

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE BOSS'S WIFE?

Thursday 4th May

University of Queensland, St Lucia

Kevin finished off his ample meal and shook his head at James who was still eating his salad roll. 'I don't believe it. Your boss actually came clean with you?'

James put down his roll. 'Not completely, but I think I'm going to be invited to his home to talk to his wife.'

Kevin opened his mouth in amazement. 'Wow! What an interesting turn of events. This could be a real counselling situation for a man who refused a full-time placement.' Kevin pointed a finger at James. 'Or will it be a case of - Special Agent, Guru James McGregor, mediator extraordinaire between East and West?'

James shook his head in mock disgust. 'Always the romantic dramatist.' Then he raised his hand in protest as Kevin was about to speak again. 'But I'm not saying any more.'

'All right.' Kevin shrugged. 'But I have something to tell you now.'

James raised his eyebrows as he took another bite.

Kevin smiled secretively. 'I've been feeding some of your new ideas into my seminars as I travel round. Some of the people mob me afterwards wanting to know more.'

James grunted. 'It's a wonder some of them don't mob you wanting to lynch you.'

‘Oh, come on.’ Kevin shook his head in disgust. ‘Don’t underestimate the average church member.’ Then he frowned. ‘But I must admit a few have told me they’ll pray for me.’

‘...to see the light’. James nodded knowingly. ‘I’m getting used to that.’

‘No. Seriously. Our people are hungry for the latest in biblical scholarship.’ Then Kevin pointed at James. ‘We need ministers like you in the ‘front line’. Why don’t you come back?’

James waved a hand dismissively. ‘I’ve got more urgent things to worry about at the moment.’

Kevin’s frown showed concern. ‘What? The phone calls again?’

James shook his head. ‘No but I had an extremely unpleasant visit from an angry clergyman yesterday that reminded me of them.’

‘Yeah? Who was it?’

‘Pastor Adrian Markwell.’

Kevin sat back in his chair and waved one hand. ‘What do you expect from the pastor of the most conservative churches in town?’

James raised one hand. ‘I know but...he used the same terms ‘nut case’ uses when he rings.’

‘O my God.’ Kevin’s blew out his cheeks. ‘Are you going to tell the police?’

James shook his head slowly. ‘I haven’t decided yet. I’m still getting over the shock.’

Kevin screwed up his face. ‘But surely he can’t be the one. Don’t they have a suspect already?’

‘Yes.’ James narrowed his eyes. ‘That’s what puzzles me.’

‘You don’t think there’s more than one person involved?’ Kevin’s face expressed horror.

‘I certainly hope not.’ James quickly reached out his hand towards Kevin. ‘Don’t say anything to anyone, please’.

‘If you say so.’ Kevin stood up and pushed his chair in. ‘Anyway, I have to go.’ Then he grinned suggestively. ‘Good luck with the boss’s wife.’

James shook his head despairingly and waved him away.

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Carindale

As soon as James arrived home he found Mary in the kitchen. ‘What are you doing home? I thought it was my turn to come home early and prepare the meal.’

Mary returned his kiss. ‘I had some flexitime due and I was up to date so I thought I’d take an early mark.’ She looked at him closely. ‘Are you all right?’

James ushered her through into the hallway. ‘A certain Pastor Markwell came to see me today, to complain about my articles.’

Mary took his hand. ‘That’s not unusual is it?’

‘No.’ James inclined his head. ‘But this man used the same phrase our caller used: ‘Heresy is the mark of the Anti-Christ.’’

Mary stopped and stood still. ‘Oh, surely a minister wouldn’t stoop that low. Did you challenge him on it?’

James kept her moving to the lounge room. ‘I sure did but he vehemently denied having anything to do with it.’

Mary drew him down onto the lounge and sat close. ‘Did you believe him?’

‘He didn’t sound guilty. He seemed more indignant than anything. That’s why I haven’t reported it to the police.’

‘I don’t think you should. It may just be a coincidence.’ Mary stood up and went to the kitchen to fix them both a drink. She pointed to their message pad. ‘Speaking of

phone calls, I checked our message bank. There's a message for you from a Stephanie Edie from the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Doesn't she present that program you record every week?

'Yes, Conflicting Concepts in Religion.' James got up and picked up the message pad. 'I wonder what she wants.'

Mary stopped pouring drinks and looked at James. 'Doesn't your boss's wife work at the ABC?'

He was looking at the message details. 'Yes, but she's Stephanie Preston.'

'Oh, come on James.' Mary put one hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. 'You're a bit slow aren't you? Women often use a different name professionally - usually their maiden name.'

'Oh no.' James glanced up with a look of horror on his face. 'You mean Peter's wife is Stephanie Edie, the clever, sophisticated radio presenter? Now I am nervous. I wonder what she wants.'

Mary screwed up her face. 'Weren't you expecting to be invited to meet her?'

James spread both his hands. 'Yes but I thought he would ask me. He said he was going to set it up.'

Mary shrugged. 'Maybe it didn't work out the way he wanted. Anyway, I told you, it wasn't a good idea for you to be getting involved in your boss's personal life.'

'I know.' James sighed as he nodded. 'You said if I fail, it'll be hard to keep working for him and if I succeed, he'll feel beholden to me. I respect your instincts but I'm committed now.'

Mary waved her finger towards the phone. 'Well, you'd better listen to that message and get her number. I saved it for you.'

'Thanks.' James dialled the message bank and heard the cultured but friendly voice of Stephanie Edie inviting him to ring up for an appointment to see her at her office at the radio station.

'That's funny,' James said to Mary. 'She wants to see me at her office, not at home. I wonder what Peter's up to.'

Mary raised her eyebrows. 'Maybe it's not his idea.'

'Maybe not. I guess I'll find out when I go.' He reached for the phone. 'I'll ring now. She might still be there.'

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Friday 5th May

ABC Studio, Toowong

James was admitted to the office of Stephanie Edie with some trepidation, not knowing quite what to expect. He had accessed the ABC's website and looked at the photographs of all the broadcasters including that of Stephanie Edie but she looked a bit different in real life. She was not quite as young-looking as her photo but still as glamorous and just as warm and vibrant as she had sounded on air. She also appeared to be quite a bit younger than his boss. Her resume on the website said that she had a PhD. majoring in the Study of Religion. She rose and shook hands with him. 'Very nice to meet you James. Can I call you James?' she asked.

'Of course Ms Edie. Would Peter Preston be your husband?' he asked tentatively.

She laughed in a way that put him at ease immediately. 'He would and please call me Stephanie. All my interviewees do. And yes I am Stephanie Preston. Edie is my maiden name.'

James smiled and relaxed. *Mary was right.* 'I thought it might be, and I must tell you I am a great fan of yours Stephanie. I listen to your programme every week.'

Stephanie sat up and looked genuinely pleased. 'Why, thank you.' Then she crinkled her eyes and leaned forward. 'I'm a fan of yours too.' James' eyebrows rose in surprise. 'Yes, really. I've read all your articles and I'm very interested in your search for Ultimate Reality. You deal with a lot of issues that I'd like to include in my Conflicting Concepts programme.' Then she waved one hand dismissively. 'Anyway, I could hardly miss reading them. My husband leaves the paper around open at the right page.'

James frowned, genuinely puzzled. 'He does?'

'Oh yes.' Stephanie nodded brightly. 'Not very subtle I'm afraid. Anyway, I was already getting them for myself here at the office but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing that. And I am very interested. That's why I've invited you here today.'

Now James was really confused. 'But I thought...'

'You thought that Peter was behind my call?' James nodded shyly. 'Oh no,' she continued. 'It was my idea. He asked me if you could come and talk to us both at home about our differences but I didn't give him an answer. I said I'd think about it. What has he been telling you about me.'

'I'm sorry, Stephanie.' James shook his head sadly. 'I can't break confidences.'

'Very good.' She smiled appreciatively and lifted a finger. 'Now I know I can confide in you. Would you like to hear my side of the story?'

'If you'd like to tell me,' said James inclining his head slightly.

Stephanie sat back and folded her arms. 'Well, Peter is much older than I am and sometimes tries to treat me like a little girl. He likes to be in control.'

Like he is at work. James nodded sympathetically.

Stephanie continued. 'So when I started attending the Buddhist temple for instruction, he was very upset. I had always attended church with him and I needed a bit of my own space. I suppose he thinks I'll come home one day saying I've found enlightenment?'

James smiled and shook his head slowly but Stephanie saw the truth.

'I thought so.' She smiled sadly. 'Ironically, I haven't had any experience of enlightenment. I was about to give up the instruction.'

'That's a pity,' said James unexpectedly.

'So you're not on his side?' asked Stephanie in surprise. 'That's good. But why do you say that?'

'Because I've come to believe that the Buddhist understanding of Ultimate Reality is just as valid as the Christian's understanding only different.'

Stephanie lifted a finger. 'Another side to God, as you wrote in your column this week?'

'Yes.' James brightened. 'I got that phrase from Peter Berger's book on the subject, "The Other Side of God."'

Stephanie smiled mischievously. 'So you think I shouldn't go back to the Church?'

He shook his head vigorously. 'I didn't say that. I just think it's a pity if you give up the Buddhist instruction. I've often heard that the Buddhist philosophy can be followed along with other religions like Christianity.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'So you think it would be better to stay in both camps?'

James chose his words carefully. 'According to my theory, we are closer to the truth if we can do that.'

Stephanie looked directly at him. 'And how would I do that?'

He shrugged and waved a hand. 'I don't know. Maybe you could attend each alternately or something.'

Stephanie looked out the window. 'What an interesting idea, especially if Peter would go with me.'

'It sounds like a win-win situation to me, but I shouldn't...'

'I know,' laughed Stephanie, 'you shouldn't get involved. But I don't think Peter will go for it.'

'Stephanie, there's something I think you should know.' James took a deep breath. 'I don't think I'm breaking any confidences if I tell you that the Chief gave me an assignment to find the truth behind the world's religions.'

Stephanie opened her eyes wide in surprise. 'He wanted to know the truth behind the world's religions?'

'He did.' James nodded and smiled. 'But, as time went on it was pretty obvious it was mainly Buddhism that he wanted to know about. He's even enrolled in Buddhism at Uni for next semester.'

'He hasn't?' She queried disbelievingly.

'He has.' James laughed. 'You two should talk more often.' Then he realised what he had said. 'Sorry I shouldn't have said that.'

Stephanie reached out a reassuring hand towards him. 'That's OK. You're quite right. This is a total surprise to me.'

'Well, there's more.' James lifted one finger on each hand. 'He was also very happy to find that the two truths could be equally valid - two sides of the one coin. He's much more open than you seem to think.'

'I am astounded.' Stephanie slumped in her chair. 'Why didn't he tell me what he was doing? He could have come with me.'

James shrugged. 'That's men for you...so I'm told. We can't express our feelings about things that matter most to us.'

'I'd like to learn more about your theory.' She gestured towards the door. 'We have a self-service machine outside. 'Have you got time for a coffee or hot chocolate?'

'I have if you have.' James sat back and relaxed.

She stood and moved to the door. 'What would you like?'

'Coffee, black with no sugar thank you.'

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Stephanie cradled her hot chocolate in her hands. 'Tell me, if according to your theory Buddhism's truth is as valid as Christianity's truth, what would have been the harm in my concentrating completely on Buddhism rather than Christianity?'

'Because, without the other truth, I believe Buddhist truth is incomplete.'

Stephanie took another sip of her hot chocolate. 'What other truth? Christianity's?'

James put down his coffee and waved a hand. 'Any theistic truth - East or West.' Then he leant forward and spoke softly. 'Stephanie, I came to know God personally at the age of twenty-one and so for me the personal understanding of God has to be included in any comprehensive understanding of Ultimate Reality.'

Stephanie then felt obliged to reciprocate with her experience. 'Well, I was brought up to believe in God but I've never come to know God personally as you say you have but I once had a brief experience of unity with nature while sitting beside a lake. That's probably why I was keen to search out other mystical possibilities.'

James nodded and smiled. 'I can understand that but I haven't had much mystical experience - only a brief moment of time distortion - so I rely on the accounts of others.'

Stephanie had a puzzled expression. ‘Then how can you say the mystical experience is incomplete in itself?’

James smiled at her searching question. ‘As I said, I rely on the accounts of others. Some mystics are quite honest about the shortcomings of mysticism. For example they admit that they underrate the value of the things of this world.’

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. ‘You don’t think the things of this world should be underrated?’

‘Not to that extent.’

Stephanie took another sip. ‘And what else is wrong with mysticism?’

James could sense her resistance. ‘Some scholars, including mystics, ask how the rejection of life as we know it can possibly be the goal of life. They say that these traditions devalue the temporal world and, as Inge says, ‘all that gives colour, variety and interest to life in this world’.’

Stephanie seemed deep in thought as she put her mug down. ‘So these critics don’t like the other-worldly aspects of mysticism?’

James nodded slowly. ‘They question the timeless aspect too.’

Stephanie frowned. ‘What do you mean by the timeless aspect?’

‘Mystics seem to operate from a time-less vantage point.’ She still seemed puzzled so James continued. ‘This may appear to be far-fetched but my theory is that the mystics are operating outside of time and space at the height of their mystical experience. Does that seem strange to you?’

‘No, not really, now that you mention it. I think I experienced something like that during my brief vision of unity beside the lake.’ Stephanie leaned forward slightly. ‘Anything wrong with that?’

James spread his hands. ‘No, not at all, unless they also denigrate ordinary time - linear time as it’s called. There’s a need for a balance of the two views.’

Stephanie's eyes showed that she liked what she was hearing.

He felt encouraged to continue. 'Bede Griffiths gives a critique of Hindu and Christian views of time. He says that the Hindu needs to discover the real value of time and history because a philosophy that denies the value of progress in time and history will never answer the need of the people.'

Stephanie wasn't going to allow his argument to be one-sided. 'And his critique of the Christian view?'

James was happy to oblige. 'From the Hindu point of view, he says the Christian must learn that the Kingdom of God is not to be found in this world, however important the service of human kind may be. The Kingdom of God lies beyond history in that timeless reality in which all things find their fulfilment.'¹

Stephanie was smiling now. 'That is very profound. He has taken the practical advantages of each world-view and combined them. I interviewed him once, years ago, and I've read some of his books. Which one were you quoting from?'

'"The Marriage of East and West".' When Stephanie looked puzzled, he continued. 'It's one of his more recent books.'

She wrote down the title. 'But how can his dream come true if each culture is trapped in their own world-view?'

James shook his head sadly. 'I don't think it can, unless people like us try living with both world-views. Unfortunately the 'eastern' view regards time as illusory; and the 'western' view finds it hard to even accept a timeless situation.'

Stephanie pointed to James. 'And what do you say?'

He took a breath and answered slowly. 'I say that neither viewpoint is absolute. They are both merely assumptions or paradigms concerning the nature of reality.'

'I'd like to hear more about your ideas but I have another appointment shortly'.

James remembered Mary's idea about new blood in the group and decided to take a risk. 'Then would you like to come to my small support group as a resource person representing the mystical point of view? We are badly in need of someone to do that.'

To his relief and surprise Stephanie didn't hesitate. 'Well, I'm hardly an authority but I'd love to come and learn. When's it on?'

James shrugged. 'The next meeting is waiting for me to set a time and place. There's just the four of us, two couples. I'll let you know. Does the weekend suit you, for a meal perhaps?'

She stood and started to gather her papers. 'The weekend's fine but could it be of an afternoon?'

'Of course.' James stood also. 'Can I ring you here?'

'Yes please, if you wouldn't mind.' She reached out her hand. 'Thank you for coming, and for your invitation. You've been a great help to me already. I'll fill Peter in on all this so it won't put you in an awkward position at work. '

'I'd really appreciate that and I'll contact you with the details.'

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1. Op. Cit. P. 181.