

James Talbot, a.k.a. Father, runs a religious cult known as the Little Sisters, teenage girls who work the street collecting money in his name. A crusading newspaper woman goes after Father trying to stop the abuse and possible murder.

Prey Ye Not Upon the Sisters

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Prey Ye Not Upon the Sisters

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Prey Ye Not Upon the Sisters

Richard Lemmon

PROLOGUE

"Goddamned tease!"

Mouth tight on a jagged row of yellowing teeth, he stared down on his growing erection, cursing the tiny teenager at his feet.

"I just can't," the teenager pleaded, fighting to close the snow-white robe he'd torn open. Honey-blue eyes wide, she slowly retreated to a corner of the seedy motel room, passing a window in the process.

"You're not here to say no when I ask only that you please me, bitch."

Her voice trembled as her eyes filled with tears. "It's just that...I mean I didn't know people were supposed to make love like that."

He followed her into the corner, grabbed a blonde braid and jerked her up on her toes. "I'm so sorry, Father. I'll leave the church right away."

"You'd leave?" Father's gray eyes narrowed and his voice dropped to a whisper.

She tried to smile away her mistake. "Not exactly leave, Father, just—"

An eerie grin took over Father's face. "You'd do that to me?" The grip on her braid tightened as she dangled even higher. "After all the church has done for you?"

"I'm sorry, Father, I didn't mean—"

"You would lay open my ministry to scorn?" Her feet were all the way off the floor and her face was a mask of pain. "Have you forgotten Proverbs reminding us that the mouth of a knowing woman is the wellspring of life?" The grip loosened enough for her toes to touch the rug. "Did the Lord err when he told us that?"

Eyes locked on the Father's eyes, she shook her head

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when he grabbed her chin. "You've studied the Bible how long now, little one?"

"Almost a year." It was a whimper.

"And during that year, I've been fair to you?"

"Yes, Father, oh, yes, Father."

"I've been there in your hour of need?"

He let loose her chin, undid her rope belt and slowly wound it round her neck. "No, Father." Her plea turned to a throaty whisper as he tightened the belt.

"And yet I continue with the Lord's work," a little tighter yet, "enduring insult after insult, surrounded by incompetence, as I struggle in my ministry to preach the word of the Lord."

Eyes bulging, the teen beat at the hands holding the belt, desperately trying to loosen them.

"Children fighting the Shepard," Father brushed back her hands, "who would bring them back to the Lord, bring shame on everyone, serving only Satan in the process."

Outside the window, a shadowy figure observed in growing disbelief.

CHAPTER 1

"Miss China," Maddy snapped, mop poised alongside the rocking chair. "Ain't no sense ownin' a newspaper if you ain't got the gumption to run it. And get up outta' that chair! You hear me? Ain't natural to mourn the Judge this long, good as he was, and I liked him too."

China O'Day, still slim at forty-six, shrugged and continued to watch a spider on a porch rail try to re-spin a broken web. "He's got a lot of patience, you know that?" she muttered.

"Don't you mean he **had** a lot of patience?"

"I'm not talking about the Judge, speaking of which, I'm not mourning." Her gaze returned to the spider. "Trouble is neither of us seem to have sense enough to know when to quit."

"You gonna' sit there starin' at a bug all night," Maddy nudged the chair with the mop, "at least raise your feet. Some of us is workin'."

China shrugged but dutifully raised the offending foot. "You're right. I need to get involved again. And maybe rebuilding the Gazette back up to what it used to be when the Judge took over, is just what I need."

"A whole lot better than watchin' spiders all night!" Maddy dragged the mop under the rocker. House-keeper and nanny to China's son, Charley Junior, she'd been with the family for the last forty years, going all the way back to the late Judge's grandfather.

"That's what I'll do, China decided as she got up and started down the steps to the circular drive fronting the mansion. "Beginning with increasing circulation." She paused at the bottom of the steps and looked back at Maddy. "You think that's the place to start or should I give up and sell it?"

"I don't know nuthin' bout newspapers but I do know it ain't gonna' be easy. Jest like I know that's what the Judge

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would have wanted you to do. That was one husband that a good man all the way through.”

China sat down on the bottom step and carefully retied her shoelaces. "I can maybe have a contest to boost subscriptions, Maddy. That sort of thing used to work for the Judge.”

Maddy paused with her mopping and shook her head. "I ain't never got used to you callin' your husband, God rest his soul, Judge, Miss China. Never." She returned to the mop with a sigh. "Ain't natural.”

"Or what about this? Run a series on children loose on the streets and offer a reward for the best idea of how to get them back home. Every parent would like something like that.”

"You wanna' get 'em off the street, open a clubhouse for dancin'." Mop poised, Maddy went over to the railing. "And speakin' of things that need doin', you need to have a talk with your son.”

"What now?"

Maddy pointed to some skid marks on the driveway. "Mister Charley is startin' to run wild with his car.”

"I'll think about it." China stood up, began a gentle jog in place and then took off at a faster clip down the driveway toward the front gate.

"That ain't the first time he done that," Maddy shouted after her.

At the end of the driveway, China leaned down to examine a rose bush that the Judge had planted the day before he was gunned down in his chambers. Concerned that the gardeners might be giving it less than full attention, she reworked the soil with her fingers.

Twenty miles south of the O'Day estate, in the little Texas

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town of League City, the Reverend James Talman, Messiah to his T.V. audience, Father to his Little Sisters, was diligently preparing those Sisters for another day of begging on the streets of Houston, twenty-five miles north of League City.

Street-wise and appealing in their snow-white cassocks, black crucifixes dangling, catching the morning sunlight. His. Two rows of six. "My sweet missionaries," he whispered, passing down the row, patting as he passed. As a unit they brought in almost two million year, before the taxes he never paid as a Reverend. Praise Jesus!

But as he looked down their ranks that morning he noted they were tired. Early to bed, early to rise and sooner on the street. He'd have to cut back on the late Bible studies. "Did you all read your Bibles before breakfast this morning?"

"Yes, Father." A scream of practiced unity. Hands outstretched they eagerly accepted their two give-away Bibles that were meant to reward anybody giving over ten bucks. Pausing as he went down the rows, he patted the slender young blonde who had just joined the Sisters. Two nights before, he'd found her downtown, begging for food. She was a natural. "Sweet Melanie..." he kissed her forehead. "Are you happy with us?"

"Yes, thank you, Father."

He tilted her chin far enough to look into her eyes. "You've studied today's lesson?"

"Yes, Father."

He pulled her out of the line and turned her around to face her Sisters. "Our little Melanie will now recite what the Good Book tells us about our duties to our parents. "As for the rest of you," he wagged a warning finger, "pay attention to the Word."

Melanie Johnson, red-faced at being singled out by Father, asked, "In front of all?"

Father ignored her plea and continued, "And while Sister Melanie is preparing in our mind, Sister Maria," he beckoned a

lanky redhead forward, "will recite what she has learned on the subject of obedience."

Maria looked confused. "I don't—"

"Saint Peter," Father prompted, "Chapter 5, verse 5."

Maria stepped forward and nervously cleared her throat.

"Ye younger, submit—"

"Louder!"

"Submit yourself unto the elder and be clothed with humility for God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble."

Father shifted his attention to another little blonde. "Sister Audrey. Who is Peter speaking to and who is the elder? And finally, should we be proud or humble and why?"

Audrey, like Maria, took a step forward. "Peter is speaking to us, Father. Telling us that you speak for God and we should always remember that and never be so proud as to think we can get to heaven without the grace of God...acting through you."

Father smiled. "Thank you Audrey." He returned his attention to Melanie. "But don't the commandments also suggest that we should honor our fathers and our mothers?"

"Only when they agree with what God commands us through you, Father," Audrey proudly recited.

Father nodded. "Exactly, and it is my job to interpret the Bible in order to ensure there are no contradictions, which of course there are none since Peter was referring to the spiritual honor we must pay our parents while the commandments speak of physical homage only. So as your spiritual parent here on earth, I speak for God almighty."

"Amen" they shouted in unison.

"Come ye little children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Thus speaketh Psalms to us. And it is I and no other who must be responsible for the way you are brought up after your parents have cast you out."

"Yes, Father, thank you, Father!" Again in unison.

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Father checked his Rolex and fell to his knees on the cement, staring up to the heavens as he opened the small Bible that he always carried in his pocket. "Your servants stand before you begging blessings for the workday. Amen." Up off his knees, Father next directed the Sisters into the two waiting vans, once again patting Melanie as she passed. "God go with you, little one."

"And with you, Father."

Time to go back to the mansion house that housed his little charges. Little Jerusalem. A perfect name. He helped Melanie into the van and smiled. Her time was near at hand...praise the Lord.

CHAPTER 2

The Houston Gazette building, purchased forty years prior from Banworth Oil, was located a block off South Main, across from Rice University. Constantly bathed in a flow of humid air drifting up from the Gulf of Mexico, the building had collected too much of that moisture and was beginning to crumble. Joining the building in a plunge downhill was the circulation, which had never been very high to start with.

China locked the door of her jet black Mercedes and paused there in the parking lot to evaluate her surroundings and shook her head in disappointment. The perimeter fence was sagging, there were potholes all over the parking lot and the back entrance was unguarded. So much for security.

Around the building to the front entrance she entered and paused to stare at the old time clock. Degrading. She had tried for years to convince her husband that the time clock would have to go. And now it would. Through a second set of brass doors she was in a hall-like room filled with people and computers. Too many people, too few computers.

Down the center aisle to an elevator that would take her to the second floor, where the Judge's office, now her's, was located. Out of the elevator there she stopped at the reception-secretary desk.

"Welcome, Mrs. O'Day." She was remembered. Good. It would save time. "My name is Trent, Mam. Trent Malone." Out of her chair, she hesitated and then offered a handshake. "I'm kind of part time now that Mrs. Harrigan quit."

Harrigan. China racked her brain and then nodded. The Judge's old secretary. She shook the offered hand. "Are all our receptionist so young?"

"I wouldn't know, Mam."

China entered the owner's office and looked around. She

had of course seen it before, many times, but this time she saw it with an eye biased to change. The rug was threadbare, the desk was too big and the curtains needed a good cleaning. Out of the window behind that desk she could she could see a bus stop just below. And adjoining that, the parking lot with the potholes.

"Everything all right?" Trent had followed with a notepad.

"I'm still putting the pieces all together." She took a seat behind the desk and spun the leather chair, desk to window and back. "Not much to choose from in the way of scenery is there, Trent." She shifted her gaze to the couch in the corner, wondering how the Judge would have started his day at this office. Coffee, two cream donuts and his morning Gazette. And he would have started his reading on the Sports page.

"You want me to call your first a staff meeting?"

China looked up, surprised. "Is it code of the hills or something? Is that the way the Judge started his day after coffee and donuts?"

"Usually."

China studied her new receptionist secretary. A little on the thin side, long brown hair and way, way too young. "How long have you been with us, Trent?"

"Not all that long." Trent tried a smile, shifting foot to foot. "Actually, I was doing odd jobs until the Editor, that would be Chet...uh, Mr. Billings, suggested I guard the Judge's door when Miss...Whatyamacallit quit."

"Are you more receptionist than secretary?"

"I'm more of a reporter. I mean that's what I'm shooting for."

"Strange path," China mused. "Odd job girl to receptionist to reporter. Is that the way it usually goes?"

"That's the way it's been going for me, Mam, but...Mr. Billings assured me that I was in line for the next reporter job opening."

"Chet Billings our Managing editor promised an odd-

jobber the next reporting job?"

"Well sort of," Trent conceded. "But to be honest I guess, he did use the word eventually somewhere in the promise."

"How old are you, Trent?"

"Almost twenty."

Nineteen. China shook her head. "Still a teenager, Trent. But there'll be time for you later, I'm sure. In the meantime, perhaps you're better suited as a receptionist."

"I'm not without some secretarial skills," Trent insisted. "I had typing in school, thirty words a minute, not counting errors, and shorthand if you don't talk too fast."

"Speaking of Mr. Billings, Trent, I think I will have that staff meeting. Kindly ask him and our Publisher, Mr. Farrington to step into my office at their earliest convenience." She glanced down at her watch. "Which should be no later than five minutes from the time you go through that door and close it behind you."

Trent stood there briefly, as if fighting the urge to curtsy, then nodded and disappeared, slamming the door as she closed it.

Four minutes later she re-appeared with the two men China knew to be her Managing Editor, Chet Billings, and her Publisher, James Farrington. "Gentlemen," she looked up with a smile, "would you be so kind as to close the door and pull a chair up to the desk?"

Briefed a long time before on their newspaper backgrounds and their individual talents by her husband, she studied their physical attributes. Billings, called Chet, although younger than Farrington, had still spent thirty years pulling himself up from copy boy to editor. No college, overweight, balding with his sleeves always rolled up, he could have been straight off a movie set.

Her eyes swung over to Farrington. Older with a Master's degree, graying hair combed into a helmet and a suit with a bow tie. "Thank you for coming."

“We had a choice?” Billings asked as he took the indicated seat.

China tried for a glare. “If I were in your shoes...Chet...my first question to a new owner would have concerned how long I would put up with a losing newspaper.”

“Fine,” Billings said. “How long and how are we fixed for fresh capital? And if we have some, how do we spend it given the needs you must have noticed coming up to your office.”

Just as the Judge had always told her about him. Straight shooter Chet. And so he was. “I have sufficient funds, I hope, to fix a few things around here, starting with circulation, Chet.” She turned her attention to Farrington. “What do you think we should do first, Jim?”

“You’ve already got your finger on the problem of low circulation,” Farrington said. “Give me some more readers and I can charge more for my advertising. Give me more space for ads, and I can up the take there too.”

“You already have too much of the newspaper,” Chet snapped. “I would say give me more space and I can get more news of interest out on the street. More news of interest, better circulation, more subscription money.”

“Gentlemen, you both have a point and although I don’t your experience, I do have enough sense to know that a newspaper has two sources of revenue. Paid circulation and ad revenues. And Chet certainly has a point suggesting the better our news output, the more readers, the more income. And Jim too of course has a point in noting that the more readers we have the more money he can charge our advertisers. The left hand washes the right.”

“Starting with more news space,” Billings insisted.

China nodded. “To that end I already have given this some thought. Which will I hope result in our newspaper making a profit by the end of this year. First, Mr. Billings.”

“Have at me. I’m all ears.”

“Fine, Mr. Billings. To start with our articles are too long and too dull. We need shorter and not so dull. Local affairs. Problems we can tackle and hopefully solve for our city. Suggesting a series to start with.”

She turned her attention to Farrington. “And as to our ads, they have no pizzazz. No pizzazz, no interest in anybody using them as a source of information useful in buying, no money from potential advertisers.” She paused and looked at both of her executives. “Your thoughts, gentlemen.”

Silence.

“Interesting.” She stared at Billings. “How far are we behind the Houston Chronicle in circulation?”

Chet’s eyes widened. “Christ I hope you’re not implying we take them on?”

“Too ambitious for you?” She shook her head and turned to Farrington. “What do you think?”

“We might catch them in two years.”

“No! We’ll be dead by then. My goal, make that our goal, is to overtake them by the end of the year. Six months from now. And I want you two gentlemen to tell me how we can do it. Jim, you start.”

“From the advertising point of view,” Farrington cleared his throat and shifted nervously in his chair, “I’d suggest that we up the ad-to-news ratio. Seventy-thirty, favor of the ads.”

China turned to Chet. “You’re laughing. Why?”

“If you want a Green-sheet approach to a newspaper, something all advertising, take his idea and up the ratio to infinity. Trouble is, people buy a newspaper for the news.” He loosened his tie and shrugged. “Thing is, we’re a newspaper, emphasis on the news, N-E-W-S.”

It was Farrington’s turn to laugh. “Subscriptions pay only 10% of the expenses of a newspaper. You want income, look to ads.”

“Here we go,” China snapped. “He said, she said, buy-

sell-right-left, listen. I called this meeting in the hopes of raising a consensus, gentlemen. Not start an argument. And if Chet likes to spell, C-O-N-S-E-N-U-S. Our ship is sinking and we need to pull together. Better yet we need suggestions on gaining readership."

Farrington's face remained impassive. "The day this newspaper surrenders to a news department that brings in only ten percent of our revenue, is the day we do indeed sink."

China turned back to Billings. "Exactly how far behind the Chronicle are we?"

"A hundred thousand readers, plus or minus a thousand."

"If you had your druthers, Chet, what would the ad-to-news ratio be?"

"Sixty-forty, favor of news."

Farrington shook his head but remained silent.

"Fine." China walked across the floor far enough to poke a finger in Billing's chest. "And if I give you that sort of ration, Mr. Editor, how would you propose to fill that extra space?"

"You ask me, nothing succeeds like a series in which we tackle a local scam. Week after week of us going after the bad guy, driving him out of business, saving our customers."

China nodded. "I remember the series the Judge ran a few years ago on Gypsy scams committed against the elderly. A home repair thing but whatever it was, it almost doubled circulation."

"Up with the go-get the rascals flag, down with the rascals," Chet said. "A series naming names and events."

"No more new hires," China warned. "In-house all the way."

Farrington groaned aloud. "You're really going to go along with this craziness without a time limit?"

"A time limit yes," China agreed. "But I don't think this is all that crazy. As to how long it runs, what do you suggest, Chet. It's your idea."

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“I have to figure out the story but two or three months ought to do it. A series, remember.”

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