

The Gospel of Thomas

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Summary: After receiving a mysterious message from the Congolese cardinal, Simon Mulangu, President Thomas Bremanger orders U.S. intervention in the imminent papal election. Bill Never, the attorney general, and top players at the NSC, NSA, CIA, State Department and West Wing of the White House assemble a special unit to carry out covert actions.

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“How did they get it so wrong?”

Jesus of Nazareth

“The mice in the monastery have grown plump and careless ever since cats ceased chasing them there, fearing tradition that warns that cats will be changed into dogs if one dares enter the cloister. But outside, famine rages, the millennium drought having settled for good over the land. And one cat listens to scarcity’s and deprivation’s counsel to breach the taboo. Finally, survival gets the better of starvation; and instead of dying of hunger like the other cats, it crosses the threshold of the secluded friary on a moonless night. It slaughters the mice, crannies and holes being too narrow for the plump ones to escape. Then, too, the cat’s hunger is intense, more so than the number fifteen, the amount of mice cats are only supposed to kill before halting. And the slaughter goes on. The cat will be sated for a month. The feast so distorts its stomach, it almost misses the exit at dawn. Out of the monastery, the bloated feline drags itself over to its favorite baobab tree and goes to sleep. After extensive discussion whether or not to approach, the other cats draw fearfully near. They expect to find a fiendish dog under their baobab and are terrified. Instead, they are dumbfounded. The monastery’s visitor, sleeping contentedly, is as it has been before its night expedition. It is still a cat.”

Congolese tale

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BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

There was a sense of certainty about Thomas Bremanger, faith in the manner he made his way. You felt drawn by the energy like a bee to the bloom. To resist left many with an uneasy isolation that had the doomsday media clamoring, “That the rats were once again following the tune of the piper to an unknown abyss.”

On Madison Avenue, where he had several offices, Bremanger would walk from one on 23rd Street to another on 28th, and it was as if Apollo had stepped off the Belvedere to march up the avenue. Pedestrians would stop, turn, and watch him pass by. And as America floundered and insecurity normed, some would follow him out of an instinct for protection. His stride was too long, and most followers fell behind watching him tower over the crowd, regretful they couldn't keep up. It wasn't his demeanor that caused such reactions. He wished for nothing better than self-effacement and put great stake in that quality in his associates. Nor was it his understated elegance; that if you copied him to the minute details you would still fall short. The pope, with whom he had done business while Secretary of State, and, who envied the marbled handsomeness and intellectual vigor, identified the indescribable sensation many experienced in his presence as a state of grace.

The Gods may have favored Thomas Bremanger, but the naysayers would not overlook his dogmatic push to right the past and his leanings toward the poor. Fortunately, neither would they overlook the disaster around them. They were desperate.

Still, it took his wife's death to make him president.

His wife, unbeknownst to the public, had been ill for some time. Chemotherapy had ravaged her body already frail from the surgery to remove her breasts, and she wanted to die. She told him, *never had she loved life more*, not to remind him of the life they had made by referring to their favorite Puccini aria—since they were married, they had never failed to be in Milan on December 7, in La Scala's third box on the right, in the first tier decorated in sea green silk, for the season opener—but because she knew he, too, was embarking on a journey of no return, and the thought of their diverging paths settled upon them.

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So she begged his forgiveness and, as if on cue, did not awaken the morning of October 22. The negative ads that guarantee election victories in the United States reluctantly ceased, for even their take-no-prisoner sponsors sensed they would turn off the public as they shared his grief. The first Tuesday in November came crossing the line at a furious gallop, shouting “enough already,” and leaving his challengers no time to recover from the public’s empathetic reaction to the loss of his perfect wife. That’s how a childless widower was elected president of the United States.

He had grown up in an orphanage, and that was usually the first peculiarity people learned about him. Orphanage was on the pope’s mind, too, when the Vatican congratulated him on his victory. The pope, caught up in the crusade to reunify the Christian world, sought to gain an advantage from the Bremanger election—a Catholic home for boys could be the ticket to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and a giant step closer to influencing events and world leaders into embracing his cause. Indifferent to the pope’s aspiration, a new euphoria prevailed. ‘After the rain the sunshine’ tuned from an adage to an actuality, as Americans ushered in the era of a president the Gods seemed to favor.

The pope was correct in at least one aspect: Thomas Bremanger had no family of his own, no father to look up to or learn from; only the companionship of fellow orphans to assuage his loneliness. Detached from the familiar, he was free to create and follow his own footprints.

He abhorred fatalism. It was as an activist—albeit a furtive one—that he assumed his responsibility in the world.

The weekly cabinet meeting with the president was on Tuesdays. This one, Bill Never, the Attorney General, would remember for the rest of his days; for it was that day the president told him about the message Cardinal Mulangu had sent him. Oh, the leaves! He probably would have forgotten about their falling with such notice-me rant had it not been for what the president mentioned that day. Over time, he looked upon the leaves’ rioting that Tuesday as a portent of what was to come; for Cardinal Mulangu, himself, soon became the focus of a White House project that would alter the lives of many. And the little donkey, Bremtoo, who was absent from the Rose Garden that day would also become etched in the memory because of what the president told him that day.

Bill Never was a tall, black, balding man, sporting a permanent politician's grin. He had been Thomas Bremanger's closest ally since they were thrown together at a California orphanage, and the president considered him his trusted confidante. In turn, Bill Never regarded the president as the one person who always had his back.

"We do not usually take your kind here," Mother Lucia told him that morning of February 22, 1946, in her office at the Santa Ana Orphanage for Boys. He was six years old, tall and thin, wearing clothes of a gray colored fabric, rough like canvas, his peeling belt around his waist twice. He was standing in front of the Mother Superior's desk, waiting, his right hand adjusting the belt, the other, pressing a soiled, tattered blanket against his chest protectively. "Perhaps we'll make an exception this time." Thomas was standing at his side, and she turned her gaze on him, her eyes above her half glasses, looking like a judge in a picture show. "You're in charge of Billy here—and mark me! You're responsible for any misdeed of laziness he commits. Do you understand me?"

"So you're in charge of me, hey?" he said to Thomas when Mother Lucia had left the room. A smile in his voice, mixed with sarcasm. "You'd have to be my brother to do that. They took my brother to another home."

"I don't mind," Thomas replied thoughtfully. "I never had a brother."

They had been together ever since. Bill Never was now attorney general to his president.

Earlier that ominous Tuesday, chief of staff, Loft Frankel, passed him a note saying that the president wished to see him after the cabinet meeting. He now approached the president who flashed him a quick head-jerk to join him into the adjacent Oval Office. Following dutifully, Bill went first to the window facing Pennsylvania Avenue to look at the little donkey Thomas had bought for the White House to remind them of their orphanage days and to amuse the White House press corps.

"Had it not been for that little donkey, Bill, remember, we would not have had the money to run away from Santa Ana. The least we can do is honor his memory with Bremtoo here."

The president acquired the little donkey when a farmer turned Congressman to whom Bill Never had recounted the exploit of his orphanage's donkey told Bill that his jenny had died giving birth. The

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little donkey was an orphan from a farm in Pennsylvania's 11th Congressional District. The president had paid fifteen hundred dollars for the orphan and named him Bremtoo. This morning, he wasn't there.

"He's sleeping in this morning," the president explained; "a storm front has rolled in, and it's too blustery out there. Pablo didn't want to take a chance he'd catch a cold."

The orphanage's donkey had indeed played a leading role in the lives of the two friends. That role began with the sheep Mother Lucia had assigned them to keep. During Thomas's turn to feed them, he trained a ram to stand up to the herding dog that bit them constantly and then to butt it. When the dog disappeared, Mother Lucia said that they would not get another and Thomas and Billy would have to look after the animals without one.

"What are you so pleased about?" Billy asked the first day on the job. "These sheep stink." Thomas was eyeing an impassive donkey that looked dazed as usual.

"What are you looking at him for?" Billy continued. "He's a donkey. Donkeys don't do sheep."

"Who says?" Thomas answered. "I read you can train bees to find gold."

Thomas did train the little donkey to indeed do sheep. Until then it had served to carry the handicapped children. The donkey's herding of the sheep with more determination and speed than a Kuvasz guard dog enchanted visitors, and they regularly dropped fives, tens, and twenty's into the now rusty tin box Billy had made in the machine shop last summer and placed on a strategically low post at the entrance to the compound. The Santa Ana *Gazette* dedicated a page of its paper to the *sheep-donkey* and many visitors began to arrive. Billy made a larger metal box after a suggestion by a Paramount film crew. They had traveled from Los Angeles to film the indefatigable donkey and its sheep.

Not having Bremtoo to reminisce over, Bill Never contented himself with admiring the flowers in the Rose Garden that the White House gardener, Pablo Armandaritz, cultivated all year round. "I wish I knew how he did it," he muttered. But without Bremtoo there, the garden looked empty and forlorn. Disappointed, he walked away and pulled a chair out from the right side of the president's huge desk that seemed to be standing guard in the office, a desk the President

christened “*Soledad*.” Never didn’t know why; but for some unapparent reason, the name seemed fitting.

Bill saw the president’s jaw tighten as he removed a 9 by 12 manila envelope from Soledad’s pencil drawer to hand to him. He then went to the window as Bill had done. “It’s empty when he’s not out there, isn’t it?” Bill heard him say.

When the president turned, his brows were furrowed. When he spoke, the pitch of his voice was low. Prior experience dictated Bill Never’s immediate attention.

“This is the message from Cardinal Mulangu I told you about,” the president declared. “He was not yet a cardinal, when I met him. The Vatican had exiled him to Senegal to save him from the Congolese dictator whom Mulangu was denouncing for human rights violations.

“I first heard him speak at the mass for the son of the Senegalese president whose car secessionists had blown up. His eulogy was full of African prophets, especially of this Congolese holy man, Simon Kimbangu, that Father Robinson told us about when he showed us the photographs of the years he had spent in Latin America and Africa.

“Listening to Mulangu, it was as though Christianity itself had its birth in Africa and Rome was a mere province. He sounded, you know, as if Jesus Christ had been African. You could hear a pin drop. People were enthralled. *I* was enthralled. I got a chance to visit with him months later at a religious gathering where I used to go on Sunday afternoons to listen to one particular *imām*. This *imām* attracted more crowds than the others who spoke in the market, and Mulangu was there listening. We got to talk, and he explained his fascination with that *imām* who happened to be a dwarf. Dwarfs are an oddity there, and people mythologize them both positively and negatively. Some consider their size a mark they’re *the least of these* and children of God; others look on them with less benign eyes and plot to murder them to make amulets with their body parts for a highly disturbed clientele. Mulangu said he was there because the *imām* was an abandoned child, an orphan like himself. And that he admired him for his individuality and for the fact that unlike Mulangu’s episcopate, which he said left much to be desired, it was the *imām*’s faith that shone so brightly and appealed to the market crowds. He was free with his views then, Mulangu was—in favor of a clergy that included women, gays, what he called humanity, and even the belief that Jesus would

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not recognize the Christ Rome had created in His name. A priest who tells you things like that back then is a different kind of prelate, you've got to admit. I've been considering a plan that includes this man, and I want you to read this and tell me what you think he's after."

Bill Never didn't speak. He just listened.

"He is a mystic. I like that in him. And a healer, I believe. Do you remember that German woman who recovered her sight in St. Peter's Square, and she attributed that miracle to him? In any case, I sent him a note telling him I believed it completely and sympathized. What I have given you is his answer."

The president walked around to the front of his desk and picked up another document that had no bearing on what he was talking about. He continued speaking while reading, two things he was able to do easily, and it never ceased to amaze Bill Never how well he was able to do both.

The first time Thomas amazed him was that day in Mother Superior's office. She told Thomas he was in charge of Billy, and Thomas asked, "What does 'in charge' mean?"

Mother Lucia thought the boy insolent, a grave offense. But Thomas's gaze did not waver, and she told herself that she would have difficulty reading him the way she did all the others who had been through ICO (Immaculate Conception Orphanage) as she called the orphanage. He would be a challenge of an unusual sort. For a clue, she looked at the sheet that Mrs. Pelletreau, the social worker, had given her. Her glance stayed on the line, "it's possible that he can read." She handed Thomas the sheet. "It's about you, read it to me."

Thomas took the paper from her hand and looked at it for a moment. He then put it on the desk carefully with two small deliberate hands and looked up not saying anything. The nun took it and placed it on the blotter in front of her. And as always when confronted with a disappointment or with a question in front of her, she went to the window to gaze at what was left of the sheep compound.

"...He was found by two officers of the Santa Ana police department on the Immaculate Conception Church's steps the night of February 8. He said his name is Thomas—"

The nun turned, looking with eyes wide-open at Thomas. The paper was on the blotter where she had left it, and Thomas was reciting what he had read from memory.

“Like us, Mulangu is an orphan,” the president was telling the attorney general. “He told me about his experiences, and we compared notes. That message he sent me, well, ... I read it, and it’s given me the creeps, like he’s reading my thoughts, like he knows he has been on my mind for one reason or another, and he wants me to understand things about him before I take an action that will involve him. He seems to favor the mysterious and the mystical, and I need someone to tell me what the hell he’s saying.

“What are you talking about?” Bill Never stammered, totally bewildered. He didn’t have a clue where this was going. “I don’t understand your discomfort with one message from an African cardinal?” He wanted to add: It can’t be that he’s another orphan. You receive thousands of letters from orphans. What’s so special about this one?

The president looked at his boyhood friend contemplatively before answering.

“This message is different,” he answered. “It comes just when I’ve been thinking that this cardinal could be the solution to the conflict simmering under the Christian denominations that’s threatening us. But I don’t know yet. When I’ve figured all this out, I’ll tell you—”

“Are you talking about Reunification?” Bill Never queried, feeling like he had just been handed the dice at a high stakes crap game where the winner takes all.

“What else? You know I’ve been looking for an end-run scheme around that.”

“Of course,” the attorney general answered wearily, “ever since the analysts told us that if the pope’s crusade succeeds and the Christian denominations amalgamate, we are in for unprecedented strife around the world. Europe would weaken, perhaps fatally. China would gain super power status from a prostrated Europe, and we’d have a class A national security threat to contend with. Of course, I know.”

“That’s right! I think I have a solution—something that involves this African cardinal. If we can put him where he can influence events, he’ll be to Reunification what John Paul was to Communism. (And Bremanger became more animated, sweeping the air with broad hand strokes to illustrate his design.) The man I met back then had such innate force—like a teeming volcano. And especially a clear mind. Thinking of it, I don’t remember ever meeting anyone so clear minded, or at least someone like him who seemed to corner

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the market on it with the understanding of what makes the world tick. But perhaps he's changed. I don't know. Age does change a person and not always in a positive way. It's been a while ... ” the president paused, lost in an invisible fog, remembering the Sunday afternoon markets; the sounds, smells, and sights where the *imāms* competed for the customers' attention.

“Please read the message, and tell me what you think. This cardinal is telling me something that's not obvious here. I'm certain of it. So if you've got any ideas, my alter ego, let me know... and before I meet the pontiff in St. Louis.”

Bill Never listened intently, then folded the envelope vertically and put it in his suit jacket's inside pocket.

“Who else is involved in this?” he asked.

“The ambassador to the Vatican, Patrick Ryan, is to a point; it's his job to keep an eye on whatever might be of interest to Washington. Loft just hasn't shown him the cardinal's message yet.” The president paused, then placed both fists and arms straight down on *Soledad* to balance himself and stared at Bill Never. The intrigue was palpable.

Outside, the trees were battling the wind, and the clamor was deafening.

“Patrick has kept an eye on him from a distance,” the president said. “And Janet Welsingham's agency people are all over the place observing, also. There's something going on. Rome is bursting with speculations; it's like Lisbon just before the start of the Second World War. Whatever it is, I've got to know before the pope's visit. I hope you find the answer in that message,” repeated Bremanger, while pointing at Never's hidden inside suit coat pocket.

The president's chief of staff rang. Bill Never's time in the Oval Office was up. He rose and exchanged straight eye with the president. No words needed to be spoken. The president moved to answer the ringing phone, and Never was gone.

Bill Never was troubled. The leaves greeting him with such gale force enthusiasm when he walked out of the White House darkened his mood further. The president was losing interest in domestic matters, and God knows they needed his full attention. He fretted in the back seat of the car taking him back to the Justice Department.

To clear his mind, he took out the envelope from his coat pocket to read, to pass the time as it were. But his thoughts kept wandering to why Thomas was getting so deeply involved in some cardinal's

message. Was he that bored with the White House sycophants? He was; and, with that acute 'built-in shit detector' of his, probably to distraction. This was not a suitable time for the government's CEO to veer off course.

Since Laura's death, Bill had noticed a major change in his friend. Thomas was no longer the purposeful but tolerant wunderkind making history. He had morphed into an imperial, impatient leader. But who would not suffer a metamorphosis after being married to such a woman for almost thirty-five years and watching her succumb to that cancer. Had they had children, it would not have been so final; and Thomas would have a part of her to live for, instead of all those photographs he surrounded himself with. Bill did not understand why Thomas refused to have children. "That's his choice," Laura just said, dragging "choice" as if in a song, that time he asked her. But Bill saw a veil pass over her face; and she repeated, "That's his choice," in the same manner. He never asked her again. He tried to talk to Thomas about it, but his friend was categorical: "No children!" And when Bill asked, "What's wrong with you?" Thomas told him, not unkindly, "I don't want children. And don't go psycho babbling on me. Something doesn't have to be wrong with me just because I don't want children! You have enough for both of us." Bill felt uneasy pondering about that now.

Never's thought returned to the cardinal, recalling how Thomas had become as excited as the proverbial groom on his wedding night telling him about Mulangu. No doubt about it but this thing had infected him. Had Bill known that his friend had already placed the Cardinal Mulangu question into a special compartment of his mind labeled 'Pope,' he would have been alarmed, indeed. Curious, he glanced at the note of thanks the cardinal had sent the president.

Apprehension and heartburn arose in him. He reached in his pocket for an antacid; then put his reading glasses on:

"My Dear Illustrious Friend, Thomas," Cardinal Mulangu had written. *"Your ambassador delivered your message into my hands at the Vatican this morning, and I hurry to tell you how thankful I am for your kind words. I'm not surprised, remembering as I do our conversations those three decades ago and glory that you are still the man of compassion I met then.*

I am not worthy to be the Almighty's hand of miracles, and I agree with the experts that the poor creature recovered her sight from an in-

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cident of hysteria triggered by exaltation following her visit to Saint Peter's Basilica. How could it be otherwise? God would not place this cross on my feeble shoulders. My only cross is advocating the sacredness of God's beings."

The cardinal had signed his note, "Simon," but then added a post-script:

"With great humility, I dare hope that God will guide you in what plans you help create for the world. Suffering embitters the soul. However, no matter how loudly we evoke grievances, past resentments cannot redeem the future. But they must be a cautionary bell, or a lighthouse marking hazardous coastline. I pray that justice be the beacon of your power."

The attorney general was mystified, wondering what in the world this cardinal was talking about. He put down the paper and closed his eyes. *Where is this going?* he asked himself worriedly.