door open, and shouted at the birds. Waving my hand inside the cage, I herded them to freedom. Noisily, they flew around the apartment and, smelling fresh air, they sped out into the night

when I slid open the terrace door. Let the snake starve to death, I thought.

Then I took off from the apartment. I had to escape. I was afraid to remain there alone.

What can I tell you? I was like a fugitive on the run. As if someone were chasing me. Like Adam in the Garden, I hurried along the busy avenues and streets of Manhattan, searching for someplace to hide. Someplace to bury my shame. After what had just transpired, how was I going to influence Harry when I was no better than he was?

I walked and I walked. I had no idea where I was going. Like I said, I didn't know anyone in Manhattan, and with Harry out of town, I had nothing to do. You'd think that after falling for the same old trick of Satan, I would have learned my lesson. You'd think that after tasting the apple's sweet poison, I would have spit it out in disgust. You would have thought that an angel who had witnessed millions of people fall out of grace for the very same vanity, and who had been sent to punish princes and kings, you would have thought that he would have had the sense to put on the brakes, scream out for forgiveness, and made a new start. But no, my friends. It was just the opposite. Don't ask me why. I'm an angel, not a psychologist, or a rabbi. I was bitten by the bug, and the bug was inside of me now. Or, to stick to the same metaphor, I had bitten the apple. It wasn't on the tree anymore. It was down in my belly, and I could feel its circulating juices raging through my blood.

So what did I do? I rationalized things. When I noticed the gaudy neon sign that spelled, "Fallen Angel," I walked in the door. I told myself that maybe someone needed help. Maybe, I reasoned, it was a hang-out for fallen angels like me. Maybe it was a refuge, or a way-station, that could help me out of my mess.

The place turned out to be a go-go bar. The apple on the stage was doing a snake dance to some sleazy music. But instead of getting the hell out of there right away, I stayed. I sat down and watched. Don't ask me why. I have no defense. I could say, "the devil made me do it," but I know that doesn't hold any water in the Heavenly Court.

The waitress kept bringing me drinks. I thought I could drown out my sorrows, but I wasn't used to hard liquor. When the police came, the manager of the bar told them that I had climbed up on the stage and started to dance with the apple. I don't remember a thing. It doesn't seem like me, but I was pickled. He told them that I had run up a bill of seventy dollars and refused to pay. How could I pay? I didn't have any money, or even a credit card. I tried to make some cash appear in my pocket, but the trick didn't work. The bar manager said that I slugged him when he had threatened to call the police. I don't remember. True, his eye was black and blue, but I can't believe that I hit him. When the cops asked me my name I told them that I was an angel.

"Sure, pal. And I'm the President of the United States," one of them said.

They didn't believe me. Handcuffing me, they dragged me outside and pushed me into a police car.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To Heaven," one said. "You'll meet lots of angels there."

I tried to disappear and "transmorph" back to Harry's apartment, but nothing happened. It was like I wasn't connected anymore to the ACC. Like someone had pulled out the plug.

They took me to a place called "Bellevue." The cop was right. A lot of the fellows there said they were angels. Who knows? Maybe they were. Fallen angels like me. There were also two more Presidents who argued with each other about which one was real, another guy who said he was Superman, there were a few Jesus Christs, and a guy with bad breathe in pajamas who whispered to me that he was the real doctor and that I shouldn't trust anyone else.

It was after midnight by the time Harry showed up to spring me. I hadn't wanted them to phone him, but there was nothing else I could do. He was the only person I knew. Fortunately, the answering service patched my call through, and he rushed over as soon as he landed back in the city.

I can't describe my embarrassment when they told him what had happened in the bar. Promising to pay the money I owed, he told the policeman on the ward that I was a friend from out of town, and that he would look after me until I sobered up.

On the way back to his apartment, I started to vomit up the booze in the taxi. The driver stopped the car and threw me out onto the sidewalk, yelling at me for puking in his car. Harry lifted me up, and placing my arm over his shoulder, dragged me the rest of the way home. When we got back to his condo, he was angry as hell. But when he noticed that his aviary was empty, he really flipped out.

“What happened to my canaries?” he fumed. “Who the hell let them out of their cage?”

“Beats me,” I said. It was the first time I had lied in my almost six-thousand years of existence. Funny how one sin leads to the next. “Maybe they flew the coop by themselves.”

“That’s ridiculous. How could they open the latch?”

“Maybe one of these voodoo gods or idols opened it for them,” I suggested, referring to the statues in the room.

“These statues don’t have any power,” he said.

“You wrote that they did,” I reminded him.

“That was only to make some money.”

“So you admit that you’ve been leading people astray,” I said, trying to turn the heat back on him.

“My readers don’t really believe in that nonsense either,” he responded. “But by blaming the gods for what happens, they don’t have to take blame for themselves.”

“Call it what you like, encouraging others to worship false gods is one of the cardinal sins.”

“Is that right? Well, tell me what the hell you were doing in a go-go bar.”

“I saw the sign, the “Fallen Angel,” and thought maybe there was someone inside I could help,” I tried to explain.

“And that’s why you got yourself pickled out of your mind and started dancing with one of the strippers?”

“I’m not used to alcohol,” I answered, knowing it was a flimsy defense.

“What kind of angel are you?” he asked.

“Everyone makes mistakes.”

“So who the hell are you to present yourself as Mr. Holier Than Thou and tell me that I had better change my ways?”

“My behavior doesn’t look good, you’re right. But my regrettable crash on this very polluted and endangered planet is no excuse for you trying to dodge the reason I came. I suggest we get on with the movie.”

Harry grumbled. With a frown, he closed the door of the empty bird cage.

“Did you feed the snake?” he asked.

“Angels don’t feed snakes,” I told him.

“Some angel,” he said with a scoff.

Walking to the kitchen, he came back with what looked like to be a half-eaten pastrami on rye. He dropped it into the snake's tank, but the reptile didn't budge.

I was praying that he wouldn't look at his computer and see that I had fooled around with its settings.

"Sell any books?" I asked him to change the subject.

"Tons. The day broke all records."

"Are you still angry at me about the canaries?"

"Na. What the hell! I can buy new ones. Maybe I'll start feeding Yasser live hamsters for a change."

"Thanks for bailing me out," I told him.

"What's a friend for?"

"It won't happen again. I promise."

"Like you said – down here, on this planet, no one's an angel."

"Got the strength to see another movie?" I asked.

"Why not?" he replied. "I'm beat, but I suppose I can keep awake for another hour or so."

Thank God, at least the movie worked. All my other powers had been terminated, but at least the movie played. It was a sign that God was still with me.

Chapter Thirteen

This time, I wasn't only the narrator, I was also a straying soul who needed rectification. After what had happened, it seemed that the same fear of Heaven that was missing in Harry was missing in me as well. To climb out of the dark pit into which I had plummeted, I'd have to absorb the lessons that I was trying to teach Harry.

"You know about the emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus, otherwise known as Julian, or Julian the Apostate?"

"I read a little about him when I was getting my Master's in history," Harry recalled.

"Apparently, after your go-around in the body of Titus, while you were getting cremated, you had time to think things over. Judging from your next incarnation, you realized your mistakes, and repented for some of the things you had done, like destroying the Jerusalem Temple."

"If that's the case, why did I need more reincarnations after Julian?" Harry wanted to know.

"While you intended to rebuild the Temple, you didn't finish what you started. The Church had you assassinated in the midst of the project."

Once again, like in his reincarnation as Antiochus, Harry could have passed for Julian's double. I started out with his early years to put him in a nostalgic mood. He noticed the physical resemblance immediately.

“Hey, that’s how I looked as a teenager!” he remarked. “I have some pictures somewhere around the house if you want to see them.”

“Maybe later,” I said, wanting to get on with the show. “You were born in Constantinople, to a branch of the ruling Constantine family, at a time when Rome’s empire had spread over all of Europe. Luckily, when your cousin, Constantius II, tried to wipe out your entire family in order to facilitate his way to the throne, you escaped, and were raised in Greece by a Christian tutor. It can be seen from your rather extensive writings, that in addition to your studies of Christianity and Roman pantheism, you were a budding philosopher and humanist. Highly intellectual, you viewed Roman mythology as allegories, discovering valuable moral lessons in the stories of the gods. Appalled by the discrepancy between the new religion of love and its tyrannical intolerance toward disbelievers, you rejected the Christian doctrine, maintaining that the Gospels and the apocalypse of Paul were all a great fiction designed to dupe the masses into submission to the ruthless policies and money-grabbing coffers of the Church.”

“Are they?” Harry asked.

“Are they what?”

“Are the Gospels just fiction?”

“Just between us?”

“Of course,” he replied.”

“They’re fiction, of course.”

“The Resurrection? It never happened?”

I shook my head no.

“The Holy Trinity?”

Again, I shook my head no.

“The immaculate conception?”

Once again, my head responded with a negative wave.

“You mean he wasn’t the Messiah?”

“The Messiah was supposed to bring salvation to the Jews. This one brought only persecution and slaughter.”

“That’s what I always suspected. So how did they fool the whole world?”

“You’ve fooled a lot of people, haven’t you?” I answered. “Most people are confused and overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life. They need something to clutch on to. For some people, it’s Christianity. For others it’s voodoo guides and ‘New Age’ yoga.”

“I get the point.”

“Some powerful souls, like Nebuchadnezzar and Titus, tried to conquer the world with their armies. Others, like Paul, with their ideologies. You are not the world’s first spiritual Swengali, and probably not the last.”

“You mean that Jesus couldn’t walk on water?”

“I didn’t say that. He was a very gifted Talmudic student with a talent for Kabbalah. But he had an eye for pretty women.”

“Don’t we all?” Harry said wryly, giving me a wink.

Embarrassed, I probably turned red. “In any event,” I said, “In the case of Jesus, his weakness for pretty girls got him kicked out of yeshiva. To take revenge on the rabbis, he started to preach all kinds of new things, antithetical to the Jewish teachings of old. Because he was charismatic and able to do a few tricks, he attracted a following. Women ran after him wherever he went. In those days, the Romans had spies all over, always on the lookout for the outbreak of rebellion. Jesus attracted attention. When he said, ‘Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s,’ they nailed him, accusing him of being a traitor to the throne. Setting a crown of thorns on his head, the Romans mockingly hung a sign over him, reading, ‘King of the Jews,’ then paraded him through the streets to his crucifixion, to discourage others from pursuing any form of insurgent activity. “

“I always thought that the Jews killed him.”

“The Jews never used crucifixion as a means of capital punishment. Paul came up with that blood libel to draw people away from Judaism and get them to join his new sect. Originally an Orthodox Jew, known as Saul of Tarsus, he was a vocal anti-Christian until he had what he described as “a vision of Christ” while on his way to Damascus. His vision was as real as your ashram study in India with the guru you wrote about. Angels,

you see, are also in charge of visions, and there was never any such revelation, at such a time, with such a person. Look at the portraits of Paul and you can see why. He was a madman. Prone to hallucinations from eating psychedelic mushrooms, and delving beyond his capacities into the esoteric mysteries, it may be that he believed what he saw. In any event, through the convincing force of his manic personality, he was able to persuade the ignorant, who followed him by converting to Christianity. To make his new sect more enticing, he cleverly did away with the Torah's 613 commandments, which make Judaism a difficult religion to follow. According to Paul, instead of having to observe the Torah, with all of its moral and ritual laws, all one had to do to be a good Christian was to accept the divinity of Jesus. For that alone, a believer's sins would be atoned for, and he or she was assured a place in the World to Come."

"You have to admit that it's a much more attractive package," Harry observed. "From a strictly commercial point of view."

"It may indeed seem like a prettier package, but by doing away with the Divine commandments and laws, and substituting a statue for God, instead of bringing the world closer to enlightenment, Christianity shrouded the world in darkness."

"Billions of believers would disagree with you on that."

"I'm not here to win a popularity contest."

“I’m not pretending to defend Christianity, but you have to admit, the Gospels sure sell. You have to give them credit for that.”

“Interestingly, the Gospels didn’t pop up until after Paul began his missionary work, traveling from town to town, cursing anyone who refused to accept his teachings. To put it in your terms, he was the biggest best-selling author ever.

Posthumously, that is. When his new movement started winning adherents from all over the Roman empire, Paul was beheaded by the emperor Nero.”

“He was beheaded?” Harry asked.

“Nero had no patience for people he considered insurgents. It may very well have been that the Romans would have succeeded in stamping out the new, rapidly-spreading creed, just by slaughtering all of its followers, if Constantine hadn’t made a strategic political decision to adopt it as the new religion of Rome. Now, just as the Romans had persecuted the Christians, the new Christian Romans persecuted anyone who was unwilling to embrace the new faith. With his keen, analytical mind, Julian understood this. How many Jews and Roman officials were slaughtered for not accepting the Cross! The new religion of world brotherhood and peace, fostered by Paul’s followers and the newfound Church, committed even more ghastly atrocities than the pagan Romans had in forcing the Jews to adopt its pantheist ways. So, when Julian rose to the throne of the Roman Empire, after serving as Caesar over the territories of Gaul, he rescinded Constantine’s proclamation

embracing Christianity and reinstated Roman paganism as the official religion of the state. While taking a tolerant approach to other religions, and not crucifying the Christians, as had been the practice of Rome in the past, he closed up churches, stripped the bishops of their powers, reopened pagan temples, and re-erected the statues of Roman gods that had been torn down by the Church. 'Julian the Apostate,' the Christians called him. Realizing that the generous charities widely distributed by the Church brought converts to its fold, Julian established a state charity office of his own to take care of the poor. Then, in line with his open policies, he issued an order to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. This move was not motivated out any great love toward the Jews. Rather, he understood that the Temple's rebuilding would be a devastating blow to the Christian doctrine that God had abandoned the Jews and Jerusalem, and chosen the Christians and the Church instead. He realized that a restored Jerusalem would be an ally in the fight to thwart the spread of Christianity which he loathed."

"You've got me on the edge of my seat once again," Harry remarked.

"Julian informed the Jews that he would finance the Temple's rebuilding. He even went so far as to send his close aid, Alipios, to Jerusalem to amass the necessary materials, and to commence with the construction. He himself set off on a military excursion against Persia, but promised to return via Jerusalem to take an active hand in the massive restoration project."

“The Jews must have been happy with the turn of events,” Harry observed.

“They reacted with great jubilation. Shofars were blown in the streets of Rome, and Jews throughout the Diaspora sent funds to help in the building. The first task was to clear away all of the broken boulders and burnt rubble that had remained piled on the Temple Mount for the almost three hundred years since the magnificent edifice’s destruction. Fleet-loads of supplies from the far corners of Rome’s sprawling empire, lumber from Lebanon and the Galilee, and blocks of Jerusalem stone from the quarries surrounding the city were brought to the restored site of the Temple. Then, with construction work about to begin, a great fire broke out on the Mount and all of the gathered material went up in smoke. Jews claimed that Christians committed the act of arson. The Christians insisted the fire was an act of Heaven, proving that God was angry with the apostate Julian, and with the Jews, for rejecting the divinity of Jesus.”

“It could go either way,” Harry noted.

“That’s the way God brings things about, creating a multi-sided picture, in order to give people free choice. He could do obvious miracles every day if He wanted, to make people believe, but he chooses to keep hidden, camouflaging Himself in the unfolding kaleidoscope of history, in order to let people discover the truth of His Oneness and Kingship for themselves.”

“According to what you say, Julian could have hung up his cleats and retired to everlasting Paradise just for taking on the Church.”

“Almost. Unfortunately, he still believed in his childhood Roman gods.”

“He certainly deserves a hefty reward for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.”

“Like I said, Julian never had a chance to finish the project. Fighting on the battlefield in Persia, he was speared in the back by a Christian mercenary sent out by the Church to assassinate him, as if he had been killed in battle.”

“At least I meant well,” Harry said. “You’ve got to give me credit for that.”

Chapter Fourteen

By the time the ancient newsreel finished, I had a splitting headache. Maybe it was from all the whiskey I had drunk at the bar, or maybe just because of my miserable situation, and the nagging worry that I might be shipwrecked on Earth forever.

“Maybe one of my canaries flew into your brain,” Harry quipped, bringing me two aspirin and a glass of orange juice. “Want me to fetch a couple pots and smash them together by

your ears?” he joked, referring to the tormenting demise of Titus.

“It isn’t funny,” I said.

“You need some sleep, that’s all. And so do I. Tomorrow morning, I’m flying to Atlanta for more book signings. In the evening, I’ve been invited to give the keynote lecture at the National Conference of Kentucky Fried Chicken Branch Managers. They want me to speak about on my ten-step yoga and stress management program. It’s part of a seminar that I’ve delivered to over a dozen big corporations at two-hundred-thousand dollars a throw.”

“Maybe you could do me a favor and lend me some money?” I asked, embarrassed at having to ask a human for help. “I don’t want to be walking around Manhattan without a dime in my pocket, if you know what I mean.”

“No problem,” he said. “But why don’t you just do a little abracadabra and fill up your pockets with cash?”

“It seems that I’ve run out of miracles,” I told him, not wanting him to know that I had been excommunicated from the Celestial Fellowship. “I used up too many too soon. We’re only allowed a limited number on each assignment.”

“I’ll take care of it in the morning,” he promised.

“Has any of what I’ve been showing you made an impression?” I wanted to know.

“Sure. It’s interesting stuff. After all of my formal studies, learning history from political, social, and economic point of views, it’s a new way of looking at things.”

“Is that all?”

“What did you expect – that I would fall down on my knees and yell out ‘Hallaluyah?’”

“Perhaps a little show of remorse,” I suggested.

“Look, those people were those people, and not me. If they messed up their lives, it’s their problem, not mine.”

“Say what you will, the clock is ticking.”

Harry fell into a thoughtful silence. Putting his cynicism aside, he was an intelligent guy. He knew that one plus one equaled two.

“Suppose I were to change my ways. What would I have to do?” he asked me once again. “The nitty gritty.”

“You’d have to observe the seven commandments of the children of Noah, that’s all.”

“What are they again?”

“Not to engage in idolatry, not to murder, not to steal, not to engage in sexual immorality, not to blasphemy the Name of God, not to eat the flesh of a living animal, and to set up a court system to enforce these basic laws.”

“Sexual immorality is a pretty amorphous term. It’s open to debate, if you ask me.”

I waved a finger, no.

“No one can accuse me of being a rapist, or a homosexual, or a pedophile,” he insisted.

“Thou shall not commit adultery.”

“It’s always been with consent.”

“Consent of whom?”

“Of the woman.”

“Her consent is meaningless. The prohibition against adultery applies to the woman as well.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Whatever you like,” I told him.

“Did God really give the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai like it says in the Bible?”

“That’s right.”

“You were there, I suppose?”

I nodded.

“Moses really received the Tablets?”

I nodded again.

“Can you bring up the souls of the dead?” he asked.

“I suppose I could, but I am not allowed to.”

“You’re a great guy, Angel. I mean I believe a lot of the things you say, but I’d like to know what some of my previous reincarnations have to say for themselves.”

“Sorry, Harry,” I said, holding up my hands, as if to say, “What can I do – I’m not the Boss.”

“It doesn’t make any sense to have powers and not be able to use them,” he argued.

“Sometimes restraint is the truest power of all.”

“I like that,” he said. “Maybe I’ll use it on my upcoming tour. For the video, I could buy stock footage of the Boulder Dam and intercut it with my lecture. And you know, after the yoga business begins to lose steam, it may not be a bad idea to put out a book on the six commandments of the children of Noah.”

“Seven,” I corrected him.

“Six,” he repeated. “If it prohibits screwing around, you can forget about sales. It’ll never get off the ground.”

His cynicism was wearing me down. I crashed out in the guest room. But I didn’t sleep for long. The sound of the blacksmith’s clanging hammer from the Titus movie kept reverberating in my head. Quietly, I made my way to living room. Then, with my tell-tale heart pounding, I tip-toed silently to Harry’s desk, opened the lid of the laptop, and grabbed a hold of the mouse. Across the room, I could see the eyes of the snake glowing at

me from the dark. How the mighty fallen! And for what? For apples. Not even real ones. Mere pictures of them on the web.

I jumped in fear when I heard a sound from the bedroom. It was only Harry talking in his sleep. Worried that I'd be caught, I summoned all of my remaining will power and closed the computer. I hurried out to the terrace to get some fresh air. The lights of Manhattan twinkled in the night like falling stars. I looked up to the heavens and called out to God, "Take me back now! Get me out of here! I don't want to be here! I can't take it anymore! Send someone else! I want to go home!"

The night sky was silent. A passenger plane flew over the city on its way to the airport. I closed my eyes and tried as hard as I could to concentrate on the "transmorphing" code, hoping I could beam my way back to Heaven. But without God's OK, I couldn't budge an inch.

"Please, God," I beseeched, staring back up to the sky. "Please take me back up to Heaven."

The rush of cars down on the street sounded like the waves of a distant ocean. But the heavens were silent. No thunderbolts or voices from out of the clouds. Feeling like an espionage agent who screwed up and was iced by headquarters to fend on his own in an enemy land, I gazed down from the terrace rail at the long, long drop down to the street.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question?"

Let's face it – I blew my assignment. Why should Harry listen to me if I couldn't control my passions any more than he could?

After my sad escapade in the stripper bar, I lost my credentials. So I jumped. I leapt off the terrace and put my fate in God's hands. If He wanted to save me, so be it. If not, smashing my brains on a sidewalk in Manhattan was an easier way to end things than what would be waiting for me in Heaven.

After plummeting five floors, with another fifty-five to go, I suddenly had second thoughts.

"Shit," I mumbled, as the air rushing into my head from the free fall shocked me back to my senses. Panicking, I tried to fly, but without my wings, I only kept falling.

"Please, God," I pleaded, but my wings wouldn't open.

Man, was I ever sorry that I had taken that first look at Harry's computer. And why had I ever agreed to go along with him to that stupid talk show and be hypnotized by that apple's swaying shoe? Six thousand years of world history flashed through my mind in an instant. Six thousand years of distinguished celestial service gone with the wind because of a stupid mistake. What a waste, I thought, as I rocketed toward the pavement like a bomb.

Then, suddenly, three feet from the sidewalk, my free fall stopped. Suddenly, as if an invisible hand had reached out and grabbed me, I was frozen in the air, levitating over the pavement like some yoga master, in the middle of the night, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Then God, or the angels whom He had so kindly sent to rescue me, let me go for the remainder of the journey. With an OOMPH, I landed square on

my coccyx bone. It hurt like hell, but it was a lot better than ending up squashed on the sidewalk like a rotten tomato.

I stood up with a limp and brushed myself off. My butt was sore as could be, but I was still in commission. God hadn't terminated my contract. I still had a chance.

But I couldn't go back to the apartment and face the computer, even with Harry there. The temptation was too maddening. A drunk who was staggering by on his way home from a rowdy night looked at me with a startled glance, then gazed up the face of the tall hi-rise, as if I had dropped down from the sky out of Heaven. Inside the building's lobby, the doorman unlocked the door, thinking I wanted to enter.

"Good evening, sir," he cordially said.

"I'm going for a walk," I told him.

"Sure thing, sir. Have a nice night, sir," he answered without asking where I was going at three o'clock in the morning.

I didn't know where I was going myself. Harry had gone to sleep without giving me any money, so I couldn't hail a taxi. I just walked. I didn't know where I was headed, but something pulled me in the direction I had taken the night before. Even though the pain in my butt was a still aching like a pressing reminder, I kept heading toward the very same hell. Gradually, I realized I was heading back to the bar. As bizarre as it may seem, I had fallen in love with the apple in the go-go club! I couldn't get her out of my mind. If I was doomed to spend the rest of my life down on Earth, I wanted to spend it with her.

“That’s crazy!” a little voice told me, the part of my conscience that was still intact. “You’re bonkers. You’ve flipped out. Why are you making such a fool of yourself? You’re an angel! You’re a servant of the King! No pleasure in the world can match your exalted station. Why blow it all for an apple?”

He was right. I know I should have listened. I should have stopped in my tracks, fallen down on my knees, and begged God to “transmorph” me back up to Heaven immediately. So what if I failed in a mission? No one was perfect. I was ready to accept my punishment. Just get me the hell out of New York.

Lucky for me, the bar was closed. The neon sign flashed on and off, but the door of the pub was locked. I tried to glimpse into a window, to see if anyone was inside, but the window was frosted opaque. Not knowing what else to do, I figured I’d wait until morning. It was the middle of October and chilly. I didn’t have a sweater or overcoat, so I looked around for a corner where there was no wind. A few stairs led down to a basement, but the place stunk from urine. There were a couple of garbage cans clustered against the building and a big empty carton that had contained a refrigerator. Having no better place to sleep, I knocked the carton onto its side on the sidewalk and climbed inside. It was like a cozy cave, sheltering me from the wind. Pulling the flaps shut, I curled up and drifted off into a deep earthly slumber. I slept so deeply that I didn’t hear the garbage truck arrive on its pre-dawn rounds. Feeling the box being hoisted into the air, I woke up with a start. But it was too late. The garbage men didn’t hear my screams because of the plugs

in their ears. The refrigerator carton landed with a thud in the back of the truck. Before I could punch my way out, the heavy steel rake of the truck crashed down, ripping through the cardboard and just missing my nose. The pistons of the monster roared, and I was scraped into the belly of the beast. Quickly, I crawled out of the shattered carton, feeling like Jonah in the whale. Garbage was everywhere. Trash bags were sliced like dissected corpses, spilling out entrails of rotten tomatoes and spoiled meat. The stench was awful. As the pistons roared again, I climbed on my hands and knees to the top of the mound to avoid getting stoned with an avalanche of empty beer bottles. My clothes were splattered with leftovers and bloodied with ketchup. Inside the truck's iron mausoleum, no one could hear my screams. The motor of the giant disposal groaned like a wrestler with a belly ache. Metal grinders churned the discarded refuge into blocks of mush. The garbage truck moved on down the block and stopped. Another tidal wave of slop sent me scurrying to the innermost part of the dungeon. I was certain I'd suffocate to death under the growing mountain of trash.

"Please God," I prayed like the fallen Samson, blinded and disgraced in the stadium filled with Philistines. "Please give me back my powers just one more time."

But God didn't answer. Or maybe He did. Without a doubt, he wanted to teach me a lesson. After all, the truck's massive steel blade could have sliced me in half. I was still living. God, in His

mercy, has spared me. I suppose I should have been thankful for that.

The city dump was located in a marshy area at the very end of Queens. Somehow, I made it out of the truck in one piece, sliding out with the rest of the garbage. Wiping the slop off my suit, I trekked out of the mountains of rotting debris. No one paid any attention. No one cared. Paid by commission, the truck drivers dumped off their loads and sped back toward the city for more garbage. I looked up to Heaven and raised my hands to the sky, but no hand reached out to help. Measure for measure, I realized. When you chase after garbage, you turn into garbage. That was the lesson God wanted me to learn.

By the time I made it back to Manhattan, it was almost ten o'clock in the morning. The doorman of Harry's building frowned at my appearance and reluctantly let me in, crunching up his nose in disgust. I still had the key Harry gave me. Letting myself into his apartment, I immediately noticed that the laptop was gone. Harry had taken it with him on his trip. At least that was a sign of good luck, sparing me from further temptation. Hurrying out of my stinking clothes, I threw them into the laundry room and took a hot shower. I found a pair of Harry's pajamas, helped myself to a glass of orange juice, and went back to the guest room to sleep.

"Harry?" a voice called a little later. "Is that you?"

It was Harry's wife.

"I'm back from vacation," she said.

What can I tell you? I promised I wouldn't go into details. She was lonely. I was lonely. She never had children. Neither had I. Harry never had time for her, she told me. I told her I was surprised. She was a beautiful apple. She had helped Harry become what he was. She deserved much better treatment than that.

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Of course I do," I answered.

That's how I seduced Harry's apple. Or how she seduced me. But now, I had really screwed up. A laptop is one thing. Sleeping with another man's apple is another. It's not just a violation of the seven commandments of the children of Noah. It's one of the Ten Commandments as well. With that blooper under my belt, there didn't seem to be any chance in hell that I'd get back my wings.

"What's your name?" she inquired when we were both dressed and sitting in the living room. I had borrowed a pair of Harry's yoga pants and a "New Age" t-shirt.

"Johnny," I told her.

"Johnny what?"

"Johnny Angel."

"My name is Susan," she said.

"It's very nice to meet you," I told her

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you too. For a friend of Harry, you seem like a very decent person. By the way, where is the creep?”

“He flew to Atlanta.”

“For more of his whoring, I presume.”

“He had to sign books and give a lecture.”

“That’s just a ruse.”

I didn’t know what to tell her.

“That’s what it is being married to Harry,” she said, standing up.

“For the last I can’t remember, we’ve been like two ships passing in the night.”

She lifted the receiver of the house telephone, waited a moment, then told the doorman to send a porter upstairs to fetch her valise.

“If my husband asks where I went, tell him to Madrid to watch the bullfights.”

She walked back to the bedroom and returned pulling a suitcase on wheels. A porter came to the door, and, like an angel, as suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished, leaving without saying goodbye, as if I were only the cleaning man, or a messenger who had delivered a pizza.

To my great relief, Harry wasn’t upset in the least. When he returned from what he called a fabulously successful trip, he told me that he had spoken to his wife on the phone.

“She told me she slept with you,” he informed me, matter-of-factly. “We have an honest relationship, if nothing else. If it made her happy, I’m glad. I know I’ve treated her unfairly.”

“You’re not upset with me?”

“Why should I be?”

“She’s your wife.”

Harry didn’t answer.

“It was in your very own home.”

“My home, a hotel room, a yacht on the Mediterranean. What difference does it make?”

“I’m your friend.”

“That’s life,” he said. “Better with a friend than with an enemy.”

“Well, I feel awful,” I told him.

“Don’t bother. At least not for my sake. Think of it like you did me a favor.”

I was amazed. But even if he held no grudge against me, I knew I had committed a terrible wrong. From where I came from, I was no better than dirt. Clipped of my wings. Stripped of my glow. Demoted, fired, expelled. I felt horribly stained. Not only for myself. For having blemished the good name of my angel buddies. Not only them. I mean, if I basketball player gets

busted, it not only makes the whole team look bad, but also the Coach as well.

“Don’t make a big tragedy over it,” Harry said. “I can’t stand guilt. You gave into temptation, so what? Who doesn’t? That’s the way your Boss set things up. He created our lusts, didn’t He?”

“He expects us to control them.”

“Now you know it isn’t so easy.”

Harry was right. It wasn’t easy at all. Now I understood how Uzza and Azael had fallen. Who knows? Maybe the incident came to teach me to have more compassion towards humans during their journeys here on Earth.

“You promised to show me another segment of my history,” Harry reminded me.

“If I still can,” I said forlornly.

“You get things ready, and I’ll order up some Chinese food for the both of us.”

For the first time ever, I felt hungry. It meant that I was no longer an angel. If I didn’t do an about face on the double, God could strike me down with an unannounced thunderbolt, just like with anyone else.

Chapter Fifteen

I can't pinpoint exactly what brought the striking change about, but by the end of the swing through California, Harry was a different person. Not wanting to be alone in New York the ten days that he was scheduled to be on the road, I agreed to go along on his tour. He had advanced bookings all along the coast of California, from San Francisco to San Diego, in what was to be a non-stop whirl of book signings, lectures, convention appearances, a goodwill publicity tour of an orphanage, the sold-out "New Age" yoga and massage weekend, a meeting with the governor of the state, interviews in Hollywood, and the grand opening of a "New Age" Boutique in Beverly Hills.

Harry gave the doorman instructions to feed Yasser. We were traveling with Chuck, his karate instructor-bodyguard, who was also going to be the driver of the rented Winnebago that was waiting for us at the airport in San Francisco. Flying in comfort in the first-class section of the plane, I had an opportunity to show Harry some more reincarnations on the movie screen built into the back of the wide, cushioned seats.

"I was a camel driver?" Harry asked, as a black-eyed, turbaned Arab led a caravan of camels over a sea of sunlit Arabian dunes.

"That's how you started out."

"What was my name?"

"Muhammad."

"I was Muhammad?" he asked in disbelief.

“Why such surprise? You actually resemble him in many ways. Like I may have mentioned, Ishmael was the father of the Arab world. Growing up in Abraham’s household, he passed on the knowledge of the monotheistic God of the Jews to his descendants, but it never caught on amongst his wild, nomad brothers until Mohammad came along. Until then, the children of Ishmael worshiped tangible things like rocks, trees, and the moon. You can still see it today in the Hajj pilgrimages they make to Mecca to prostrate themselves before the great Black Stone, which they believe to be a meteor which fell from outer space. Like Harry Potter, Muhammad was brought up by his uncle. Because of his incredibly high-powered soul, he was driven with a dream of uniting the scattered desert tribes populating the Arabian Peninsula and leading them to world dominion. But to begin, he needed some kind of creed to inspire the primitive masses and mold them into a unified nation, instead of being mere desert marauders. So, like Paul before him, he underwent a ‘miraculous’ revelation in an isolated mountain cave, claiming that the angel, Gabriel, brought him a message from Allah, appointing him as his messenger to spread the true religion of Islam throughout the world.”

“Speak a little more quietly,” Harry whispered. “There may be FBI agents on this flight, and I don’t want anyone to get the idea that we’re with Al-Quaida.”

“Now just between you and me, the angel Gabriel is a good friend of mine, and I can tell you for a fact that he never met

Mohammad in a cave or anywhere else, and certainly never flew him up to Heaven on a tour.”

“You mean Mohammad made the whole thing up. Sort of like me.”

“Like you exactly.”

“No wonder writing books comes so easy. I’ve done it before.”

“With tremendous success. Almost overnight, inflamed by the promise of salvation from all sins, and a World To Come filled with a harem of beautiful virgins, the “Koran” became a runaway bestseller, and the newfound religion of Islam spread like oil, with you as its charismatic leader. With an almost inhuman dedication, you traveled from town to town, village to village, tent to tent, enlisting adherents, starting with illiterate slaves who became your most devoted and bloodthirsty warriors in your Jihad to convert the world’s pagans to Islam.”

“What about woman?” Harry asked bluntly.

“To give him credit, Muhammad was pretty faithful to his first wife for over twenty years. But when she died, he turned into a real Hugh Hefner with thirteen wives and a harem of concubines, including the seven-year old, Aisha, who later compiled many of his writings that form the basis of the Sunni tradition of Islam.”

“I studied the ‘Koran’ a little myself. It’s got a lot of good stuff in it.”

“Muhammad based many of its teachings on Judaism, and set the Jewish patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses as prototypes for the ideal holy disciple. He fancied himself the successor to Moses, and claimed that Muhammadism was the new chosen religion, and that he was God’s final prophet. Of course, not everyone rushed to hop on his bandwagon, and as his movement grew in followers, he was chased out of Mecca. In Medina, he turned to the Jews for support against the pagan Christians, but they weren’t interested in his wares. So he sent his faithful marauders to plunder the Jews and their wealth, amassed a great army with the funds, and returned to conquer Mecca by force. Within a few short years, with Muhammad himself leading his troops, all of the Middle East surrendered to his fanatic hordes and the conquering swords of Allah, including all of North Africa, a huge chunk of the Byzantine Empire, and Spain.”

“Not bad for a start-up camel driver,” Harry had to admit. “It makes me feel kind of proud.”

Chapter Sixteen

“King Richard the Lionheart?” Harry repeated when I told him who was next.

We were flying over Michigan and still had a long way to go on our way to the Coast. I tried to catch a glimpse of the lake down below, but a layer of clouds blocked the view.

“When I was a kid, I had a book about Richard the Lionhearted that I must have read a dozen times,” Harry related.

“Now you know why.”

“I can’t believe it,” he mumbled.

“I may not be the world’s most successful angel, but I don’t lie,” I assured him. “In fact, King Richard was a bit of a failure himself.”

“Why do you say that,” Harry asked, sitting up straight in his seat, as if to defend his boyhood hero.

“He failed in his primary goal – to conquer Jerusalem for the Christians.”

“Back to Jerusalem again?” Harry moaned.

“History repeats itself, isn’t that what they say?”

Before we got started, he asked one of the flight stewards if he could bring us some peanuts and beer.

“Actually, at this stage of history, it is no longer called Jerusalem, but Aelia Capitolina. The Romans changed the city’s name, hoping to erase the Jews from the map. When Rome adopted Christianity, Jerusalem became Christianized too. Then the Persians sacked the Christians, and let the Jews back into the city to run their own affairs. But it wasn’t long before the

rising Christian Byzantine Empire set its sights on the Holy City. Led by King Heraclius, Byzantine armies ousted the Persians from Israel and marched on Jerusalem. In the name of the Cross, and Christian love and brotherhood, they let the native Christians slaughter thousands of Jews and then expelled any Jewish survivors from the city. But their hold over the battle-torn city was short lived. A great storm of dust, spreading with the deadliness of a mushroom cloud, arose over the Sinai Desert as the armies of Allah swept through Egypt on their way to the Holy Land.”

Harry halted my narrative and froze Muhammad’s battalion of camels in midstride, by holding up a hand, then ripping open a bag of roasted peanuts with his teeth.

“With your consent, let’ start with a little overview,” I suggested.

“You’re the history professor.”

“Although Jerusalem was the geographical target of the Crusades, the two-hundred years of pillage and slaughter, wasn’t so much a battle for territory, as for religious world’s heavyweight crown. Like two prizefighters slugging it out to the very last bell, the Christians and Moslems fought over the Holy City, each religion trying to prove that it was the true faith, selected by God to lead mankind to salvation. In the process, millions of soldiers and innocent civilians were killed, Jews and non-Jews alike, all in the name of Allah or Christ. Jerusalem was merely the battleground of the ideological contest.”

“What about the Jews?” Harry asked.

“They were still licking their wounds from their defeat by the Romans. What the pagan Romans didn’t finish, the Christian Romans tried their best to complete, wiping out the downtrodden Jews wherever they ran for shelter. Military, the Jews weren’t a factor in the Crusades at all.”

“Why over Jerusalem and not some other place?”

“By that time, everyone believed in God in some form or another. And everyone knew that Jerusalem was God’s chosen city on Earth. Adam and Eve were born there. Cain killed Abel in a squabble over who would inherit the town. After the Flood, Noah brought a thanksgiving offering to God on the site of the Temple Mount. It’s where Abraham was tested with the sacrifice of Isaac, and where Jacob dreamed of a ladder of angels connecting Heaven and Earth. The Jews had their ancient Temple there for a thousand years before they were routed from the land, and they still face in the direction of Jerusalem when they pray until this very day. While Jerusalem isn’t mentioned at all in the “Koran,” Islamic legend tells that Muhammad flew from there to Mecca on a horse, even though the imaginative fellow never stepped foot in Jerusalem in his lifetime. Although Jerusalem is the focus of our story, to the Moslems, Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo were far more important.”

“Don’t the Moslems face Mecca when they pray?” Harry asked.

“That’s right. But while Jerusalem didn’t play any part in the beginnings of Islam, the Moslems understood that to verify their claim that they were the new, universal religion, they would have to wrest Jerusalem away from the Christians and Jews. The Church had the very same goal. Even though Rome was its center, they launched the Crusades to liberate the Church of the Holy Sepulcher from the grasp of the Moslem infidels, less worried about the spread of Islam than they were over the chance that the Jews might return to the Holy City, proving that God hadn’t cast them into everlasting purgatory after all.”

“So when the Moslems conquered Jerusalem, the Church went off to war.”

“Exactly. But while the first Crusaders were ideologically motivated, many others set off in quest for booty and fame. For the poor of the realm, it was an opportunity to earn a monthly salary for plundering and killing Jews, all under the auspices and blessings of the Church. Everyone was enlisted. Slaves were promised emancipation, prisoners were freed from jail, and sinners were granted salvation in helping to raise the Cross back over the churches of Jerusalem and rescue the Holy Grail. Hordes of marauding Crusaders swept through Europe, leaving a trail of slaughter, pillage, and rape wherever they passed.”

“Richard the Lionheart wasn’t a rapist,” Harry objected, getting back to the star of the movie.

“I’m sorry to tell you that while Richard possessed considerable military skill and bravery, the romantic legend surrounding him is more historical fiction than fact. Physically, he was head and shoulders above everyone else, but morally, he wasn’t very different from the massacring mobs which he led. As heir to the throne of England, the gallivanting young Richard was reprimanded by his father, King Henry the Second, for his nightly un-knightly behavior. While he was betrothed at an early age to Princess Alys, daughter of King Louis VII of France, he seemed to prefer her brother’s company much much more.”

“I don’t believe it!” Harry exclaimed.

“I don’t mean to tarnish your childhood heroes.”

“Richard the Lionheart was gay?”

“To succeed in his schemes to overthrow his father, the ever-ambitious Richard, enlisted the aid of his wife’s brother, Philip. Time and again, King Henry succeeded in foiling his son’s treacherous intentions to seize the throne, until the beleaguered monarch died of a broken heart. At his coronation, Richard barred Jews from the ceremony. Any Jew showing up at the palace was stripped, flogged, and murdered. When the news reached the city of London, the Christians of the city set out on a massacre, rounding up the Jews and burning them alive. Solidifying his kingship, Richard formed an alliance with France by spending a night in the same bed with Philip, with whom he shared a passionate friendship.”

“It was probably symbolic, like when two leaders shake hands today,” Harry insisted.

“Believe what you like. In any event, the two pals joined forces, and with crosses embroidered on their breastplates, they set out together to liberate the Holy Land from the armies of Saladin and win Jerusalem back for the Church. After the dismal failure of the first two Crusades, Richard was certain that he was the man, chosen by God, to extinguish the fires of Jihad. After all, hadn't the famous sword of King Arthur, the Excaliber, fallen into his hands in battle? So, complaining that London was cold and always raining, he waved goodbye to England and set off with Philip on what to him was more of a madcap adventure than a sacred cause. Leading an army of trained soldiers and renegades through Sicily, he looted all the cities on the way in order to hire more mercenaries. Capturing Byzantine Rhodes and Cyprus, he married, Berengaria, daughter of the King of Navarre, in a calculated, political union. Abandoning her, he set sail with Philip to the Holy Land's port city of Acco, which he captured while suffering from a fierce bout of scurvy. Lying on a stretcher, he remained with his troops, firing pinpoint arrows with his crossbow at the enemy guards up on the ramparts. After a nasty falling out with Philip regarding who would rule over Jerusalem, Richard proceeded on alone, executing the three-thousand prisoners he had captured in Acco. Moving south, he defeated Saladin's forces in their first encounter. Raping their way down to Jaffe, Richard's impassioned and well-supplied warriors looked to be unbeatable. But when he learned that Philip had returned to France and was amassing an

army to march on England, Richard was forced into signing a temporary truce with the Moslem ruler, Saladin, which granted Christians the right to re-enter Jerusalem and establish a presence there. He returned to England just in time to ward off Philip's advances. But his plans to renew the fight for Jerusalem were never fulfilled."

"My biography for juniors said he was killed in a battle after his troops fled and he stayed on to battle alone," Harry related.

"A nice legend, but the reality is that a boy shot him in the arm with a crossbow as he was walking along the ramparts of his castle. Richard had ordered the execution of the lad's father and brothers. A not very dramatic case of gangrene finished him off."

"So in the end, the great lion was felled by a mouse."

"His brain was buried in Charroux Abbey in Poitou, his heart was buried at Rouen in Normandy, and the rest of his corpse was interned at the feet of his father at Fontevraud Abbey in Anjou. If you don't believe me, do a search on Wikipedia."

"How lovely. Just as he chopped up his enemies into pieces, he was chopped up into pieces too."

"Ready for your next life?" I asked.

"I've seen enough," Harry replied.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his seat. The "Fasten Your Seatbelt" sign flashed on when a pock of heavy turbulence rattled the plane, reminding frightened and forgetful

passengers that God was the real Captain of the plane. Harry gulped down a beer.

“There’s a lot more reincarnations to come,” I told him.

“I pass,” he replied.

Just to be sure, I took out my pocket notebook and read out the rest of the list:

“Kublai Khan, King Henry the Eighth, Giacomo Casanova, and Chief Sitting Bull.”

“I was Chief Sitting Bull?” he asked.

“According to my records,” I replied, not knowing why he singled that name out from the rest.

“It’s too much,” he moaned. “I can’t take it anymore.”

I put my notebook away. Harry fell asleep. He looked exhausted.

Like I’ve mentioned, I’m not going into the details of our rock-and-roll tour. My purpose in penning this account is not to titillate my readers by writing an erotic bestseller, but rather to teach people from my mistakes, with the hope that they, like Harry, will change their lives for the better. Reaching San Francisco, Harry had three, back-to-back book-signing galas, in a downtown bookstore, at Berkley College, and across the bridge in Marin County. At each location, Harry delivered a short lecture on the power of restraint. I was amazed how the guy came alive before crowds of people. He never seemed to

tire. Even angels, when they were working on Earth, had to nap once in a while. But Harry could work non-stop. In the Winnebago, he let me in on his secret. Cocaine. He was hooked on the stuff.

Like it was in the store, “Books and Books,” in Manhattan, someone wrote the book inscriptions that people requested, so all Harry had to do was sign when they got to the head of line. Chuck stood behind him in his karate uniform, arms crossed over his chest, looking like a capable bodyguard. Harry asked me to wear “New Age” yoga pants and a “New Age” yoga shirt. I was in charge of the apples, finding a few willing candidates that Harry could choose from for his evening pleasure.

“Me?” I protested, when he gave me the assignment. “I’m an angel.”

“You used to be an angel,” he quipped. “Now you’re a bum like all the rest of us.”

The problem was that I didn’t feel like a pimp, as you might have expected. On the contrary, I enjoyed it. How the apples all played up to me! Especially after Harry turned the spotlight over to me and had me levitate one of his books in the air, in order to demonstrate the power of concentration. Like I said, the brunt of my angelic powers had been disconnected. But I had a few cheap tricks left. I don’t know if the power came through holy channels, or through the doings of the Satan, who was happy to drag me deeper into his clutches, but it worked. I could even levitate three books in the air at once and rotate

them around the bookstores like little space stations. That stunt brought loud cheers of excitement and waves of applause from the crowds. And it sure as hell sold books for Harry!

What can I tell you? The Winnebago was rocking that night! And the next night. And the night after that.

We traveled down the coast, playing major gigs at Oakland, San Jose, Santa Cruz, and Monterey. Cruising down scenic Highway 1, along winding cliffs and the foaming blue Pacific, we brought our traveling show to a nudist beach that showed up on the Winnebago's GPS Navigator.

Only Chuck went for a swim. When Harry said he was remaining in the camper, I said I was staying with him. After all, how low could I let myself fall by prancing around on the beach like a plucked chicken? If Harry lost all of his respect for me, I would never be able to make a dent in his walls of cynicism and disbelief, which seemed as impenetrable as the ancient walls of Jerusalem.

After appearing at a big bookstore in Santa Barbara, we drove up the hills into the forest, to the hotel retreat where the "New Age" yoga and massage weekend was getting underway. While the mostly young and beautiful-looking attendees were checking in and filling out "New Age" questionnaires, we put our belongings in the fabulous suites that were waiting for us. The first meeting was held out on the spacious lawn, where over five-hundred aficionados of the "New Age" Way were sitting on the grass, most of them in awkward yoga positions.

Speaking into a microphone, Harry gave an introductory lecture on karma and Kundalini breathing, and guided Chuck through some basic yoga techniques. Then, leaving Chuck behind to put the group through some exercises, we retired back to his suite, where he told me to go through the registration forms and pick out the more attractive apples from the photos attached. Then he retired into his bedroom, saying he wanted to rest.

Outside the room's large picture window, I could see everybody splashing into the retreat's dozen large outdoor Jacuzzis for a relaxing break. After that, a local yoga masseuse was to demonstrate Zen massage techniques, which everyone would try out on each other after pairing into partners. Following dinner, Harry was scheduled to give another lecture, but he didn't show up. After waiting for him a half hour, Chuck hurried up to the suite to tell him that the crowd was getting impatient. He returned to the auditorium alone, whispering in my ear that Harry wasn't feeling well and that he requested me to give the lecture in his place.

So that's what I did. Being my very first lecture, I was a little nervous. I wasn't accustomed to speaking before large gatherings. Plus, it was obvious from people's groans that they were disappointed that I had taken Harry's place. He was the star attraction, not me. They had paid a lot of money to hear the master, not one of his students. But after I flew a few books around the hall like flying saucers, I won them over to my side. One guy ran up to the rostrum, looking for some kind of remote control, but Chuck shooed him away. Luckily, I remembered

most of the major points of Harry's lecture on the power of concentration, so my debut proved to be a rousing success. It even increased their interest in Harry. If a disciple could levitate objects, imagine what his teacher could do! At the end of my presentation, I was so inundated with questions from apples who wanted to meet me that Chuck had to fight them away. The rest of the evening, the "New Age" groupies were free to watch movies, bathe in the heated outdoor Jacuzzis, or party in the hotel disco. I didn't see Harry the whole night. Like a recluse, he remained locked in his room.

It turned out that the hotel and "New Age" Enterprises had to refund everyone's money. After his first lecture, Harry never showed up again. Apologizing, the management explained that Harry was sick. The truth was that he did look a little pale. He complained of chest pains and a shortness of breath. The normally hyperactive conman seemed to have no energy or enthusiasm at all. Chuck convinced him to go to the hospital, where tests, thank God, proved negative. Hypertension, the doctors called it.

"This time," Harry said when we were walking back to the Winnebago in the hospital parking lot.

"This time what?" I asked him.

"This time, the pain in my heart was only a warning, but the next time, God can call it curtains like that," he noted with a snap of his fingers. "Isn't that right?"

“That’s right, Harry,” I answered. “Your thirty days are running out.”

“You should watch out yourself,” he advised me. “Once you’ve bitten into the apple, it’s very hard to stop.”

He was right. The Almighty could pull out the plug whenever He deemed, with or without warning, with angels just like with human beings. Ironically, our roles were beginning to be reserved. Harry, the budding penitent, was warning me, the fallen angel, that I had better put my house in order.

All the rest of the way to Los Angeles, Harry sat in a deep, meditative silence. What I hadn’t been able to accomplish in all of our talks, God had done in a few seconds with a sudden pain in Harry’s heart. The showman had gotten the message. For one thing, Harry wasn’t stupid. And for another, he wanted to stay alive. After seeing on screen how all of his previous lifetimes had ended up dismally, a little pain in the ticker had pierced through all of his delusions of invincible grandeur and fame.

I wasn’t sure if Harry’s sudden introspection was merely the outcome of fright, or whether he was really feeling pains in his heart over the rotten choices he had made in his life. Remorse was an important factor if his repentance was going to stick. Fright can get a person started, but without real regret over the past, and a firm commitment to change in the future, thoughts of penitence don’t last. Once an ailing person starts feeling

healthy again, his fleeting brush with humility is soon forgotten, and it isn't long before he's back to his old arrogant behavior.

Judging from his lackluster appearance at a big Westwood bookstore, it wasn't the same Harry. If you wanted to measure his performance, it showed up in book sales, which were noticeably low. People were more interested in my aerial sideshow. In Los Angeles, word had gotten out ahead of our arrival, and several TV news crews were on hand to film books as they circled over the heads of delighted customers. Chuck had to shove fans away. As reporters flocked around me, I got a glimpse of Harry sneaking unnoticed out of the store. I really felt sorry for him. I mean without his encouragement, I never would have turned into a star. It just goes to show you how fleeting fame can be in Hollywood.

That evening, Harry didn't show up at the masquerade Halloween party that "New Age" Enterprises was hosting with MGM Studios, which had purchased movie rights to his book. Mega-powered floodlights lit up the Milky Way outside the Sunset Boulevard disco where the gala was being held. Their beams crossed back and forth in the night, piercing the sky. If you ask me, there were more stars at the party than there were in the heavens. Some of the costumes could have won Academy Awards. In addition to the usual Halloween skeletons and witches, there were characters from "Star Wars," "Lord of the Rings," "Harry Potter," "Pirates of the Caribbean," and "Avatar." And talk about apples! The place was like an orchard of red delicious, all ready and ripe for the picking.

Dressed as an angel with a halo and wings, I was standing at one of the bars, sipping on a drink, when I heard a deep melodious voice behind me. Turning, my eyes were blinded by the sight of another angel. His costume was illuminant and glowing. "Pretty wild effect," I thought.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" the familiar voice questioned, sounding like Charlton Heston.

"Ashamed of what?" I inquired.

"The way you've been acting. You're giving all of us angels a bad name."

I laughed good-naturedly, thinking that he was kidding.

"I'm not joking," he said. "You see that screen on the wall?" he continued, referring to a wall-length plasma screen that mirrored the dancing on the dance floor.

"Yeah, I see it."

"Do you want me to exchange cassettes and show everyone what you've been doing down here on Earth? It's all been recorded, you know."

Now that my eyes had adjusted to his glow, I could make out his features. It was Seth, a real angel, one of my oldest friends!

"Seth! What are you doing here?" I asked in surprise.

"That's what I've come to ask you. Do you realize the trouble you're in? I've been sent here to warn you."

“You’ve been sent here?” I asked. Instinctively, I looked up toward the ceiling, but all I could see was a swirl of flashing strobes.

“You know we can’t do anything on our own.”

“That’s what I once thought, but it isn’t true, at least not down here.”

“It’s time for you to quit your silly games,” he said.

“I can’t. I don’t know why. But I’m sure it will pass,” I assured him.

“It doesn’t seem that way from your behavior. Not only that, you seem to be enjoying your sins. Besides, you’ve been misusing your celestial gifts and making a buck on the side. That’s a big offence.”

“A guy’s got to make a living,” I replied. “What do you want? They pulled out my plug. I’m down here on my own.”

“You pulled out your plug, no one else. Like you’ve told Harry, stop now, while you still have the chance. Otherwise, my old friend, you’re doomed.”

“Don’t listen to him,” a sinister voice behind me argued.

Turning, my heart almost jumped out of my skin. The voice belonged to a towering figure, as tall and black as a basketball center. His eyes beamed like a laser from his narrow, Zorro-like mask. The hood of a cobra framed his terrifying face, and he had the body and tail of a snake.

Either it was a fantastically real job of Hollywood costuming, or the Satan himself.

“Your friend is just trying to scare you,” he insisted. “The fact is he’s jealous of your success.”

“Nonsense,” Seth replied. “You know me better than that.”

My head flipped back and forth between them, as if I were watching a ping-pong match.

“Be smart and think about your future,” the Snake advised.

“Keep behaving like you are and you won’t have a future,” the angel countered. “I’m warning you – you’re playing with fire.”

“Don’t worry about his threats,” the Snake assured me. “I’ll take care of you. You’ve studied history. Who really rules over the world – me or them?”

“It may seem that way for the time being, but things will change,” Seth promised.

“For the time being!” the Satan barked out with a laugh. “I’ve had the upper hand for thousands of years!”

“Don’t be taken in by his persuasions,” my old buddy warned.

“Can I get anyone a drink?” the bartender asked.

“Not now!” the Snake impatiently snarled with a glare that almost turned the poor guy into ashes.

The dancing on the disco floor continued, looking like some voodoo rite of possessed and demon-driven souls. The music

was so loud, I doubt that anyone could have overheard our conversation at the bar.

“Face it,” the Snake said to me. “When you came down to Earth, you were a nothing. Harry didn’t pay any attention to you. No one took you seriously. Now, with my help, you’ve become a celebrity. Just think what will be when you’re internationally famous! Everyone will listen to what you have to say. Take my advice. First become famous. Then if you want to turn the world on to God, be my guest. I won’t stand in your way.”

“Is that a promise?” I asked.

“I swear on everything holy,” the Snake vowed, as if holding up a hand on a Bible.

“Coming from him, it means nothing,” Seth insisted.

Just then, two incredible looking apples came over and hung their arms around the Snake.

“Who’s your friend?” one of them asked, eyeing me with a look that made me blush.

“Allow me to introduce you,” the sleazy reptile said. With a flick of his powerful tail, he knocked Seth off his feet. When the angel hit the floor, he disappeared.

“Holy shit,” the bartender said, staring down at the floor in surprise. “I’ve never seen that stunt before.”

To get on with the story, I had to pinch hit for Harry in Long Beach and make the drive down to San Diego alone. Like with Seth, Harry just disappeared. When I flew back to New York, the doorman let me into the apartment. There's was a note from Harry on his desk.

"You take over for me for awhile," it read. "I left word with my office and lawyer that you'll be running the show. I need some time to be by myself. Thanks for everything you've done for me. It's made a big impression."

It was simply signed, Harry. And there was a hastily scribbled P.S.

"Don't worry about feeding the snake. He can starve to death for all I care."

Chapter Seventeen

The first thing I did was some interior decorating. I got rid of Harry's collection of idols and voodoo dolls, and replaced them with an angel motif – puff pillows, sky wallpaper, and dozens of new canaries and tropical birds that I let fly freely around the penthouse. I donated Yasser to the Central Park Zoo. Luckily, Harry's wife liked the changes when she dropped by for a night, on her next stopover in Manhattan.

After book sales started to wane, I did pretty much the same overhaul with the office. Without Harry around to initiate things, “New Age” Enterprises showed a big drop on Wall Street. Yoga products stop selling. “New Age” boutiques were forced to close. Reluctantly, I had to lay off Chuck and other personnel.

I kept the business going as best I could, but without Harry, things weren’t the same. For one thing, when I made the decision to stay in New York, I lost all of my powers completely. Even the Satan didn’t bother with me anymore. I couldn’t even levitate a single book. Without that trick, I couldn’t draw crowds. People wanted Harry, not me. Cutting out and pasting all kinds of witty aphorisms from the Internet, sayings of Confucius, Aristotle, Plato, Voltaire, Ben Franklin, Nietzsche, and other philosophers, I hired a ghostwriter and rushed a new book out on the market, called, “Lessons With Harry.” It reached the New York Times bestseller list, hung on for three weeks, then disappeared from the charts, just like Harry had vanished into thin air.

Without revenue coming in from book sales, speaking engagements, and yoga wear, I had to close down the office. With the capital we still had, I converted the loft into a mall featuring Chinese restaurants, Chinese take-out food, and a Hong Kong-like bazaar peddling all kinds of cheap crap from the Orient. But the idea didn’t work. People seemed to prefer walking around the filthy, aroma-filled streets of Chinatown for

a more “authentic experience,” rather than being cooped up in a loft.

After three years of almost steady failure, I had to liquidate the business and sell the loft. When the inevitable divorce wiped out Harry’s savings account at Smith Barney, I had to sell his apartment as well. Harry’s former wife took up residence in Paris, and his lawyer, if he knew where Harry was, wouldn’t disclose his whereabouts.

I can’t complain. For those three years, I lived the good life. I never made a pig of myself with Harry’s money, but I didn’t go without whatever pleasures I fancied. I enjoyed New York’s nightlife, a few vacations in the Caribbean, and rubbed elbows with the talk of the town. Ten days of penicillin cured a case of VD, and over-the-counter lip creams kept reoccurring bouts of herpes in check. Then, after the apartment was sold, I found myself penniless and out of work, with no place to live. For a while, I spent my nights down in the subway, crashing out on the Forty-Second-Street Shuttle, riding back and forth until some cop threw me off the train. Since it was summer, I spent some nights in Central Park, then I moved down to the Bowery, where I shined car windows by day and slept in a basement stairway by night. Playing a hunch, I landed a job washing glasses back at the “Fallen Angel,” but even the cheap and bitter apples who danced there didn’t take my passes seriously anymore.

For a while, I slept on a stained and moth-eaten mattress in the kitchen. One night, after the joint had closed, there was a knock

on the door. Looking out the peephole, I saw a Hasidic Jew, dressed all in black.

“We don’t give handouts,” I called out, not bothering to unlock the door.

I tried to go back to sleep, but the guy knocked again. Cursing, I got up and walked back through the empty bar to the entrance.

“We don’t give out charity!” I shouted.

“It’s me, Harry,” the familiar voice called out.

Was I ever surprised! Quickly I unlocked the lock and the security latch.

Framed by a black hat and a beard, the face was Harry’s all right! I would have passed him right by on the street, thinking he was just some other Lubavitch Jew from Brooklyn, but standing face to face, there was no mistaking that this was the long lost Harry. Only there was a new softness in his features, a gentle smile, a glow in his eyes that he hadn’t had before. And while in the old days, he had stood erect and walked with a swagger, now he was humbly bent over, as if weighed down by his full-length black coat and the shoulder bag he was carrying.

“Harry!” I happily exclaimed. “Is it really you?”

“Yes,” he said. “Thank the good Lord. It’s me.”

It wasn’t just that his clothes were different, or that he had exchanged his Hindu tunic for a new line of Hasidic wear. It was obvious that he had gone through a spiritual reincarnation

during the almost four years since I had seen him last. His expression and manner had totally changed. But it was Harry all the same.

I gave him a hug. A real hug. Like when you rediscover a long-lost brother. Then I feasted my eyes on him once again and gave him a kiss on his beard.

“Harry! Harry!” I repeated. “You son of a bitch. Where the hell have you been?”

Chapter Eighteen

We sat in the dimly lit pub and talked until dawn. Behind the bar, bottles stood like rows of silent saints. A glowing sign advertising Budweiser Beer spread a golden light across the tables in the place, making the cheap joint look like a Rembrandt painting. Harry kept his head lowered, careful not to look at the girly posters on the walls. When the first rays of daylight appeared outside the frosted window, he said he had to find a *shul* with a *minyán*, put on the *tefillin* that he was carrying in his shoulder bag, and pray the morning service.

What did we talk about? Everything. We had four years of catching up to do. I told him about my failures with running the business and having to sell his apartment, but he knew most of the details already from his lawyer. He didn't seem upset, nor

angry at me in the least. As far as I could tell, he didn't hold any grudges at all.

"Easy come, easy go," he observed.

"You're not peed off at me?" I asked.

Shrugging, he brushed the matter away with a flick of his hand, as if fame and fortune were the most insignificant things in the world.

"Someday, maybe I can pay some of it back," I floundered.

"It isn't necessary," he said. "It's only money."

"That's true, but it was your money, not mine."

"Don't worry," he said. "I've got a private Swiss savings account with enough book royalties to keep me going for years."

"Still..." I began, but Harry brushed me into silence with another wave of his hand.

"You tried your best," he assured me. "Anyway, 'New Age' Enterprises was all a lot of *nurishkeit*. That's Yiddish for frivolity. '*Vanity of vanity, says Kohelet. All is vanity.*'"

He said it earnestly, as if he really meant it.

"You've learned Yiddish?" I asked him.

"A little," he said. "*A bissilla.*"

Then, with a sad and pained expression, he glanced around the bar.

“I had a hard time finding you,” he related. “I searched everywhere. Then I remembered this joint.”

“This is where my downfall all started,” I recollected.

“What’s happened to you, my good friend?” he wanted to know. “This place is a dive. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“I lost my wings,” I replied with a shrug. “I’m stranded.”

“So was I,” he said. “But you helped me get out of the swamp.”

“I helped you?” I asked in surprise.

“Sure. What did you think? All the lessons you taught me.”

That made me feel good. At least I had done something worthwhile on Earth.

“I can never thank you enough,” he said. “You saved my life.”

Could be that I blushed. “That’s nice of you to say, Harry. Can I get you a drink?” I asked, standing up.

“I don’t drink anymore.”

“A glass of water, maybe. A Coke? We have peanuts around somewhere, but I don’t know if they’re kosher.”

Harry reached out a hand and lowered me back in my seat.

“I’m OK for now,” he assured me. “I came back here, because I wanted to thank you. Actually, I was hoping you wouldn’t be in New York anymore. I was hoping that you would have

discovered your senses and gone back to Heaven. It pains me to see you like this.”

“I wanted to get out of here,” I admitted. “Not right at first. When you disappeared, I continued to play the role of the big shot, but then things went bad, sales crashed, the business went on the skids, things weren’t the same without you running the show. Little by little, I had to lay off workers, give up the loft, and close everything down. After selling your apartment, I had nowhere to go. Before I knew it, I hit rock bottom. Believe me, I’ve tried to pray for salvation, but it’s like my heart is dead. My words are so heavy, after leaving my mouth and rising up toward the ceiling, they take a tail dive and crash back down to the floor.”

“Try going out to an isolated place in the park and praying there,” he advised. “Where there isn’t a ceiling to block your prayers. The Hasidim recommend the practice highly. Especially Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, may his memory be for a blessing. If God doesn’t answer right away, don’t get discouraged. Do it every day. Pray from your heart and God will answer you. Never give in to despair.”

“I’m married to despair,” I told him.

“King David said in the Psalms, *‘If I ascend up to Heaven, You are there, and if I descend to the lowest region of Hell, You are there also.’* God is everywhere. Even in this stinking bar.”

“I tried, Harry, believe me. When I was sleeping in Central Park, I would pray in the woods and scream out. People who saw me

probably thought I was crazy. But all of my pleading did nothing. I'm disconnected from Heaven, that's all."

"You're not disconnected. You're still breathing, right? Life doesn't happen by itself. It means that God is still with you. He's the one pumping air into your lungs. You still have a chance, believe me."

"If you're hoping to save me, Harry, I'm afraid you've come back too late."

"There's no such thing as too late. Look at me. You could live a hundred lifetimes and still not plummet to where I had fallen. But God, in His infinite mercy, tore up my past and let me start anew."

He said it with absolute earnestness, without any of the cynicism that had characterized him in the past.

"I'm happy for you, Harry, I really am. You look like you've found genuine serenity. But your case is different. You're a human. You're expected to screw up. But when an angel falls, that's the worse thing there is. It's unpardonable."

"You always were a little arrogant, you know that?" Harry said sharply. "Stop thinking you're so special and come down off your cloud. It's your ego that's getting in your way, that's all. Nothing can stand in the way of repentance."

How strange life is, I thought. Instead of me lecturing to Harry, he was now lecturing to me.

“To tell you the truth, I blame myself for what happened to you,” he said.

“Nonsense,” I retorted. I could see he was serious. Facing me across the small, round bar table, there was a look of real sorrow in his eyes.

“I was the one who dragged you into the dirt,” he said.

“I dragged myself,” I told him. “Everyone has free choice, remember? That was one of the first things we spoke about.”

“Still, if it wasn’t for me, you never would have been sent down to Earth.”

“I’m not a child. I’ve been around for almost six thousand years. I should have known better than to fool around with temptation.”

“You really mean it?” he asked.

“Yes,” I assured him.

“That’s a load off my conscience,” he said. “With all of my newfound happiness, it’s been a thorn in my side ever since I took off from California, leaving you to clean up my mess.”

“Should I call you, Rabbi?” I asked, with a friendly poke of fun.

“Far from it,” he said.

“Where have you been all these years? In Brooklyn?”

Harry shook his head no. “Jerusalem,” he answered.

“Jerusalem!” I replied in surprise.

“After all you taught me about it, I had to go there and see it for myself.”

I was impressed. Maybe even jealous. Jerusalem was just about the only city where I felt happy when I was down on Earth. Every other place was a shock to my system. Whether it was New York, Paris, London, or Moscow, I felt like a fish out of water, as if I couldn’t breathe. All the angels I knew felt the same way. But being sent down to Jerusalem was like no transition at all.

“What happened?” I asked. “What made you take off out of the blue and disappear for all these years?”

“It’s hard for me to explain,” Harry said. “During our drive down Highway 1 in the Winnebago, I started to experience an overwhelming feeling of shame. By the time we got to the yoga retreat, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I felt soiled, unclean, terribly dirty inside, as if my whole life was a filthy lie.

Somehow, I got through the first lecture, but then I simply couldn’t continue. Something snapped inside. The movies that you had shown me, all the whoring of my past, and killing, and scenes from my own life as a bestselling conman, kept flashing before me. I couldn’t get them out of my mind. Then I started having pains in my chest. It felt like an invisible hand had grabbed a main artery and cut off the circulation. I couldn’t breathe. I was convinced I was going to die. I didn’t have any revelation, or hear any voices out of the sky, but I knew why it

was happening. Nobody had to tell me. I knew God was doing it – and that it was my final chance.”

While Harry was speaking, I stood up, walked behind the bar, and poured myself a double.

“I was scared,” Harry continued. “Maybe for the first time in my life. I don’t know why, maybe because I had inherited the bravery of Richard the Lionheart, and all those others, life never frightened me. I took things in stride. Laughed at the world and mocked at the do-gooders. Up to that point, life had always been a big game.”

I downed the drink, poured myself another, and walked back to the table in the dim and desolate bar. It was Harry’s voice all right, but the Orthodox Jew sitting opposite me looked like some kind of heavenly apparition, not the old Harry I knew.

“I don’t know if my epiphany occurred on the flight out to California, or on the drive down the coast. Alone in the hotel room, feeling that I was going to die, one thought filled my mind – that I had to get to Jerusalem. I can’t explain why. I guess it was because of the films you showed me. Jerusalem was the center of the world. It’s where history began. It’s where I came from. But I had never been there. Not in this lifetime at least. I had traveled to Italy and France and India and China and Thailand and Tahiti and all over the globe, but Jerusalem was the last place in the world I had ever thought of visiting. That night, while you were taking my place downstairs at the lecture, while I was sitting alone in the hotel suite,

feeling that my heart was about to explode, I knew that calling a doctor was a complete waste of time. If I was going to be saved, it wasn't going to be in California. My salvation was awaited me in Jerusalem."

Gripped by Harry's candor, and by the intensity of his story, I didn't have anything to say.

"I was afraid to tell anyone how I was feeling, knowing that if I did, they would laugh and get me to change my mind. So I didn't say a word. Not even to you. All I knew was that I had to get away as fast as I could from the life I was living. Your warning was ringing in my ears that I only had a short time to remain on this planet if I didn't change my tune. When the pain in my heart disappeared, I knew it could return any minute. I knew that God had His hand on the switch. When the doctors didn't find anything wrong at the hospital, that only confirmed my suspicions that God was sending me an urgent message. So, without saying a word to anyone, I flew back to New York, packed some things in a suitcase, and left some instructions with my lawyer. Without telling him where I was going, I jumped in a cab and told the driver to take me to Kennedy Airport. I didn't even take the time to make reservations. I just wanted to get out of New York and get on a plane to Jerusalem as fast as I could."

"You didn't have to become an Orthodox Jew," I said. "Didn't I tell you that keeping the seven commandments of the children of Noah would be more than enough?"

“Believe me, it was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“*Nu?*” I asked, using a Yiddish expression of my own. “How did it happen?”

“It wasn’t so very dramatic,” he said.

“If you write a book about it, you can always dress it up for your readers. When it comes to inspirational bestsellers, you’re Number One.”

“My writing days are over,” he said. “I’ve had enough fame for a lifetime. Right now, I’m content to sit in a yeshiva all day and learn.”

He said it simply, like he really meant it. Maybe it was some of Harry’s old cynicism that had rubbed off on me, but seeing him in his Hasidic costume, I kept expecting him to break out in hysterical laughter and confess that the get-up was all a part of his new hype, on the way to his next runaway bestseller.

“We could start a new business together,” I quipped. “How about the name ‘Biblical Enterprises?’ Do you like it?”

Harry didn’t laugh. His expression was perfectly serious.

“I haven’t come back to convert people, or preach, or start a new scam. I came back to see you, that’s all.”

“I appreciate it, Harry,” I said, gulping down the rest of my drink.

“Wouldn’t you know it,” he said, starting out on his tale. “The cab driver on the way to the airport turned out to be an Israeli.

Sure, there are a lot of Israelis in New York, but what's the chance of getting into a cab with an Israeli on your way to Jerusalem? One in fifty? He was a young kid, taking a breather after a long stint in the Israeli army. He had run out of money traveling around America and was trying to put a little stash together before flying home. We made small talk for a while, and then he asked me if I was Jewish. When I told him I wasn't, he said that Israel was the Holy Land for everyone. When we reached the airport, he gave me a Book of Psalms that someone had left in his cab. I took it as another sign on my journey. I had read hundreds of books on world history, philosophy, and literature, but I had never even looked at the Book of Psalms. Then, once again in the terminal, a Hasidic Jew asked me if I was Jewish. When I said that I wasn't, he smiled and wished me a pleasant day. It turned out he was stopping Jews and getting them to put on tefillin. For a while, I stood a small distance away and watched him wrap the little black boxes on the head and arm of willing volunteers. It looked like some kind of voodoo incantation to me. Having been that route before, I was sure that it wasn't for me."

My head was reeling. Maybe from the liquor, maybe from his tale.

"I had already decided that I was finished living a life of affluence with all of its excesses and waste, so I bought an economy-class ticket to keep a low profile and merge in with the crowd. But one of the stewardesses recognized me and kept bringing me little bottles of wine without my even asking.

Of course, it was a come-on, and her cheek-to-cheek smile was the clincher, but I wanted to be finished with all that. Like I told you, I felt that my life was a filthy mess and that my soul was horribly polluted. So, to get away from her, I got up and found an empty seat in the middle of a group of Hasidic Jews. For some reason, I felt safe in their company, knowing that the stewardess wouldn't enter their territory. They were like uniformed bodyguards in their black frocks and hats, forming a ghetto wall around me which couldn't be breached by all of the worldly temptations from which I wanted to flee. They read their Talmudic texts, and I read my Book of Psalms. No one bothered me. None of them recognized me. If I had told one of them that I was a bestselling author, I don't think it would have impressed him in the least. It was like they belonged to a totally different world."

"You can be religious without shutting yourself off from the rest of society," I observed.

"Of course," Harry replied. "But for a penitent, at the beginning of his journey, he has to disconnect completely from his old world, if he truly wants to break free. At least, that's the way it was for me. I sensed that without such a drastic change, I'd end up back in New York in a week."

I nodded, understanding exactly what he was saying. One of the reasons that I was still crashed out on Earth was that I hadn't exerted all the strength that it took to counter its gravity field of passions and pulls, in order to free myself from its polluted atmosphere and get back to Heaven.

“I suppose I expected to see prophets riding on camels when we landed in Israel, because I remember feeling disappointed when I left the terminal and was confronted with a busy, modern country. My plane ticket came with a free night in a Tel Aviv hotel, so I spent my first day in the Holy Land walking up and down Dissengorf Street, which is like a poor man’s Fifth Avenue, with all of its boutiques and shops. I experienced a terrible let down. It’s hard for me to describe it, but I was looking to find something holy, and instead, I found myself in a lousy imitation of Paris or New York. Of course, Tel Aviv is the modern, secular Israel, and there was a whole other Biblical Israel waiting to be discovered, but with jet lag from the trip and fallen expectations, I started to feel really down. Plus, no one recognized me at all, and, even though I wanted to get away from all that, I suppose it was a blow to my ego. Believe it or not, for a while, I even stood in front of a bookstore window which was displaying my books, but no one gave me a second look. Fighting the urge to walk inside and tell them who I was, I went back to my hotel and stayed in my room the whole night reading Psalms. Would you believe it?”

“It’s not the Harry Walsh that I knew.”

He smiled, perfectly at ease with his new identity. While I was happy for him, I was beginning to feel a little jealous of his aura of calm and the great certainty of his faith.

“The next morning, I took a cab to Jerusalem. I thought about taking a bus, but I wanted to get there as fast as I could. I told the driver to take me to a simple hotel near the Old City. Like I

said, I didn't want anything fancy, just a clean place where I wouldn't be noticed. He dropped me off at the Bethlehem Hotel just inside the Jaffa Gate, in what he called the Christian Quarter. It was a dive of a place, more like a youth hostel than a hotel, with maybe eight rooms, but it was just what I was looking for. The room had a tiny terrace overlooking the busy, cobblestone street below which was always congested with tourists, Arab peddlers, taxis, kids riding on donkeys, Hasidic Jews, and Israeli soldiers and cops. No matter what time of the day, there was always a special glow in the sky. With the rich oriental aroma of spices from the Arab casbah right by the hotel, and the ringing church bells, and wailing prayers from the loudspeakers of the Moslem mosques, there's a mystical air over the city that transports you back to the age of the Crusades and King Richard the Lionheart. I fell in love with the place."

"I've been there," I told him. "In all the world, there is nothing like the Old City of Jerusalem."

"As corny as it might sound, I felt I had been there before. It was like I had finally come home."

"That's not surprising considering your past reincarnations."

Harry glanced at his watch. "I have to find a *minyan*," he said. "And right after that, I have to get to the airport. I'm flying back today. One of my kids is having his tonsils removed."

"You have children?" I asked.

“Three of my own,” he replied with a smile, “and my new wife has four from her first marriage.”

“You remarried?” I asked.

“Thank God,” he said.

“To an Orthodox woman, of course.”

“Of course.”

“She wears a wig?”

“When she isn’t sleeping,” Harry quipped.

“And she dresses up from head to toe?”

“That’s right too.”

“And you’re happy with that?”

“Couldn’t be happier. Here in New York, or just about anywhere else in this modern, ‘civilized’ world, wives dress up so sexy, a husband can never be sure she isn’t shacking up with someone else the minute he’s out of the house, or at the office where she works. With us, it’s different. I know my wife is at home with the kids. She has lunch ready for me when I come home from yeshiva. She doesn’t speak with other men. And I don’t speak with other women. We have relations once a week on Sabbath night. When she’s in her menstruation period, we don’t touch one another at all. When we get back together, we are like honeymooners. Things couldn’t be better.”

I looked up at the clock over the bar. It was five in the morning.

“You still have another hour until dawn,” I told him. “You can pray here, if you like. No one gets here until eleven.”

“I’ll find a shul nearby,” he said. “It’s much prayer to pray in a minyan with others. You know it would be great if you could come back to Jerusalem with me.”

“I can’t, Harry. I have responsibilities here.”

“Nonsense! Cleaning the floor in a bar! Let them get someone else.”

“I suppose you’re right, but Jerusalem is too heavy for me. I’m not ready for it yet.”

“I’m not pressuring you. I’m just suggesting it as a friend. I’d invite you to move in with us till you can get set up on your own, but my mother lives in our spare room. Anyway, it isn’t hard to find a place in Jerusalem.”

“Your mother’s in Jerusalem too?”

“I brought her there when I decided to stay. Thanks to you, she’s doing great.”

I remembered the night we had visited the old lady in the nursing home, when I still had all my powers. Harry was a good son, that was for sure. No wonder that God had rewarded him with such happiness.

“What sealed it for me was my first visit to the Western Wall,” he continued.

“The *Kotel*,” I said, calling the famous wall of the ancient Jerusalem Temple by its Hebrew name.

“I stood there for hours, gripping onto its massive boulders. I cried like a baby,” he recounted. “Tears rolled down my cheeks for the first time in my life. I couldn’t control myself. I couldn’t stop. Three thousand years before, I had waged a war against Jerusalem and razed the city into a pile of rubble and ashes, and here I was standing before the only remaining wall of the Temple, the one wall that had withstood all of my arrogance and senseless wrath.”

The memory caused Harry’s voice to well up with tears once again. He paused to regain his composure.

“While I was there, a rabbi came up to me and asked if I was Jewish. When I told him no, he smiled and walked away. One by one, he walked up to the newcomers that appeared at the Wall and asked them the same question. He put his arm around some and talked to them at length. I saw him hand them his card. Curious, I walked up to him and asked why he had asked me that question. He said that if I was Jewish, he would have invited me to learn in a yeshiva. When I told him that I was ready to learn anyway, he politely declined, and once again walked off on his rounds, searching for more suitable candidates.”

I felt like I needed another drink. This time I found some orange juice and added a heavy slug of vodka.

“That first week, I went back to the *Kotel* every day. I was drawn there like a magnet. I felt so at peace there. It was like spiritual Jacuzzi. Being there, holding on to the stones of the Wall, wiped away all of the ugliness and impurity and disgust I felt with my life. I felt cleansed, reborn, as if God had reached out to touch me and erased all of the mistakes of my past.

“The same rabbi was there every day, trying to interest the uninitiated in trying some yeshiva learning. ‘I’m still willing to try,’ I told him each morning. But he would only smile pleasantly and walk on in search of someone Jewish. One day I asked him why he had a prejudice against gentiles. Taken aback, he explained that Judaism didn’t believe in a missionary approach, and didn’t go out of its way looking for converts. He said that keeping the Torah’s commandments was a very difficult and serious matter that had to be preceded by a long and diligent course of Torah study. Besides, he said, with all of the anti-Semitism in the world, it didn’t pay to become a Jew.”

“He’s right,” I observed.

“That’s all well and good, but I hadn’t come all the way to Jerusalem to be brushed off so easily. After asking a lot of questions of a lot of different people, I found a yeshiva that had a program for converts. I wasn’t thinking about becoming a Jew – I just wanted to learn what the Torah was all about. If it was the truth, like you told me it was, then I wanted to know what it said. All of my life, I always enjoyed learning, so it was easy for me. I loved sitting in the yeshiva and learning all day. It was like going back to college when I didn’t have a care in the world. Of

course, to study the Talmud in the original, I had to learn Aramaic, and that wasn't so easy. And learning Hebrew at my age wasn't the same as learning French when I was a kid. But as the rabbis told me, 'slowly, slowly.' Rabbi Akiva started learning Torah when he was forty, and he turned out to be the greatest sage in Israel. But it was more than the intellectual challenge. The spirit of God was there in the study hall, just like it was at the *Kotel*. Plus, being celibate for so long, and not taking drugs, and getting to sleep at a reasonable hour, all made me feel like a lion. I studied more vigorously than anyone else. All the passion that I had spent before on women and making myself famous, I now directed toward God."

Harry's face shone with light as he reflected back on his six-thousand year journey.

"So after all of those reincarnations you told me about, and a lifetime of persecuting Jews, I decided to become one in Jerusalem. To me, that was my rectification."

I was speechless. Flabbergasted. Happy for Harry and proud that he had been my student.

"I don't want to give the wrong impression and make it sound like it was easy," he said. "On the contrary. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. Most of the other students from America were a lot younger than I was, and their brains were a lot fresher than mine. What they picked up in one lesson, I had to go over four or five times. Not to mention the Israelis who were learning in the yeshiva, they were light years ahead of me."

And remember the evil prompter you taught me about? He followed me to Israel. Every day on my way to the yeshiva, he'd walk with me and say, 'Why are you wasting your time? This isn't for you. Why throw away your life? You've got enough background for a new book already, so let's wrap it up and get back to reality.' Day in and day out, he'd argue with me without letting up. Generally, I refused to listen to him, but sometimes, when the learning became more advanced and difficult, I had the urge to pack it all in and fly back to New York. One day, I slipped back into my yoga costume, took a cab to Tel Aviv, and hung around a bookstore until I found some gullible victim who was impressed to meet the world famous author. I took her to a hotel and got us a room, but before things got underway, I started to feel guilty, and my heart began to pound like it was about to explode. Terrified, and mumbling some stupid explanation, I got the hell out of there and made it back to Jerusalem. Like a junkie needing a fix, I rushed back to the *Kotel*. Wanting to feel reconnected, I entered the underground tunnels that run along the Wall. I wanted to be opposite the place of the Holy of Holies on the Temple Mount, the place where Adam was born, and where Abraham built an altar. But there was construction work going on, and a wooden board gave way beneath me, and suddenly I was plunging through space, down an endless chasm, as if I were in a tunnel speeding back through time. Jerusalem is like a layered city, built up on the destructions of its past, one empire and civilization after the next. Free falling through history, I re-witnessed the Crusades, and the Roman and Greek conquests, and the fall of

the city to the armies of Babylon. Finally, like a space capsule returning to Earth, I splashed down in a pool of water.

Immediately, I felt purified. When I crawled out onto dry land, sitting under a tree was the oldest man I ever saw in my life. His face shone like the sun. He was dressed in a brilliant white robe and clutched a staff in his hand. His beard flowed down behind him and formed a path leading to a towering gate and a beautiful garden that was filled with a radiant light. 'I've been waiting for you,' he said."

"Are you sure it wasn't a dream?" I asked Harry.

"As sure as I'm sitting with you here in this bar." he replied.

"OK," I said, knowing that anything was possible in Jerusalem.

"Let's hear the rest."

"You don't believe me?"

"I suppose if an angel can come down to Earth to talk to a man, then a man can go back through time to talk to an angel."

"You think he was an angel?"

"Sounds that way to me. Or it may have been Adam sitting outside the gates of Eden, waiting to return to the Garden."

"It's funny, but he looked a little like the Rabbi who walked around the Western Wall plaza all day, looking for people who wanted to learn, but his beard was all white and the light shining from his face was blinding. 'You've been waiting for me?' I asked him. 'Yes,' he answered. 'For almost six thousand years.'"

“It must have been Adam,” I said. “What did he tell you?”

“He said, ‘The fear of God is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all. Just one sentence, like in a Chinese fortune cookie, as if that summarized everything. The next thing I remember is waking up in a hospital bed. There was a religious woman sitting nearby wearing a wig and a kerchief over her head. She gave me a big smile. She wasn’t pretty in the usual sense of Miss America, but she had a simple warm charm that put me at ease. She held a Book of Psalms in her hands and said her name was Hannah.

“‘Where am I?’ I asked her.”

“‘You’re in Shaare Tzedek Hospital,’ she said in a shy and hesitant English.”

“‘What happened to me?’ I wanted to know.”

“‘You had a bad fall. And a fatal heart attack. They had to give you a heart transplant to save your life. You’ve been in a coma for the last two weeks. My husband, may he rest in peace, donated his heart to you. He was killed in a car crash the same day that you fell.’”

“‘I didn’t know what to say. I’m sorry. Thank you. I’ll be happy to pay for the heart?’”

“You don’t have to say anything,’ she assured me. ‘Just rest and get better soon.’”

“She visited me every day. Sometimes, she would sit by my bedside for hours. She was there when I nodded off to sleep and when I woke up. Sometimes, she sent one of her kids to sit by my side. She had four boys, one around bar-mitzvah age, and the others younger. With their long, curly, side locks, they looked like miniature Hasidic Jews. They didn’t speak any English, so they spent their time bobbing back and forth, studying their tomes. It turned out that their father had been a very pious and learned man. After a week, when Hannah kept coming back, you didn’t have to be a Talmud scholar to know what was on her mind. I told her I wasn’t Jewish, but it didn’t seem to matter.”

“You can convert,” she said.

“I just started to learn,” I protested.

“You’ll continue,” she insisted. “Just like Rabbi Akiva.”

“Her mind was made up. She was going to marry me. When I asked her why, she said that I had a good heart.”

“That’s the most important thing of all,” she assured me.

“When I recovered, I went back to my learning. I spent the Sabbath and holidays with my new adopted family. Being with Hannah was the greatest happiness I ever had. We never touched. We never kissed. But it felt like we had been lovers forever. After learning for a year, I was circumcised. I had

already made it a habit to go to the ritual immersion pool every morning, so the *mikvah* part was nothing new. When my conversion was official, we got married.”

“Mazel tov!” I told him.

“Within a year, we had twins.”

“Mazel tov again!”

“So that’s my story. My new name is Harry Ben Abraham. Hannah calls me Hirshel, and my Israeli name is Tzvi.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand, as if I were meeting someone for the very first time. “I’ll look you up the next time I get to Jerusalem.”

“Woo! I’ve got to go,” he exclaimed, glancing once again at his watch. He stood up and lifted his shoulder bag onto the table. Opening it, he took out a Book of Psalms and handed it to me.

“This is the book the taxi driver gave me on the way to the airport when I first set off for Israel,” he said. “I want you to have it. If I can be forgiven, you can too.”

I took the book from him and felt a sob rising in my throat. “Oh, Harry,” I said, fighting to maintain my composure. “I’m so screwed up.”

“If you feel ashamed, you’re half the way there already,” he assured me.

It was the kind of thing that I would have told him a long time ago. He gave me a comforting hug.

“Be strong my friend,” he said. “Trust in God and He will straighten your path.”

I walked with him to the door of the bar. It was that time of the dawn when it wasn't yet light and the streetlamps were still glowing. He gave me an encouraging smile, but there were tears in his eyes too. His beard felt funny when he gave me a kiss on the cheek. Then, with a wave, he turned away from the bar and headed down the sidewalk, a Jew in search of a synagogue. For a moment, I had an impulse to call out to Harry and run off to join him, but my tongue was tied, and my feet felt like they were stuck in quicksand. Harry turned at the corner, and, like an angel, disappeared from my life.

“Fallen Angel.” That's what it said on the window of the sleazy joint where I lived. I walked back inside and shut the door. For a long moment, I stared at my reflection in the mirror behind the bar, and wondered if I could follow in Harry's path. I made myself a stiff Bloody Mary for breakfast. I had to wash the floor, set up the chairs, finish cleaning the glasses, and tidy up the dressing room before the apples arrived. But it was still early. Having the morning in front of me, I took out a napkin from a dispenser on the counter and started to write this book. Maybe by telling Harry's story and inspiring others to live better lives, I'll be able to get myself out of this hell as well.

THE END

