

Chapter One

THE ASSIGNMENT

Monday 14th February

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

Peter Preston was Editor-in-Chief of the Brisbane Daily Mail where James was a part-time journalist. He paced around his spacious office like an angry lion, glancing occasionally at the man sitting in the chair opposite his own. He looked like a man with a problem he wanted to get off his chest but didn't know how to approach it. Eventually he stopped pacing and said, 'Ever since 9-11, relations between Muslims and other religions in Australia have worsened. Wouldn't you agree?'

James felt uncomfortable sitting down while his boss remained standing. He had to strain to look up at the man towering over him with the manner and bearing of an ex-army officer. 'Yes, I suppose so Chief.' He wondered where this was leading.

Peter Preston, or PP as many of his staff called him behind his back, sat down in his plush office chair and swivelled it around to face James across the desk. He shoved a copy of the weekly news bulletin under James's nose. 'Well, why haven't you included some of these ugly incidents in your weekly articles?'

James was a religious columnist but it was unusual for his editor-in-chief to make suggestions for his weekly column. Caught a little off guard, he chose his words carefully. 'Well, for one thing, the media don't seem to need any help to highlight negative aspects of religion and I prefer to write about things we have in common.'

His boss leaned back and put his hands behind his head. 'Now that's what I don't understand. How can there be so much conflict between religions. Aren't we all supposed to be worshiping the same God? You did theological training. What do you think?'

James hesitated for a moment and then replied carefully, 'I believe it's the same God behind every religion called by different names, but I'm afraid a lot of Christians wouldn't agree with me, including my theological lecturers at the college.'

Peter Preston leaned forward and looked earnestly at James. 'I would like you to take on an investigative job for me. You don't have to. If you don't feel up to it, I'll understand.'

James frowned and looked a bit anxious.

Preston continued without waiting for an answer. 'I'd like you to do some research into the major world religions. Not just those three but all the major ones, including some of those Eastern ones. See if it's really the same God behind all of them.'

James pulled a face as he thought of the enormous amount of work that would be required for such a research project and opened his mouth to speak but his boss held up his hand. 'I know it's a bit 'above and beyond the call of duty'.' That was Peter Preston's army background coming out. 'Don't answer me now. Go home and think about it. Take some time and let me know when you've decided.'

Back at his desk and unable to concentrate any further on his article, James packed up and left the office. He drove out of the employees' car park at Bowen Hills and headed across the Story Bridge to their home on the Southside, impatient to share his boss's request with Mary.

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Carindale

That evening, in their home at Carindale, James settled into his favourite lounge chair with his coffee ready to watch the news on the ABC. As his wife Mary turned to face James he noted how attractive she was in her business suit, her short, dark hair

and her brown eyes, which were looking quizzically at him. He was wondering why she did not turn on the set to watch the evening news as she usually did, until she said 'I'd like to know more about this assignment Mr Preston's asked you to do'.

'So would I' James laughed. 'I'm a bit confused about it myself. I'm not even sure why he wants me to do it.'

Mary settled herself next to James cradling her coffee in her hands. 'Why, what do you mean?'

'Well, first he talked about the strained relations between Islam and other religions and how we are all supposed to worship the same God...'

Mary interrupted him. 'But do we all worship the same God?'

James looked sideways at his wife. 'That's the big question, isn't it? We were taught in College that there was no truth at all outside Christianity. That was one reason I left the ministry.'

Mary snorted. 'One reason you didn't really start, you mean.' A few years ago, James had been a theological student for the ministry working part-time in a small parish, but after graduation he had refused a full-time appointment and returned to his former profession of Journalism. Mary took another sip of her coffee. 'Go on.'

'Then he asked me if I'd like to do some research into *all* the major religions to see if they really do worship the same God.' James turned towards Mary. 'How do you like that? He starts with a problem between the Western religions and then wants to bring in all the world religions. What's the point?' He spread his hands.

Mary shrugged. 'No idea, but you don't have to do it, do you?'

James looked down. 'No! I suppose not.' But the fact that Peter Preston had made it a request was a bit strange in itself, because his boss was of the old school of editors who usually gave orders and expected them to be obeyed without question.

Mary glanced at him quickly. 'Then maybe you shouldn't do it. You might lose your own faith if you start going too deeply into those other religious beliefs.'

James smiled confidently at her concern. 'I don't think so'. Even if it did affect his beliefs he felt that he should be prepared to search for truth no matter what the consequences were. He remembered that a Christian scholar called Rudolf Otto once wrote that he'd continue to seek for truth even if there were some aspects of that truth that were not found to be 'in Christ'.

Mary touched his arm and changed tack. 'Then why not do it?'

James was quiet for a moment and then replied, 'Because for one thing, to do the job properly, I'd need to have access to university library resources and spend a lot of time there.'

Mary looked up and spoke in a low voice. 'Then why not go back to Uni and finish your Master's Degree?'

That idea appealed to him but he wasn't ready to give in yet. 'But that would take a lot of time.'

Mary shook her head in disbelief. 'Your job's only part time. You could fit it in if you really wanted to. Anyway, you turn the boss down and you could kiss goodbye to any promotion.' As a Tax Consultant with an accounting firm, she was a very down-to-earth person who could always be relied upon for good practical advice but he was still resistant.

'But I still have an article to write every week,' he objected weakly.

'You could use your findings for your articles. You spend an awful lot of time researching those church magazines for gossipy items. Maybe it's about time you gave your readers some meaty stuff.'

He pulled away slightly and smiled ruefully at her. 'I should have known you wouldn't give me an excuse to get out of it.'

She looked surprised. 'Why should I? This could be the chance of a lifetime.'

James made one last feeble protest. 'What if they won't let me back into the Masters Degree?' He had resigned in protest when he became upset over a particular lecturer who was very anti-Christian.

Mary raised her eyebrows. 'It would serve you right for resigning from it so quickly but you don't know that until you ask.'

James sighed. 'I suppose I could go and see someone about it.'

Mary stretched out her free hand palm upwards. 'Well! There you are.'

'OK. OK. I'll give it a go. You should be a career counsellor. Can we see the news now?'

'Of course.' She started to rise. 'Want another cup of coffee? That one must be cold by now.'

'No thanks. I'll just warm this one up.'

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Thursday 17th February

University of Queensland, St Lucia

The University of Queensland had a large Refectory where many students spent too much time socializing instead of studying. A standing joke was that some students didn't attend lectures preferring to do 'Refectory I, II and III'. However, since UQ's rapid growth, it also had a number of smaller Departmental Canteens and James was sitting in one of these eating his salad roll. He was thinking anxiously about his forthcoming appointment with his course adviser, when he became aware of a figure standing in front of him carrying a tray of hot food from the servery.

'Well, well! The people you meet in a place like this,' said Kevin Hilliard.

James looked up startled. 'Kevin. What are you doing here?'

'Enrolling in the Master's degree.' Kevin replied nonchalantly.

'No. I mean what are you doing here in the city?' James pushed out the chair opposite him using his foot under the table.

'Doing my job as Christian Education Officer. I've finished my stint in the bush, thank God.' Kevin placed his tray on the table. As he sat down he extended his hand, which was shaken warmly by James. 'You still going with that girl you brought to the graduation party?'

'Mary? No! I married her.' James laughed. 'How's Julie?'

Kevin picked up his knife and fork. 'She's fine. We have twin girls now – Sarah and Sharon.'

'Wow! You don't do things by halves do you?' James paused and then asked. 'Is that why you thanked God you've been transferred back from the bush?'

Kevin shook his head. 'No! I was referring mainly to the heat and the dust.'

James nodded. 'Anyway, it's good to see you.'

'You too.' Kevin kept his eyes down and his face expressionless. 'I hear you eventually didn't accept an appointment. Is that right?'

'I'm afraid so.' James said, feeling a little guilty.

Kevin waved a fork at him. 'But you passed every subject with flying colours. What went wrong?'

Just then a student whom James had known the last time he had been at Uni passed their table recognised James. James nodded back and put down his salad-roll. 'I couldn't take on a parish full time when I had so many doubts about my beliefs.' James still did occasional supply preaching to keep his hand in and to supplement his income.

'I don't see why not.' Kevin raised his eyebrows. 'My theology leaks like a sieve.'

‘Yes! I know’. James frowned. ‘I used to wonder how you would get on in a country parish?’

Kevin smiled at James’ concern and gestured with one hand. ‘Easy. I just proclaim the good news of God’s love positively and avoid the problem areas.’

James screwed up his face. ‘How can you do that? I know you don’t believe in the Virgin Birth. How do you get on at Christmas?’

‘That’s when I take my holidays.’ When he saw the look on James’ face, he held up his hand and laughed. ‘Just kidding.’ Then he looked serious. ‘I just teach the spiritual meaning - the incarnation of Christ, the God become man thing, you know - and let them take the Virgin Birth literally if they want.’

Both James and Kevin believed in the divinity of Christ but also believed that, if Jesus didn’t have a human father, he was not fully human. When he and Kevin discussed the issue in college, they agreed that the absence of a human father no longer protected the sinlessness of Christ since science discovered that, contrary to previous beliefs, the mother also contributes to the nature of the child. James was remembering the lectures on the Nativity from a Roman Catholic lecturer at the university. He had pointed out all the contradictions between the birth stories in Matthew and Luke and yet still took the story of the Virgin Birth literally because it was his Church’s teaching.

James suddenly realised that Kevin was speaking again. ‘So why do such things worry you?’

‘Because I can’t let people take literally something I believe is wrong. It’s our job to teach the truth.’

‘Ah!’ Kevin lifted a finger. ‘But what is truth?’

‘Cut it out Pontius Pilate. This is serious.’

Kevin reapplied himself to his lunch and shrugged. ‘Obviously to you it is. ‘

James was quiet for a moment while he finished his roll. 'What about Jesus' prophecy in Mark 13?' They both remembered only too well the day the class discussed the passage in Mark's Gospel chapter 13 where Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and his own return. Jerusalem was destroyed in 70ad but Jesus didn't return - at that time or any time since. Either the divine Jesus was mistaken about that or the author of Mark and the early church were mistaken.

'Oh yes. The puzzling passage in Mark 13.' Kevin pointed at James with his fork. 'Now that passage separates the men from the boys.'

James cocked one eyebrow. 'What do you mean?'

'Come on. You remember the reaction from old Bob Jamieson? He went red in the face, jumped to his feet and said, 'Well, Jesus must be wrong. The Bible can't be wrong' and then clamped his hand over his mouth and said, "What have I said." It was a scream.'

'Yes,' agreed James. 'It was funny to us but had a nervous breakdown over it.'

Kevin shrugged. 'Well, a literalist attitude to the bible can be a health hazard.'

James still wasn't happy. 'But surely none of us liked to think that a Bible passage could be so wrong.' He had joined the Evangelical Union at University after his sudden conversion at the Billy Graham Crusade and he wasn't sure that he was completely free of a literal interpretation of the Scriptures.

Kevin nodded thoughtfully as he replied, 'I suppose it was a bit of a shock to us.'

'Well, it certainly was a problem to me and maybe it still is. How could I preach every week from a book that's so contradictory? I think life was simpler when I thought it was infallible and inerrant.'

Kevin looked up quickly. 'Oh come on James. You don't want to put the chains back on do you?'

‘Maybe they haven’t all fallen off yet.’ James looked at his watch. ‘Anyway I’d better go or I’ll be late for my appointment.’ He stood up, turned to go and then stopped. ‘See you next week, same time?’

Kevin nodded and waved him away. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’

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The sign on the door in the Study in Religion Department said ‘Dr Phillip Gill’ but it was past the time of his appointment. James looked at his watch. He could have spent more time talking with Kevin. He turned his attention back to his enrolment form. A little later, a young student emerged and headed for the outer door.

‘You can go in now Mr McGregor,’ she said formally as she stood and opened the door for him.

‘Thank you Miss Thomson.’ He entered the room and his supervisor looked up, smiled and nodded towards the comfortable armchair at the side of his huge desk. James’ eyes surveyed the desk, which was littered with books and papers. Three walls of the room were lined with shelves also overflowing with books.

‘James Roy McGregor, I presume?’

‘That’s right Professor.’ He was much younger than James expected - not much older than himself – with an untidy mop of brown hair. He was casually dressed and seemed very relaxed as he leaned back in his armchair.

‘Call me Phillip.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Any connection with the famous Rob Roy McGregor?’

‘Or infamous.’ James chuckled and then acknowledged, ‘Apparently he’s an ancestor of mine. Maybe I’ve inherited his rebellious tendencies.’

Phillip sat back and studied James carefully. ‘And is that why you pulled out of the New Testament subject last year?’

Oops! He knows all about that. ‘Possibly.’ James felt foolish. ‘That was because the lecturer was arguing against the Divinity of Christ.’

‘The Myth of God Incarnate?’

‘That’s the one.’ James was surprised at Phillip’s detailed knowledge of another man’s subject.

Phillip leant forward. ‘So now you want to come back and continue with the Master’s?’

James was dreading this question. ‘Yes. I’d like to learn as much as I can about non-Christian religions, that is, if I’m allowed after resigning last year.’

Dr Gill smiled conspiratorially. ‘Well, you are very fortunate. Miss Thomson had your long-term interests at heart. She thought you might be back so she processed your resignation from the subject but not your withdrawal from the Master’s Degree.’ James was stunned but also relieved. He thought he had burnt his bridges. The professor looked at James’ enrolment form. ‘Anyway, I approve of your preferences. You will find in the Handbook that Islam and Hinduism are offered this semester. You could also choose ‘Concepts of Ultimate Reality’ which includes a little of all the religions.’

The Professor paused while he handed some material to James about the course. ‘You also have to choose a topic for your 5,000-word assignment this semester. I’ll be your supervisor for that assignment.’

‘Thank you.’ James accepted the material. ‘That’ll be great.’

‘Tell me James, what made you want to come back?’

James was surprised at personal nature of the question. ‘We-ell, I write a weekly column called ‘The Religion Report’ for the Daily Mail and...’ He chose his words carefully, ‘my editor wants me to research the latest ideas on a common reality behind the world’s religions.’

'Peter Preston?'

James was startled. 'Yes. You know him?'

'Oh yes. He came to enrol in my Buddhism class next semester.'

James thought to himself, *Hmm. The plot thickens. Maybe he wants me to do some groundwork for him.* His eyes flickered to the full length open window where a large water-dragon was sunning itself on the ledge. Another few centimetres and it would be inside the room.

Phillip's eyes followed James' and smiled. 'Don't worry. He often visits me. I love all creatures - 'God's creatures' as you would call them.'

James also loved animals. He was starting to warm to this man. 'Don't you call them God's creatures too?'

'No. I'm a Buddhist.'

James was silent for a moment and then said, with an offhand gesture, 'So?'

'Buddhists don't believe in a personal God. That's one of the things you will learn in SR 105 - Concepts of Ultimate Reality.' Phillip changed the subject and looked enquiringly at James. 'Any other questions about your enrolment?'

'Yes.' He had to choose his words carefully. 'I have one reservation. I can't see how I'm going to find time to do both the Chief's assignment and all these subjects and yet,' James spread his hands, 'enrolling properly seemed to be the best and fastest way of accessing the library facilities.'

Phillip smiled knowingly. 'If you keep me posted as to where you are up to in your research I'll get your lecturers to give you essay topics that fit in with your assignment.'

James was amazed. He hadn't realised that post-graduate work was so flexible. 'Well, do you want to enrol or not?'

'Yes. Now I do'.

'Then you'd better not waste any time. Tomorrow's the due-date for continuing students.' Phillip stood and showed James to the door. 'And give me a topic for your assignment by the first week of semester.'

'OK.' James nodded and walked off feeling a bit more positive about his boss's assignment.

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