

The Padre, the Rabbi, and the Devil His Own Self

by Melanie Fletcher

When someone finally pulled the gunnysack off Father Ray Marotta's head, the first thing he thought was, *Let there be light*.

And there was. And it wasn't good at all.

He was on the floor of what looked like an old backwoods shack, with three men in flannel shirts and jeans staring down at him. The pungent scents of body odor, old barbecue and gasoline drifted off the trio in an invisible but nose-shriveling cloud. The one in the middle, wearing a mesh trucker's cap with the slogan "Redneck And Proud Of It," scratched his armpit meditatively. "I s'pose you're wonderin' why we brought you here," he said.

The banjo theme from "Deliverance" went though Ray's head, and his butt muscles clenched. "I swear, I never even *looked* at an altar boy," he pleaded.

The man on the left shook his head. "He's a Cath'lic preacher, all right. I don't know about this, Jimmy James—"

Trucker cap sighed. "I do, DeWayne, and a Cath'lic's what we need. Y'all saw the movie."

The other two nodded reluctantly. Jimmy James gave the priest a quick, uncertain look. "You *are* a Cath'lic, aincha?"

Ray blinked. Having to point to his Roman collar was just icing on the surrealistic cake, but it seemed to reassure the other man.

"All right, then," Jimmy James said. "I'll take him to see Gramma."

#

Ray stared around the dim room where Jimmy James had deposited him with the injunction to "Sprinkle some holy water or wave a cross around, whatever y'all do — just *fix* her, padre."

Unlike the rest of the house, which had been decorated in Nouveau NASCAR Fan, this room was genteel in a faded sort of way. Muted floral wallpaper and framed samplers covered the walls, and the furniture was solid dark mahogany that dated from the 1930's. On the far side of the room sat a huge old horsehair armchair, with an antimacassar draped over the back.

When the man in the chair stood up, Ray yipped, tripping over his own feet and falling back against the door.

"Oops, sorry about that," the man apologized, coming over and extending a hand. "I'm Rabbi David Konig — call me Dave."

"F-father Ray Marotta." Ray shook the rabbi's hand a little harder than he intended.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"That's about the size of it."

"What?"

Dave gave him a weak grin. "Sorry. I'm terrified, and when I'm terrified I tend to make stupid jokes. I'm assuming from the collar that you're a Catholic priest?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Ray demanded. "Look, I was *kidnapped*—"

"From the conference in Little Rock, right?" Dave said. "Yeah, they grabbed me yesterday. Unfortunately, it wasn't until after our hosts brought me back here that they thought to inquire about my particular flavor of faith." He shrugged. "I think my coloring fooled them. A blond, blue-eyed Jew — who knew?"

Ray's gut went cold. He hadn't heard anything about a missing conference member. To make matters worse, one of the conference's special guests this year was the Reverend Timothy Poole, the biggest televangelist in the tri-state area. In their infinite wisdom, the organizers had allowed Poole to bring his Pentecostal road show to the conference, complete with a tent revival in the hotel parking lot. With that kind of circus going on, it could be days before someone noticed they were short a priest *and* a rabbi.

He sagged onto an overstuffed sofa. "Great. So we're screwed."

"Oh, it gets even better than that," Dave said, pointing at a nearby door. "Check it out."

The priest glanced at the door, and did a double-take; the door itself seemed perfectly normal, until he noticed the rusting iron hooks screwed into each side of the doorframe. A thick length of wood stood nearby, ready to bar it shut. "Jesus. What's in there — an albino banjo player with an axe?"

"Just an old lady," Dave said. "She's why we're here. While we're on the subject, I strongly suggest you go see her under your own steam. You really don't want her grandsons tossing you in there — I speak from experience."

Ray pictured his three kidnappers and shuddered. *Damn it, this is the last time I go to an interfaith conference in a red state.*

Reluctantly, he crossed the room and opened the wooden door. Beyond it was a very old-fashioned bedroom, a brass bed glimmering in the dim light from the sitting room. Next to the bed, a dark shape rocked back and forth.

He cleared his throat. The rocking stopped, and two red glints appeared in the darkness.

"Her name is Mrs. Mackay," Dave called helpfully.

Ray glared at his colleague, then forced a smile. "Hello, Mrs. Mackay," he said, stepping into the room. "Um, I'm Father Marotta, and your family wanted me to see you—"

There was an *urk*, followed by a scuffling noise as if someone was desperately trying to get a grip on the floor. With a surprising amount of elegance, Ray soared back through the doorway and slammed into the opposite wall before tumbling to the floor.

Dave rushed over and helped him sit up. "Wow, she must be cranky tonight," he said. "I didn't come anywhere near the wall when she threw me out."

Wheezing in pain, the priest stared back along his flight path. In the darkness beyond the doorway, something chuckled malignantly.

"Oh, and if you're wondering, yes, she's possessed," Dave added. "That's why we're here — her grandsons want her exorcised. And unfortunately for you, that nice film with Linda Blair vomiting pea soup convinced them that the only person who could do it is a Catholic priest."

"Possess—ow!" Ray touched the back of his head and hissed. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Serious as a heart attack. The big bubba thinks she's got a devil inside her."

"Great — and people wonder why the Church hates that movie," the priest moaned. "Most cases of 'possession' are just straight-up psych problems. If she thinks she's got a devil inside her, she needs a shrink, not a priest."

The rabbi gave a very Judaic shrug. "I'm not arguing with you. Just one question, though — how did Granny Beelzebub throw you through the door?"

"She..." Ray hesitated. "Well, look, disturbed people can be incredibly strong—"

"Yes, I know, but they usually have to reach you first. Betcha a slice that you didn't get within two feet of her. I *know* I didn't."

"But she...I mean —" He remembered the shape in the rocking chair, and those glowing eyes, and then he was flying backwards—

—*and she never touched him.*

"Aw, shit," he said weakly.

Dave got him up, guiding him to the armchair. "I know this sounds hard to believe, but I think we've got a genuine case of demon possession on our hands," he said gently. "The question is, can you exorcise her before her grandsons decide to break our legs as an incentive?"

Ray scrubbed his face, trying to think. *I've been kidnapped, I'm trapped in the middle of nowhere with the cast of Blue Collar TV and their possessed grandma, and my only backup is Jerry Seinfeld's rabbinical brother.* "I think so. I've never actually done an exorcism before, but I know the procedure."

The rabbi sighed in relief. "All righty, then. So what do you need — crucifix, holy water, a Bible?"

Ray gave his clerical counterpart a long, bleary look. "Actually, I'm going to need an assistant."

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The priest studied the worn grey nightgown. "Um..."

"It's the closest thing we got to what you said," Geraldine said apologetically. The mother of Jimmy James, DeWayne and Luke, she was much smaller than her hulking sons, and worn with the strain of taking care of her own mother. "That surplus thingy."

"Surplice." He shook his head. "It'll be fine. What about a stole?"

Shyly, she held up a neon purple velvet table runner edged with gold fringe. In the middle was a portrait of Elvis Presley from his Vegas days. "Luke won it for me at the county fair," she confided.

Ray took the table runner and smiled weakly. "Can't go wrong with the King, huh?"

After putting on the voluminous nightgown, he reluctantly kissed Elvis and hung the runner around his neck. "Okay, let's get started."

The Catholic ritual of exorcism was fairly simple. A crucifix was placed in the victim's hands, and the exorcist recited the Litanies of the Saints, the Pater Noster, and the 54th Psalm, calling upon the demon to make itself known, succumb to Jesus Christ, depart the victim and leave them in peace.

The real trick of an exorcism was the number of times this all had to be done. An exorcism wasn't a quick "The power of Christ compels you," a couple drops of holy water and boom, goodbye demon. It was repetitious, strenuous. It was practically *aerobic*.

Especially with Mrs. Mackay, who had spent the morning cursing, spitting, vomiting, levitating, extending a variety of obscene offers, and contorting her body into poses that would have sent Hieronymus Bosch running for his paintbrush. There was now a slippery, smelly no-fly zone around her chair, and her grandsons huddled with their mother in a corner. Ray glanced at them; he wasn't sure who was protecting whom.

He turned back, and ducked in time to avoid the battered crucifix flying across the room. As Mrs. Mackay cackled, he brought it back and held it over her head. "Fine, we'll do it this way," he gritted. "*Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum*YOW—"

The crucifix burst into flames and he dropped it. DeWayne jumped forward, stomping on it to put out the fire. Belatedly, he realized what he'd just stomped on. "I ain't going to hell for that, am I?" he whispered to Ray.

Mrs. Mackay grinned at him. "Like we'd have you, cock-knocker," she rasped.

"You shut up," Ray ordered.

"Don't you tell Gramma to shut up," Jimmy James called.

Ray glared at him. "I'm not telling *her* to shut up. I'm telling the *demon* to shut up!"

The demon waggled Mrs. Mackay's tongue at them all. "Make me, douchebag."

"You shut up!" Jimmy James yelled, flushing.

The rabbi sighed and checked his watch. "People, it's two o'clock in the morning, which means we've been at this for six hours," he announced. "Why don't we call it a day, get something to eat, maybe some coffee and whatever you lovely people have instead of bagels, and take it up again bright and early tomorrow?"

Jimmy James and his brothers didn't look convinced. "Sometimes it takes a couple of days to do this," Ray pleaded. "Don't believe everything you see in the movies, especially one made by a non-Catholic."

The two younger brothers looked at Jimmy James, who finally nodded. "Okay. But you two are bunkin' down in here with her," he said. "We'll start 'er up again tomorrow at ten o'clock."

"Ten!" DeWayne whined. "Jimmy James, you know I hate gettin' up that early!"

"You shut yer 'tater-trap, DeWayne," Jimmy James snapped. "Padre, rabbi, we'll be bringin' you some food in a while. Y'all go ahead and make yerself comfortable."

The family filed out of the room, Geraldine giving them an apologetic smile before closing the door. The lock clicked.

Ray and Dave looked at each other, then at Mrs. Mackay. Who, much to their surprise, sighed and said, "I was wonderin' when they were finally goin' to give up."

Ray felt his jaw drop. "Excuse me?"

The old woman smirked at him. "Don't look so surprised, father. It's not flatterin'."

Dave gaped at her. "You were *faking*?"

Mrs. Mackay chuckled. "Oh, I ain't fakin' anything, son. I got a devil inside me, all right. I just ain't possessed." She paused, then nodded. "Speak of the devil — Listur said he wants to talk to you. I'll be right back." Her head dipped for a moment, then came back up with a wolfish smile that didn't quite fit her face.

"Hello, boys," she rumbled. Ray started; if he didn't know better, he would've sworn that she was channeling Barry White. "Now that she let me out, we gotta talk."

The priest edged closer. "You weren't out earlier?"

"Hell, no. That was all Gramma Mackay." The old woman paused, as if listening to something, and shrugged. "Okay, yeah, the levitating was me. But that's what I want to talk to you about — she's telling the truth. *I'm not possessing this woman*. You can exorcise her until the cows come home, and it's not going to do a damned thing."

Ray ran a hand through his hair, grimacing when he remembered it was covered with body fluids. "Okay, if you're not possessing her, then how come you're—" he waved at Mrs. Mackay's midsection. "—in there."

Listur sighed. "This is embarrassing. I'm here because she summoned me. It just looks like a possession because she's keeping me in her own head instead of a closed circle. Which, by the way, is one hell of a trick. I've worked with some powerful hags in my time — Ursula Shipton, Anne Boleyn, Barbara Bush — but Juline Mackay is probably the strongest witch I've ever met."

The priest glanced at Dave, who gave him a "don't look at me — not my faith" shrug. "Okay, even if we believed you," he said, "which I'm not saying we do, what do you want us to do about it?"

Listur rolled Mrs. Mackay's eyes. "Why couldn't they find a Jesuit? Look, the old...darling...won't let me go until I do what she wants, and her family's fucking useless for that. I mean, they kidnapped a *rabbi*, for Satan's sake. So I need your help to do her bidding."

"Why would we want to help you?" Dave asked. "Looks like you're corked up nice and tight where you are."

The demon gave him a nasty grin. "Yeah, and so are you, with three increasingly irritated rednecks. Who do you think is gonna squeal like a pig first?"

The rabbi blanched. "He's got a point."

"Think of it as an act of charity," Listur added. "If you help us out, old lady Mackay gets her vengeance, you get to expose a false prophet, and I can stop bouncing bubbas off the walls and go home. It's a win-win situation for everyone."

Ray held up a hand. "Um...go back to 'vengeance' and 'expose a false prophet', please?"

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In the morning, the door creaked open and Jimmy James peered around it. "Y'all up? Ma's cookin' you up some breakfast before we get started."

Ray and Dave were already standing next to Mrs. Mackay, who squeaked back and forth in her rocking chair. "Yeah, about that," Ray said. "We need to talk to you. In private."

The old woman did something obscene with her tongue, then cackled. Jimmy James turned green. "I s'pose we can talk about it at the table," he mumbled. "Come on, then."

The two clergymen followed Jimmy James out to the kitchen, where Geraldine was presiding over an old-fashioned wood stove. "Mornin', Father, Rabbi," she nodded at them,

cracking eggs into an iron skillet. "Luke fetched some breakfast from town — hope you like your bacon crispy."

Dave looked slightly pale. "Um, actually—"

"Crispy's fine for me, thanks," Ray said. "We've got some news about your mother — we found out which demon is possessing her."

Geraldine turned, her face flushed with the stove's heat. "You did? Is that good?"

"Well, it's good and it's bad. It's good to have the demon's name, since that gives you a handle on it during the exorcism. The bad thing is, I can't exorcise this particular demon. We kept trying all night, but it's just too strong for me."

The Mackay men looked at each other, dismay clear on their faces. "Tolja," Luke grumbled.

Ray shook his head. "Hey, it's not over yet. While we were trying to exorcise her, I found out that there's a Protestant preacher who scares the crap out of this demon. The way I figure it, this preacher is the only one who can exorcise the demon and save your grandma."

Geraldine touched her work-reddened fingers to her lips. "Do you think that would work?" she said hesitantly.

Ray gave her the smile he used for parish fundraising events. "*I know* it'll work, ma'am. And I happen to know that this preacher is holding a tent revival near Little Rock — if we all take your mom there, he'll be able to pop that demon right out of her."

The Mackay clan exchanged looks. "I dunno," Jimmy James muttered. "Sounds like a trick to me—"

Fast as a snake, Geraldine whacked him with a dishcloth. "Jimmy James Orbison Mackay, you listen to that nice Cath'lic preacher," she ordered. "It's bad enough y'all kidnapped him and his heathen friend here — no offense, Mister Rabbi."

"None taken," Dave said cheerfully.

Jimmy James rubbed his arm, a hurt expression on his face. "I'm just tryin' to help, Momma."

"Then stop flappin' your mouth and do what I tell you. If he says that we need one of our own to help Momma, you listen to him and do whatever he says, y'hear?" She turned to her other sons. "DeWayne, you and Luke can go in your pickup. Jimmy James'll take the rest of us. And everyone go get cleaned up and put on your good overalls. We're going to church!"

Ray squelched a smile at the men's groans. Possessed or not, Juline Mackay's spirit was alive and well in her daughter. "Thank you, ma'am," he said sincerely.

She snorted, banging a pile of bacon on the table. "They ain't too big for me to take a switch to them, and they know it. Now, what's this preacher's name, anyway?"

God, please forgive your servant for flinging a colleague into the crapper like this, but if Mrs. Mackay is telling the truth, he more than deserves it. "His name's Timothy Poole," Ray said. "Maybe you've heard of him?"

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An hour later, a badly rusted F-150 pickup truck jounced down a gravel road, kicking up a cloud of red dust. Jimmy James and Geraldine were in front, while Ray, Dave and Mrs. Mackay sat in the back of the crew cab, the men scrunched up against the doors thanks to Mrs. Mackay's sharp, well-aimed elbows.

"It's funny — I remember when Reverend Poole came to Skarsie a couple of years ago," Geraldine said, turning in her seat. "Held a big ol' tent meeting just outside town. He gave Missus Simmons a blessing and promised her that her arthritis was gonna be healed, too. She was so happy."

Ray grabbed for the Jesus bar as they hit a large pothole. "Missus Simmons — she's a friend of your grandma's?"

"Oh, yes. Those two pretty much did everything together." She sighed. "Then Missus Simmons' arthritis started getting' too bad for her. Poor old dear — it seemed to get better after the Reverend blessed her, but then it all started hurtin' again, and she kept writing to the Reverend asking for another blessing." She looked uncertain. "I reckon it costs a lot to bless people cross-country, kinda like a long-distance call from God, 'cause the Reverend kept askin' for donations. Poor Missus Simmons gave him all she could, but, well..."

Mrs. Mackay's lips skinned back from her teeth, and she growled. "Yes, well, I'm pretty sure he'll be able to help your mother," Ray said quickly. "And I can guarantee you that this blessing will stick."

"One way or the other," Dave muttered.

An hour later, the two trucks were out of the hills and in the suburbs of Little Rock. As they pulled into the parking lot of the conference hotel, Ray saw a huge white tent set up at the far end of the hotel. Crowds of people stood in line around the tent, herded by men in suits and buzz cuts.

Even at that distance, Ray could spot the earpieces linking the "shepherds" to Poole's command center. Like any prosperous televangelist, Poole used wireless radio transmitters so that his assistants could gather information from the attendees and funnel it back to the good reverend. When the healings got underway, the people would be astounded at how Poole knew all about their personal troubles.

They got out of the truck, Jimmy James unstrapping an old-fashioned wheelchair from the truckbed and helping his grandmother into it. She was quiet, but as she stared at the tent her expression spoke volumes. As they wheeled her to the tent, one of Poole's shepherds intercepted them. "Good afternoon to all you fine folk," he said in a jovial voice that reeked of sincerity. "I'm guessing you're here for the meeting?"

"Yes, we certainly are," Ray replied, fishing out his conference badge. "This lady here is suffering from, well, the best thing I can call it is possession. I was wondering if the Reverend would be willing to help out — professional courtesy, so to speak."

The shepherd's eyes narrowed at "possession," then lit up as he saw the badge. "Why, the Reverend would be more than happy to help a fellow man of the cloth, Father! I think we can arrange to have this dear woman moved right to the front row. If y'all will follow me?"

As he led them into a side entrance, he casually asked about Mrs. Mackay's symptoms. Ray gave him a rundown on the demon, ignoring a prickle of conscience when he explained that Listur was terrified of Poole.

"I'm not surprised at all. The reverend's already done battle with a couple of fiends from the pit just this morning," the shepherd said with a smile as they approached the front row of folding chairs. Ray estimated that the tent was already three-quarters full; judging from the crowd still waiting outside, it would go to SRO status. A huge, white-draped stage held more than enough room for Poole's choir and backing band. On one side of the stage was a sturdy ramp, the better to get wheelchair-bound attendees up to the reverend for their "healing."

The shepherd guided them to the center of the front row, where there was a space for wheelchairs. "You just set Mrs. — Mackay, was it?" he said. "Yes, set Mrs. Mackay right here,

where the reverend can call her up for her blessing. And don't fret about her -- the reverend *is* filled with the power of the Lord, after all. He'll pop the Devil right out of her, yessir."

Smiling, he headed backstage. The Mackays took nearby seats, leaving the ones flanking their relative to Ray and Dave. The rabbi's head swiveled as he took in the tent. "Well, the reverend is certainly full of *something*," he muttered.

Mrs. Mackay cackled. "You ain't seen nothing yet, rabbi man."

Twenty minutes later, she was proved right as a 25-member choir took the stage and started belting out, "Sing the wondrous love of Jesus, sing His mercy and His grace!" The shepherds wandered up and down the aisles, clapping along and encouraging everyone to join in. By the time the choir finished with the second hymn, "Highway to Heaven," even Ray could feel the power crackling through the audience. Next to him, however, Mrs. Mackay sat as if listening to a dirge.

Finally, the Reverend Timothy Poole bounced on stage. From the top of his perfectly styled hair (with just a touch of distinguished grey at the temples) to the soles of his handmade wingtip shoes, he was the epitome of the modern televangelist; professional, polished and ready to dazzle. "Welcome, fellow pilgrims on the path to righteousness!" he boomed into his handheld mike. "God has sent me here tonight to bring you some good news, yes He has! And would you like to hear that news, pilgrims?"

The congregation shouted for more.

"The good news is, God loves you!"

A chorus of "Amen" and "Bless you" roared back from the congregation. "And you know why He loves you? Because you are here tonight, ready to listen to His word and follow Him!" Poole said, opening his arms to the cheers.

A half hour of carefully modernized fire and brimstone preaching followed, in which Poole called down the wrath of God on homosexuals, liberals, Planned Parenthood, librarians who wouldn't burn books, pornography, the theory of evolution, and Hillary Clinton. The response from the congregation was loud and enthusiastic, especially after Poole described the fiery punishments waiting for such perverted sinners as Ellen DeGeneres and Howard Dean.

"I'm telling you, pilgrims, Satan walks our very streets even this day," he thundered, pointing at Mrs. Mackay. "Even here, in our very midst, we have a poor innocent who has been overtaken by his wickedness and is trapped in his foul grasp. But I'm here to tell you that God is

"Haaaaallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!"

"Shama-lama-ding-dong!"

"Shama-lama-ding-dong!"

"A whomp-bop-a-loo-bop?"

"A whomp-bam-boo!" came back in a thunderous shout.

Poole stopped and grinned at them. "My Lord, you'll do anything I say, won't you?" he said. "I tell you to say hallelujah, you say hallelujah. I tell you to praise God, you praise God. I tell you to sing some nonsense lyrics from a Fifties song, and you do that, too. Bless your hearts, y'all make my job so *easy*."

The crowd went quiet, people glancing at each other in confusion. "Oh, now, don't look so surprised. Leading y'all is a job, after all," Poole said. "And Lord, I love my job, because I don't have to do much of anything to get y'all to follow me. All I have to do is shout about sin and the fiery pit, and you're locked onto me like I was *The Intimidator* come back to life." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Lord love a duck, I have no idea if Hillary Clinton is going to become Satan's concubine, and I'm pretty sure that most librarians aren't going to roast for all eternity on a burning pile of *Catcher in the Rye*, but I start hollerin' about that sort of thing and y'all eat it up like grits with butter."

The televangelist's grin widened. "Of course, I'm just telling y'all what you want to hear, just like I get you up here on stage with your walkers and your wheelchairs and tell you you're healed. And the truth of the matter, folks, is that I tell you what you want to hear so that I can ask you for money." He held up his hands at the first murmurs. "Now, I know how that sounds, but that's not the shocking thing, folks. The real shock is that all you wonderful people *send* me money, even though some of you have no business doing that, not when you're living on some pitiful amount from Social Security. But damn if you don't drain your savings accounts and send me your last penny, just because I told you I've got a direct line to the Lord."

He chuckled again, and this time it was an unpleasant sound. "Of course, I don't. Y'all could talk directly to the Lord anytime you like, without any help from me. But heck, where's the money in that? Won't help me any if you cut out the middleman, and then who's going to pay for these nice thousand dollar suits or these sweet little diamonds?" He twirled, flashing a pair of sparkling pinky rings. "No, I need you all to think of me as your shepherd, keeping y'all in a nice

orderly flock." He gave them a huge wink. "Makes it so much easier to fleece you at the end of the day."

The muttering from the congregation grew, and some people started to leave. "Aw, come on folks, you came tonight to hear the Truth, didn't you?" Poole called. "Don't you want to hear about my fine house, my BMW, all my expensive suits and jewelry? I haven't even mentioned all those investments I've got up the ying-yang. And that's just the money — I haven't even started on the sins of the flesh, oh my yes! Gourmet meals, expensive wine, massages — and the poontang, pilgrims!"

He cocked a thumb back at the choir, where three women and one young man were now turning crimson. "I tell you, there's nothing like getting some fine young thing all fired up with the Spirit and back to the hotel, just beggin' for it!" he said, leering. "Doesn't really matter if it's a buck or a doe, either — after all, variety is the spice of life. Ask my deacons if you don't believe me."

By now, the backstage area was boiling with choir members trying to get out of the tent and deacons trying to get onstage and kill Reverend Poole. "And y'all paid for it, for which I thank you from the bottom of my little black heart," he said, throwing his arms wide in a mocking gesture. "And when I'm sipping a mint julep on the porch of my mansion and having my knob gobbled by some pretty little sixteen-year-old, I'll think about y'all out there, with your aching bellies, and the landlord beating on your door, and you trying to decide between getting medicine for your sick momma or clothes for your kids, and realizing you can't do either because you sent all your money to me."

He leaned forward, eyes gleaming with malice. "And then I'll *laugh*."

Unsurprisingly, the audience erupted.

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Ray surveyed the carnage from the parking lot. After the twelve squad cars, three fire trucks, seven ambulances and a skeleton crew of National Guard finally finished mopping up, the revival site looked more like the aftermath of a Metallica concert than a religious event. "Well, that was fun," he said.

"Yeah, a real knee-slapper," Dave said, holding an icepack obtained from a friendly paramedic on his eye. "Feels like I got clocked with a Talmud."

"King James Bible," Ray corrected him. "Heavy mothers — all that Protestant commentary."

Beside them, the Mackays munched on bags of pork rinds. "That was way better than rasslin'," Luke said through a mouthful of pork product. "I thought that good ol' boy from the choir was gonna lay a turnbuckle slam on the reverend."

"Think they ever found him under that pile of old folks?" Jimmy James wondered. "They looked mighty mad."

"Don't know, don't care," Geraldine said, kneeling next to Mrs. Mackay's wheelchair. "Momma, you feelin' better now?"

"I feel just fine, darlin'," Mrs. Mackay said, patting her daughter's hand. "Why don't you and the boys go get the trucks, and let me thank these nice young men for their help?"

"Whatever you say, Momma." Geraldine ducked in to kiss her forehead, then herded her sons off towards the parking lot.

Alone, Mrs. Mackay turned to the clergymen. "Both you boys helped me right a wrong, and I thank you for that," she said, her tone low and formal.

Ray scuffed at the asphalt. "Yeah, about that — what exactly happened to Poole?"

"And Listur?" Dave added. "Is he still inside Poole?"

Something dark danced in the old woman's eyes. "Oh, I expect Listur's gone back to Hell by now. He ain't actually that fond of people, y'see — says we're worse than some of his kinfolk. As for Mr. Poole, I don't think he's gonna be up to fleecing any more sheep for awhile. Course, with what those choir members did to his privates, I don't think he's gonna be up for much of anythin'."

Geraldine bustled back, brushing rind crumbs from her hands. "Momma, we're ready to go," she announced. "Thanks again for your help, Father Marotta. You and the rabbi are always welcome in our part of Skarsie." She looked at the wreck of Poole's tent and shook her head.

"Whoo. Exorcism ain't quite what it looks like in the movies, is it?"

Ray couldn't help smiling. "No, ma'am, it certainly isn't."

Still shaking her head, Geraldine wheeled her mother away, the old woman raising a hand in a final benediction before they disappeared around the hotel corner.

The rabbi grinned. "I think we just got a genuine witchy blessing, Father."

"Well, it *is* supposed to be an interfaith conference, Rabbi," Ray said judiciously.

"Tolerance, understanding, all that crap. So, wanna go have a religious dialog over a beer?"

"Amen," Dave said, "to that."