

When an old woman is taken to St. John's Hospital, patients mysteriously begin to heal. The doctors are baffled and even more surprised when several days later, the cures are reversed. What is causing this phenomenon?

False Panacea

By Emma Aragon

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BOOK 3

FALSE PANACEA

CAN MIRACLES CONCEAL EVIL?

A Medical Mystery Novel

EMMA ARAGON

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Chapter 1

Dr. Roger Branford drove down Charles Street, rain studding his windshield. He glanced down at the temperature gauge on the dashboard: 33 degrees. As he watched, the numbers slipped down to 32, and now his windshield wipers were sweeping sleet from side to side. He shook his head, smiling at the exactness of nature. One degree of temperature made all the difference. Flakes began filling the night sky like slowly falling stars landing on his window. Already it was dark, and the traffic light sparkled red on his car. Suddenly he was jolted out of his thoughts by frantic knocking on his window. He wiped the steamy glass and saw an old woman with a shawl over her head, pounding on his window and saying things he couldn't hear. He rolled down his window.

“Someone need help!” she shouted in a shrill, cracked voice.

“Who needs help? Do you need help?” Roger asked, slightly confused. Car horns were beginning to blare behind him. The snowflakes were now sparkling green. He reached back into the back seat and opened the door. “Get in!” he said, reminding himself how dangerous it was to let an absolute stranger climb into his car. But she was only an old woman....

“I need St. John hospital,” the woman said. “Someone need me.” She had a heavy accent...Polish or Czech? Roger wondered.

He reversed his course and drove back to St. John's. He'd call his wife, Emily, as soon as he had a chance. He drove into the emergency entrance and said, "Do you need any assistance? Do you know where to go?"

"I get out here. This is good," the woman said, opening the door. Roger turned on the overhead light in the car and looked at her sharply. He couldn't see any gun or dangerous device on her. She didn't have a bag or even a pocket, and her shoes, with the laces dangling open, were soaked. Perhaps the psychiatric department could handle her. He had begun to open his door when an orderly rushed up with a wheelchair.

"Come with me, ma'am," the orderly said, gently taking her arm to help her into the chair.

She pushed his hand away violently. "Do not stop me!" she shouted with more threat than Roger expected from a woman her age. "Many need me! I must go!" And with surprising speed, she limped through the emergency room doors and disappeared into the crowd of people who were standing in line at the desk, waiting to be helped. Roger met the eyes of the orderly, and they both shrugged.

"Maybe I'd better get out and see what's going on," Roger said and pulled his car to the side. He decided to call Emily first.

"Hi, babes," he said when she answered. "I might be late. There's something sort of strange going on here at the emergency room."

"Oh honey, not again!" Emily said, her voice both stressed and impatient. "You give so much of your time to St. John's."

You deserve to have dinner at home at least one day a week.” She paused and continued in a softer tone of voice, “I’m sorry. I sound like I’m whining, don’t I?”

Roger hesitated and then said, “No, you don’t, sweetheart. You’re right. They’ll be able to handle it. I’m coming home.”

As he drove home through the ever heavier-falling snow, he thought back on the old woman, standing in the street amid the traffic, knocking on the windows of cars. From the few quick glimpses that he had gotten of her, she was dressed completely in gray, a long, plain dress dropping almost to her wet shoes, which were falling apart. She had a gray shawl over her head; her face, with its large, hooked nose, was heavily lined. She may not have had many teeth, if any. Poor homeless soul, he thought as he swung up his driveway and into the garage.

“So what was going on?” Emily asked as she set out some cut vegetables and a small cup of hummus on the black marble breakfast bar.

“Someone knocked on my car window,” Roger said, pulling out a short crystal glass for some scotch. “She might have been homeless. Her accent sounded as if she might have been Polish or Hungarian...sort of thick, barely intelligible.”

“So...you took her to St. John’s?” Emily asked.

“Well, that’s the strange part,” Roger said. “She insisted on going to St. John’s. She said someone needed her.” He took the first sip of his drink. “She even said ‘*Many* need me,’ which convinced me she was probably demented, poor thing. She shook off the orderly’s arm and pushed her way into the

emergency room by herself.” He shook his head. “Not good,” he said, “but you’re right. I can’t stay around and fix everything. I needed to come home and eat dinner for a change.”

“You mean I can actually set the table, and you’ll actually be here?” Emily asked.

Roger heard the touch of bitter sarcasm in her voice. Her face, lovely even without the light makeup she usually used, looked thin and older; her sunny brown hair looked unbrushed. He felt a pang and rose to put his arms around her. “Babes, I’m so sorry. I’ve just gotten eaten up by my work...as if no one can do without me. That’s arrogant...and I know it. I’m so sorry.”

Emily stood fairly rigid in his embrace and finally leaned against him. “Life is hard for both of us sometimes,” was all she said before disentangling herself from him. “Let me dish up the roast chicken.”

They ate together in unusual silence. Roger guessed that Emily was becoming more unhappy about all the time he was spending at St. John’s—which, he had to admit to himself, was his favorite place to be. It was a place where he felt completely at peace; his mind was always busy, his hands were always busy...there was nothing in the world that could touch him. But he could touch others. He could fix their spines, relieve their pain, give them the ability to walk again. He guessed that Emily wouldn’t understand if he tried to tell her how he felt. She would take it personally, thinking he didn’t want to be with her.

“How long have we been married?” he asked as he helped himself to more cole slaw.

“You don’t know?” Emily asked. “Wow. Well, it’s been thirteen years.”

“I think we should get out of Dodge,” Roger said. “Let’s take one of those Mississippi boat cruises this summer, down the path that Mark Twain took.”

“I think that would be wonderful!” Emily said, “although summer is a long time away.”

“True,” Roger said. “Maybe we can do something before then.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Emily said, getting up to clear the table.

“Meanwhile,” Roger said, “I’m going to run back to the hospital and see what’s happened with that weird old woman that I dropped off there. I just have a funny feeling. There was definitely something strange about that situation.”

Emily continued carrying dishes into the kitchen without a word, and Roger put on his raincoat.

“Sorry, babes,” he called over his shoulder. “I think I need to check out the emergency room.” Emily didn’t answer. Roger went out to the car and, backing carefully through the growing snowdrifts to the street, headed back to the hospital.

Dr. Jennifer Manning drove cautiously through the slippery streets to St. John’s hospital. She was even worried about driving down the slight slope to the covered garage. They

scarcely ever had weather like this in Atlanta, and she was nervous in this swirling white-starred night. Even the streetlights had snowy halos around them. She pulled into the underground garage with its tracks of water. She usually didn't come at this time of night, but she was new here, and she didn't want a single thing to go wrong. She was worried about her patient, a middle-aged woman named Alicia who had diabetes that was going off the charts. Alicia had stepped on a piece of broken glass, and the wound was not healing. Jennifer was afraid she might lose the foot...or even the leg.

Hurrying down the hall to room 324, Jennifer met a hunched old woman who might have been homeless, gray shawls trailing from her and soaked shoes dragging from her feet. What was she doing in here? Escaping from the snow?

"Excuse me," Jennifer said, reaching out and taking the old woman's arm, which felt withered and bony under the wet shawls. "Can I help you? Are you looking for a doctor?"

The old woman stopped and looked her full in the face. Jennifer was shocked to see how joyous the woman's face looked, despite her wrinkles, her big hooked nose, and her shrunken mouth.

"It is all good," the woman said in a heavy accent. "All good." She pulled her dripping shawl around her and limped quickly away down the hall. Jennifer looked at her wet footprints on the shining tiled floor and then turned into her patient's room. To her surprise, Alicia met her with smiles. She was sitting up, her empty dinner tray pushed to the side.

“Hi, Doctor Jennifer,” she said in a calm, happy voice. “How nice of you to come so late at night to check on me.”

“How are you doing?” Jennifer asked, getting out her stethoscope and then fastening the blood pressure cuff around her patient’s arm. “How is your leg?”

“Everything is fine!” her patient said, face glowing. “I feel great. My leg feels normal. I guess it’s starting to heal. I want to go home in the morning.”

“Not so fast,” Jennifer said, smiling. “Let’s get everything checked out. I’ll have the nurse check your blood sugar.” She let the pressure cuff go and read, “One hundred ten over sixty.” Perfect. Amazing! “I’ll check your blood sugar myself,” Jennifer said, her head whirling a bit. To her surprise, it was 112. Again, perfect. This morning it had been over 200.

“Did you eat dinner?” Jennifer asked.

“Oh yes! It was really good...even the dessert.”

“You weren’t supposed to get dessert,” Jennifer said.

“Well, I ordered it anyway. Oreo cake! Really good!”

Jennifer thought of something. “Did someone come into your room a few minutes ago?”

“You know,” Alicia said uncertainly, pushing back a strand of graying hair, “I was sort of sleepy, but I thought I saw someone walk in. At first I thought it might be my daughter, but then I saw that it was a really old lady. I wondered if maybe she was some sort of therapy nurse, but the next time I opened my eyes, she was gone. Maybe I was dreaming.”

“I don’t think you were dreaming,” Jennifer said.

“You mean someone came into my room...someone who wasn’t a nurse?”

“It’s begun to snow outside,” Jennifer said, “and these poor homeless people sometimes try to find shelter. Don’t worry...she’s gone.”

“So, can I go home in the morning?”

“I’ll take a look at you and then, maybe yes, you can be discharged.”

“Oh good!” Alicia wriggled her bulky body deeper under the thin hospital blankets and said, “I want a really good night’s sleep, especially if it’s snowing. I love to sleep when it’s snowing. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, see you,” Jennifer said, wondering: what had just happened in this room? Maybe she was a better doctor than she thought. What else could explain this? She had treated Alicia with all the skill and knowledge she had. Maybe that’s why her leg was healing. And who knew if it would continue to heal? She decided to get to the hospital early tomorrow and check this out.

Putting on her damp parka, she headed for the elevators, hoping she’d get home through this snowstorm.

Chapter 2

When Roger reached the hospital elevators in the garage, he was surprised to see Jennifer Manning step out, the shoulders of her parka gleaming with moisture. Her chin-length dark hair looked damp.

“Don’t tell me you drove in tonight!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here at this hour?”

“I’m worried about my patient Alicia. And now there seems to be something out of the ordinary going on with her, and I feel I should keep a close eye on her.”

“What’s ‘out of the ordinary?’” Roger asked. They both stepped back into the warmth of the hospital.

“I honestly thought I was going to lose this patient. Her blood sugar was extremely high, and her right foot was swollen from a cut she’d sustained by stepping on a piece of broken glass. I was terrified that we were going to have an amputation, so tonight I came in to take another look at her. The snow had just barely started.”

“So...how is she?” Roger asked.

“This is the strange part. Yesterday I was so afraid that I was going to have to order an amputation, but this evening she was just fine. I mean...she seemed totally well! Her blood pressure was perfect, her blood sugar was perfect...and this was after eating a plate of Oreo Cake! And she seemed totally calm and happy and even wanted to go home tomorrow

morning. Of course, with the weather, she doesn't have a chance of being discharged."

She leaned against the concrete wall, obviously very tired.

"You need to get home," Roger said. "Do you have someone waiting for you?"

"You mean...like a husband? No, there's just me, and I prefer it that way. I've had too many friends whose spouses resented their being at the hospital almost every day and sometimes part of the night."

Roger felt an almost accusatory pang, thinking of Emily. Quickly brushing those thoughts aside, he said, "But wait. First, tell me: did you, by any chance, see a very old woman here in the hospital, dressed totally in gray, her clothes sort of ragged and wet?"

"Yes! Yes, I did!" Jennifer said, straightening up. She gave him a searching, puzzled look. "She was coming down the hall just as I was heading for Alicia's room. I thought she was homeless and trying to get out of the snow, but she looked at me with the happiest look I have ever seen on such a wrinkled old face and said, 'All is good!' Alicia couldn't seem to remember clearly whether this woman had come into her room. She thought it might have been a therapy nurse." Jennifer wrapped her scarf more closely around her neck. "I hope someone can find a place for that poor old thing."

Roger stepped into the elevator, his head swimming with questions. He wondered where that old woman was this very minute. Was she in the hospital? Was she at a shelter? He

suddenly felt that it was important that he find out. He punched “E.”

When the doors opened into the emergency room, he stepped out into a chaotic scene. People were huddled on chairs clutching bulging plastic bags, and the floor was covered with dirty water as more people tracked in. Doctors and nurses were bustling about, separating the sickest from the people who just wanted to get out of the snow.

“Dr. Branford!” a nurse said. “What are you doing here?”

“It looks as though you have your hands full,” he said. “Carry on.” But then he took her arm. “So sorry...but I just thought of something I have to ask you.”

“Of course,” the nurse said, turning to him.

“Was there an elderly woman here tonight? Gray shawl, eastern European accent?”

The nurse put her hand on her forehead. “Let me think. Yes, some old lady came in and rushed right by us. We were so crowded, people everywhere, and I really don’t know what happened to her. I guess someone else caught her before she went into the hospital.”

The nurse hurried away, and Roger heard his name called. An emergency doctor who was an acquaintance of his waved to him over the crowd.

“What’s going on? Are you looking for someone?” Jed Holland asked. He was a short man with a bit of a belly, a kindly face, and a warm smile.

“You guys are really going nuts tonight, aren’t you?” Roger said, putting his hand on Jed’s shoulder and leading him aside.

“Yeah. What a mess...not to mention the car accidents.”

“Listen, Jed, “Roger said. “I just want to know...did some elderly woman come in here? I mean, not your usual old woman, but someone dressed in a long gray dress with an old-fashioned shawl.”

“I didn’t see her, but I heard about it. Someone said she rushed right through the crowd into the hospital, and it took about ten minutes before someone found her on the third floor and brought her back. I think Jerry Peters took her into an examining room, but the next time she was checked on, which could have been only a few minutes, she was gone.”

“Was she admitted...for hypothermia, for instance?”

“Damned if I know,” Jed said. “You might track down Jerry and see what happened to her.”

“Thanks, Jed,” Roger said. “I’ll check on her tomorrow. No one is going out there tonight, that’s for sure.”

“Except you,” Jed said with a grin on his round face.

“Except me.”

Jasmine stood at the living room window, looking out at the snow, which was blowing sideways, turning yellowish under the streetlights and growing pink and green halos from the Italian restaurant across the street. It still had its blinking

sign on. She hoped Sanjay wouldn't try to come home in this terrible snowstorm, and yet she needed him so badly. They both had wanted a child for the last two years, and now she was pregnant! It was such joy to both of them. She was already twenty-six weeks along, and up until now her pregnancy had been healthy and normal. A few hours ago, however, she had begun to experience faint cramps, and fear gripped her.

“Oh Sanjay,” she said out loud into the empty room. “What shall I do? What shall I do?” She walked carefully to the satin-upholstered sofa and then, before she sat down, she had a chilling thought: suppose I bleed on this beautiful sofa that cost so much money? With a faint feeling of shame, she hobbled to a carved wooden chair and carefully sat down. Yes, there was definitely dampness between her legs. She buried her face in her hands and said out loud, “Oh Sanjay, I am sorry. I am sorry,” and began to weep. To her enormous relief an icy wind began to blow around her legs, and she knew the back door was opening.

“Sanjay! I'm in the living room,” she called, so grateful that he'd made it home.

Her heart jumped into her throat when an old woman, wet and frosted with snow, limped into the room. Momentarily forgetting her cramps, Jasmine sprang to her feet.

“Who are you?” she asked, fear catching at her breath. “How did you get in? I am going to call the police!” She held out her cellphone in front of her like a weapon.

“No,” the old woman said. “I come. You need me. I go now,” and she turned and vanished into the kitchen. Jasmine

ran after her in time to see her step out the back door into the snow.

“Wait!” Jasmine said. “Don’t go out there! You’ll freeze to death!”

But the old woman had disappeared into the swirling white. Jasmine could see her faint footprints on the back step, but they were soon covered with snow. Jasmine had closed the door and mopped up the melted snow on the kitchen floor before she noticed that her cramps were disappearing. Maybe it *was* the spicy food, she thought, as she put the mop away into the broom closet. It was a strange story she would have to tell Sanjay when he came home. Since she seemed to be feeling all right, she decided not to mention the cramps or the possible bleeding to him. He has enough on his mind with all that spinal surgery, she thought just as her cell phone chirped.

“Darling,” Sanjay said, “Please forgive me, but I am staying at the hospital tonight. I am sorry to admit that I am afraid to drive in this weather.”

“Oh, I am glad you are not trying to drive tonight. Our child needs you alive and well.”

“And how are you feeling?” Sanjay asked, his voice warm.

“I am fine,” Jasmine replied with unexpected joy. She *was* fine and felt better than she’d felt since she became pregnant. Maybe all those stories about women “blooming” when they became pregnant were true. “Please, just stay at the hospital until it is safe to drive again,” she said. She decided not to even mention the old woman’s coming through the back door. That was certainly strange, she thought, and went to check one more

time that the back door was locked, because it must have been unlocked while she waited for Sanjay. I must try to be a more responsible wife, she thought as she went up to bed.

Jiminy was sitting, half-bombed, in a wheelchair in the emergency room. He couldn't help moaning out loud from the awful pain in his leg. People kept tripping over his leg, and the pain made him nauseated. Looking down at his jeans, he saw they were blood-soaked. Gingerly, he pulled the bloody pants leg up and gagged up sour mucous that ran down his jacket. He saw a bone sticking out of the skin. Oh God, what had he done?

He had only a hazy memory of what really happened. He was at the bar with his buddies and they were downing gel shots that tasted like candy. Each one he swallowed made him feel better and made him more clever. His jokes got better. At least everyone was laughing louder and louder...or was it the music?

Then he had to pee, and he felt a little dizzy on the stairs and sort of lost his balance and stepped out into midair. The floor came up to meet him like a fist, and he heard an awful snap. He started to scream with pain. Somehow his buddies made it down the stairs and pulled him back up.

"Call 911" he screamed in anguish, but they were so bombed they just threw him in a car and dropped him off at the emergency room, and here he was. He waited, prayed, to hear his name called: James. He went by Jiminy...a nickname he'd earned playing high school basketball...because his long legs and sharp elbows reminded people of a cricket, but "James"

would do. Please, he begged now in his mind. Suddenly there was a commotion as someone darted through the crowd to the indoor entrance. If you can run fast enough, maybe you can make it in, he thought blearily. Oh please, someone call my name. Then he thought, had he even checked in? Maybe he'd be here all night. He threw up slightly again. Please, he begged.

He must have dozed off, because when he looked around, the ER was almost empty. Did they all get rooms? Hey, what about him? He noticed gradually that his pain was almost gone. There was just a dull ache. With all his nerve, he pulled up the bloody jeans and saw that the bone was back in the skin. In fact, it looked pretty good. Maybe it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd thought. Maybe he was so drunk he'd been seeing things. It had happened before. He got up and found he could walk pretty good. It was only a few blocks to his apartment. Surely he'd be able to walk that far. He let himself out into the storm and left bloody footprints behind him.

Creeping along the glass front of the emergency room at St. John's Hospital, Neddie clutched her half-full garbage bag tightly. It contained everything that belonged to her. She didn't dare leave anything at home...or what she called home: a stack of layered cardboard boxes under a bridge near Union Station. She was afraid of freezing to death, now that the snow was blowing sideways. Storms around here hardly ever got this bad. She saw that the emergency room was swarming with people. There was a man with a bloody leg being wheeled in in a wheelchair, so she ducked beside it and scurried inside. In the corner stood a palm in a huge pot, perfect for her to hide

behind. She worked her way through the crowd and settled herself behind the plant container, half-sitting on her bag. Tucked into her pocket were two pills she'd gotten for the five dollars she earned by giving some guy in an alley a blow job. Now she slipped one of the pills into her mouth and soon she was feeling really good. The warmth was bliss. For a moment, there was a disturbance in the room as someone just barged in and ran for the inside door. It looked like an old lady...a really, *really* old lady. A nurse seemed to be chasing her. As she wondered how that old biddy could run that fast, to her surprise the old woman turned, pushed her way through the crowd and stood over Neddie, her shawls dripping. Neddie shrank back, a bit scared, but the old woman's glittering black eyes fastened on hers, and Neddie heard a deep, hoarse voice say, "You will be well." And then the old woman disappeared again into the crowd. The nurse was still looking for her.

Neddie sat speechless, her heart pounding, but no one bothered her after that, and the pill was really taking effect, so she dozed for maybe an hour, and when she woke up, the emergency room was almost empty. They must all have been given a room. Suddenly her arm was shaken. She began scrambling to her feet, grabbing her bag. "Sorry, sorry," she mumbled. "I'll get out of here right now."

"What are you doing here, young lady?" she heard a kindly male voice say. Looking up, she saw a man with a white collar and a cross around his neck...a priest. "Do you need medical attention?"

"Uh...no. Just wanted to get warm," she said. "I'll leave right now."

“Why don’t you come and spend the night at our shelter?” he said. “It’s perfectly safe, and you’ll get breakfast. You can leave any time.”

She followed him numbly out to a small bus that was packed with women like her, all clutching plastic bags crammed with stuff. Everyone was silent except one woman who occasionally shouted meaningless, obscene words. They were taken to a small building near a church, and there Neddie was assigned a cot. She kept her bag underneath her. She didn’t want to be here, but hell! it was better than freezing to death. She thought of the extra pill she had hidden and for some reason didn’t feel like taking it. Instead, she lay down and slept in comfort for the first time in years.

She seemed to be the first one to awaken the next morning and, looking over the sleeping bodies lined up, thought, I have to get out of here. But she smelled food! Taking her bag with her, she found a little cafeteria and was given a bowl of oatmeal with sugar, cinnamon, and hot milk. She saw there were eggs for the taking, too, but sat down to eat this first. And you might know, here came the priest, who sat down across from her.

“You can stay here for a while,” he told her. “It’s quite awful outside.”

“I don’t want to hear any lectures about all that God shit,” she said, shoveling in the cereal. “Having to go to Mass and all.”

“Actually, it might be helpful.” He smiled slightly. “But no, that is not a requirement. There’s a counselor available right now, if you want to talk to her. But first...” he reached across

the table and patted her arm, “have some of those eggs and sausage.”

She did see the counselor, first telling her before she sat down, “I don’t want to hear about what I have to do to be some goody-good person...go to church and all that.”

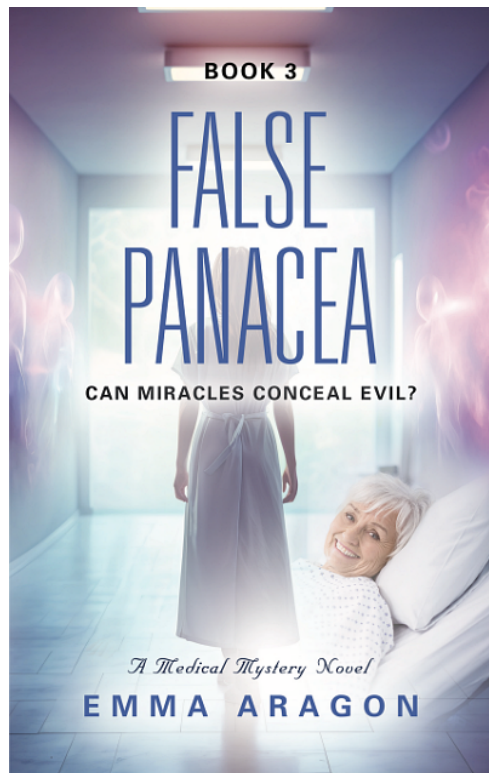
The counselor laughed. “You *are* good.”

“I am?” Neddie asked incredulously.

“Of course. God made you good.”

“Huh.” Neddie snorted. That’s all she needed to hear. These people were Jesus freaks, just as she figured, so she left the counselor and went back to her cot, ready to leave. However, it was amazing how much better she felt after having eaten a full meal. She actually felt like staying warm and moving around, so she found a mop and cleaned up the dirty melted snow under her cot, and then under the next cot.... And then it was time for lunch.

She stayed there that night and the next, too,



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