

## Chapter 4 – Initiation

It was Tuesday afternoon and John was cruising up A1A with the top down on his way home. He wasn't thinking about much. He was in his silence. The sun beat down on him from the clear blue sky.

Then he heard her inside again.

*Come to me.*

He slammed on the brakes. The dusty red 1972 Buick convertible skidded to the side of the road. He jumped up and stood on the driver's seat, looking around in all directions.

“Where are you?”

The traffic hummed up and down along A1A, the palm-lined backbone of Coquina Island. The row of old wooden houses that lined the once-sleepy boulevard looked back at him sadly in their gaudy commercial clothes.

Then it hit him. *Of course – it's not far from here.* He dropped back into the hot vinyl bucket seat and floored it, screeching back out into the traffic. Three blocks later he took a sharp left down Tropical Lane. He wound back until there were no houses and the road turned into packed sand. *Maybe this is it. Lord knows I've looked everywhere else.*

John drove into the empty lime-rock graveled parking lot of the Island Christian Church. The wheels crunched to a stop at the edge of the uncut grass. He got out and took the path through the palm grove. The breeze coming off the ocean a mile away rustled through the thick palm fronds above. Soon he came to the large white wood frame church with its adjoining fellowship hall.

When he got to the fellowship hall he went up the steps he'd climbed so many Sundays as a child. It had been years since he had been here. There had always been something magic about this place, and he could feel it again now. His heart surged with emotion as he pulled open the double doors with both hands and went in.

It looked the same. First he noticed the long rafters high above. Under them, the cavernous hall was divided into multiple classrooms on both sides by big child-art-decorated bulletin boards on wheels. The center of the room was set up with neat rows of folding chairs for the services that were held for the children before Sunday school class each week. There was an aisle down the middle. He walked slowly to the front, to the white draped table under the plain wooden cross hanging on the wall. There was a stand on the table with a large Bible on it, open, waiting for his eyes. He looked down at it and read the first words he saw:

*...his delight is in the law of the Lord;  
and in his law doth he meditate day and night.*

It was the first Psalm. He felt a spark of recognition, something, but what did it mean? He looked up at the old brown cross that had been hanging there on the wall for as long as he could remember. And what did that mean? Sacrifice? It looked so static.

*No, this can't be it.* He walked back up the aisle toward the door. He was about to leave, but stopped. Something moved him to call the one name that might help him. He turned.

"Mrs. Jensen!" His words echoed among the old wood rafters above. "Mrs. Jensen! Are you here?"

To his surprise, he heard a muffled voice. It seemed to come from behind the cross.

"Who is it?"

"It's John ... John Wilder," he called across the large room, doubting for a second that he'd heard anyone.

An old woman appeared at the side door in front of the hall. They walked slowly toward each other.

Christi Jensen was stooped over. She had a bad limp and a black cane with a smooth white ivory handle on top in her gnarled hand. Her curly white hair framed a face withered by a life of ambitious seeking. She wore wire Ben Franklin glasses and a plain blue dress. Over many years, she'd become an expert on the scriptures looking through those glasses, and on people looking over them, especially young people. Her penetrating green-rimmed blue eyes shone as bright as ever.

"John? Oh my goodness, it's you," she said. They met in the center of the hall and embraced. "How you've grown, my boy."

John stepped back shyly. "You look just as good as ever," he said softly.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she said, taking his arm. He felt a prickly sensation going up from where she touched him. "We have missed you these past few years. I've read about your running in the paper. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks."

She gestured to the nearest row of folding chairs, and they sat down.

"And how is your relationship with God these days?"

He knew she'd get right to the point. She always did. It is what he admired most in her when he was a child.

"I'm struggling," he said. "Something is happening, but I'm not sure what."

"Something is happening? Ah..." She stroked her wrinkled chin.

“Something is calling from inside me. I want to get to it more than anything, but I just can’t seem to break through.”

“And how are you trying to break through?”

John hesitated. “I’m not sure how to explain it. With my feelings, with my body, with my thoughts. It seems everything I do is a way to try and break through.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled,” she said. “Remember that?”

“Yes, very well.”

“That’s good. Remember the lessons you learned here, and you will be all right.” She placed a misshapen hand gently on his chest. “Everything you need is in here, always be listening here.”

He felt a strange thrill surge through him.

She took her hand away. “It will be all right,” she said. “Believe me.”

“Sometimes I regret not coming back here,” he said. His voice was beginning to tremble from the vibrations still reverberating in his chest.

“You did the right thing.”

“I did?”

“Absolutely. A person shouldn’t stay one minute in a situation that compromises the living spirit in their heart.”

“But I walked away, even after accepting Jesus as my personal lord and savior in front of everyone at the confirmation service. It didn’t stick.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “You knew what you needed to do, and acting on that was much more important than what the church wanted. I suspect you still know what you want. You always have had it in you.”

“Jesus was my role model,” he said. “Still is. The problem was I never saw him as different from anyone, except that he chose to join with God, to become God, and worked hard at it until he succeeded. Like Abraham, Joseph, Job, Moses and all those tough people in the Old Testament. They’d crawl through glass for God. That is what I always have wanted.”

Her eyebrows went up. “To crawl through glass?”

“To find God, somehow, some way in myself,” he said. “It has never appealed to me to use anyone else as a middleman.”

“Seeking first the kingdom of heaven within is a good thing,” she said. “By whatever means ... You are blessed.”

“I don’t know about that. I think I’m doing it the hard way. But the other way doesn’t make sense to me. If we put Jesus way up on a pedestal, there isn’t room for anyone else up there.” John ran his fingers along the smooth edge of the metal folding chair in front of him. “If Jesus is just like us, then there is no reason we can’t be just like him. The separation can be gone much quicker, can’t it?”

“But how can that separation end without the help of God?” she said.

“I don’t know. I want to be like Jesus so much. I don’t think it can work for me to put it all in the hands of him or any another person. I feel irresponsible doing that. Like I’m waiting for someone else to do something. I can’t give it over like that. I have to be doing something.”

“Like what, John?”

“I don’t know. I want to give it all to God. The only way I know is to put myself on the edge, where I have something to lose. Everything to lose. Then something moves in me. That’s what you’ve read about me in the paper, between the lines, behind the running.”

“I see ... do you do these things in God’s name?”

“In God’s name? You mean in the name of Jesus?”

“Not exactly ... you see, Jesus is a given name. Even God is a given name – man-made. The power is in the ungiven name of God, the real name of Jesus, who is one with the Father. That name is not given, and is not man-made. That name has always been and will always be. That name is very important. It is the original vibration – the *word* that lives in us.”

John’s eyes lit up. “So what’s the name?”

“Can you surrender to it?” she said. “Can you let go?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t it in our hands to do more than just surrender? Most people try really hard to surrender and don’t get what they want. Me too. There has got to be more to it than that. Why should we expect God to do all the work? What about the struggles we read about over and over again in the Bible? No one in the Bible ever said it would be easy. The church tells us all will be fine if we accept Jesus. Just sign up for the program and it isn’t our problem anymore. I think that’s a trap. It is convenient for busy people, and maybe for the church too.”

“You think finding God is a struggle?”

“Well, yeah. Hunger and thirst, remember?” he said. “It’s got struggle written all over it.”

“Oh, I see your point,” she said. “We all have a tendency to drift along. There is no question we have to be actively wanting God, actively pursuing God in every minute. Perhaps it is a matter of finesse.”

“Finesse?”

“Yes, being smart about it, a little cagey,” she said. “Developing the skill of active surrender. Hungering and thirsting, but surrendering too, learning how to dive into God.”

John’s inner antenna shot up. “How do I do that?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s something you have to work out yourself with God,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he said. “If there’s something more I can do, I need to be doing it right now. Please tell me.” His hands began to squeeze the back of the chair in front of him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen any child in Sunday school as intense for God as you were...” Christi Jensen gazed off into space.

“I’m much worse now,” He practically leaped out of the folding chair at her. *What does she want from me? Do I have to beg?*

She turned back to him. “My goodness.”

“And no one knows it. Am I praying in my closet instead of on the street corner, or what?” he said.

“It seems so ... John, why did you come here today?”

“I need something, a good swift kick maybe. I graduate this year and the pressure is on me to make plans. I don’t want to make plans, not the kind others want for me. All I want is to break through. What should I do?”

She became silent. She opened her mouth slightly and something moved deep inside. Her eyes went to the center and up as she closed them. She sat motionless. Her old hands were hunched on the handle of her cane. She didn’t seem to be breathing. He sat with her, not knowing what to do. He closed his eyes too, trying to find his quietness.

Finally she stirred in her chair. He opened his eyes to find her looking at him intently.

She reached out with a crooked index finger and tapped his breastbone. The air whooshed out of his lungs until he was completely empty. A few seconds went by, and he gasped in a deep breath. As he did, pleasure surged up through him from his loins.

“Ohhh God, what was that?”

“*i am*,” she said

“I AM?”

“No, *i am*.”

“I AM?”

“No, *i am*.”

“What’s the difference?” He could hardly breathe.

“Intention,” she said. “I AM has an outward intention. *i am* has an inward intention. It makes all the difference. Can you say it?”

He tried to point the thought inward as he said it. “*i am?*”

“Good. Like that. Always remember, less is more.” Her hands moved down through the air with palms down, like she was quieting the whole cosmos.

“Meditate on *i am*,” she said. “*i am* is God of the Old Testament, and God of the New Testament. The only God there is. *i am* is the secret name

of God, the true name of God, the only consciousness in the universe. All things are reflected rays of *i am*.”

He was bewildered by her words. Could it be that simple? “Meditate on *i am*?”

“Yes, for as long as it takes until you have all the answers you seek. Remember, *i am* is God, the kingdom, the power, the glory. *i am* is also Jesus in all of us, for he and God are one. Outward I AM is not much, just a human sound, a noise, a dim shadow of the inner truth. Sound has little substance until we turn it inward in ever-quieting vibrations to our silent depths. ‘Be still and know *i am* God.’ This is the greatest secret of the scriptures – the most ancient, sacred wisdom. Follow *i am*. Everything else flows from that.”

“Everything else?”

“Yes, much will happen. *i am* will open many doors for you. That is all.”

“Is that it?” he said.

“Isn’t it enough?”

“I don’t know.”

“One more thing,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Pass it on,” she said.

“Pass it on? Pass what on?”

“You will know. I’m so glad you came today. It will make all the difference.”

John hesitated. His gaze was down on the wooden floor worn by thousands of small eager feet. Then he looked at her. “Are you the one who has been calling me inside?”

Christi Jensen shrugged her stooped shoulders. She looked up at him. Her green-rimmed blue eyes pierced his soul. “There is only one who calls. It is *i am*. There is only one who hungers and thirsts. It is *i am*. You hunger and thirst. I respond. It is all *i am*. And now it is time for you to go, my dear.”

She got up painfully, and limped with him slowly through the double doors of the fellowship hall, out into the sunlight. It illuminated her weary face in a way he did not remember, like her being was going up into the bright light.

“Thank you,” he said as he went hesitantly down the wooden steps. She stood on the small porch in front of the fellowship hall. He was dazed and quivering inside. *Have I forgotten something?*

She put up her right hand as though blessing him for some great purpose.

“I will come to you,” she said. “Now go. There is much for you to do.”

He didn't know what she meant. "What?"

She shook her head slowly. Her God-like eyes sent him away.

He went back through the palm grove to his car. He looked over his shoulder several times. She was still standing in the sunlight watching him go. Something important had just happened ... but what?

While driving home, John pondered all that he had ever heard or read in the Bible about I AM. He remembered it was I AM who addressed Moses. He remembered Jesus referring to himself as I AM several times. He remembered him saying:

*Before Abraham I AM.*

He remembered the famous words Jesus spoke that penetrated his being when he was only six years old, attending Sunday school for the first time:

*I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*

Why had the focus in the church been on Jesus the person, and not on Jesus the I AM? Or the *i am*? He repeated the sound, *i am*, inwardly in thought and he was filled with new understanding. A strange pleasurable thrill rose through him, the same feeling he got when Christi Jensen touched his chest. He looked in the rear view mirror and saw a trail of glistening white light behind the car extending all the way back to the Island Christian Church. It was made of billions of sparkling white specks, following him as he drove.

His skin crawled with an intense desire for God. He could barely stand it. He had to do something about it right away. He pressed hard on the accelerator. The red convertible roared home.

Locked in his room, John sat cross-legged, leaning against a pillow propped at the head of the four-poster double bed. He heard the soft rumble of the ocean coming through the dormer window.

He'd sat here many times before, exploring his thoughts and feelings. Usually he'd end up pleasuring himself, hoping to find an answer in the intense feelings that were so hard to control. Instead of an answer, he often found temporary relief from his longing. A small consolation.

Now he had I AM to explore. Would this be different? He began by posing a question in his thoughts.

*I AM, what is the truth?*

He repeated it half a dozen times inside, and waited. There was no response. Then he tried something else.

*I AM, who am I?*

This time he repeated it a dozen times, and then waited – still no response.

Then he tried a more direct approach.

*I AM the way, and the truth and the life.*

Over and over again...

Again, there was nothing.

He tried different combinations, putting all the meaning he could find into his solicitations. He aimed for precision of purpose and mental enunciation.

Still nothing.

After a half-hour of trying, he was getting irritated.

*I AM, where are you? Why don't you answer?*

And a while later...

*I AM, you bastard! If you are there, show me now. God damn-it!*

Only the waves of his rising anger remained when he stopped his increasingly chaotic incantations. He threw his pillow at the bookcase across the room, knocking the trophies off. They clattered to the floor.

He jumped up and down on the bed yelling,

“I AM! I AM! I AM!”

In his fury he missed the bed with one foot and went tumbling to the floor onto the hooked rug. A stream of obscenities came out of him.

He lay heaving in emotion on the floor. Desperate longing swept over him again and again, and he began to weep. He pulled himself up on his knees, into a prostrate position with his forehead on the rug. His arms lay on the rug wrapped around his head. He rocked forward and back.

*I AM, I AM, I AM...*

He let go ... his intention slipped inward.

The meaning was gone. The mental sound faded and he entered a completely different quality of thought.

*i am, i am, i am...*

It was subtle, silent, yet luminous and alive inside him. He became filled with its presence.

*i am, i am, i am ... iii-aaammm ... iii-aaammm...*

His body began to pulsate with a living silence. Each *i am* reverberated through him as if he were hollowed out empty space inside. Then the vibration was gone, and he was far bigger than his body, far bigger than the house, than the earth, than the solar system. He became infinite blissful awareness ... Then he was back in his body with a thought. *Oh, what was that?*

He began again, letting go, giving up his need to hold on to the meaning, or even the thought itself.

*i am, i am, i am...*

Gradually he became infinite again. It was a uniquely pleasurable journey inward, this letting go. A few minutes later he was back in his surface thoughts. With determination to stay infinite, he began with a more enunciated thought.

*I AM, I AM, I AM...*

It didn't fade as long as he held on to the clarity of the sound and the meaning. So he let go. He watched as *i am* went from a clearly enunciated thought to a fuzzy thought, then to a feeling, then to a faint feeling, and finally having lost all its boundaries of thought, meaning and feeling, expanding infinitely within him, and his awareness with it. Every atom in him quivered deliciously as he went beyond the concrete levels of *i am* to the unboundedness of it. The less he held on, the more there was, and the more he experienced a pure pleasure that bordered on erotic.

Huddled on his knees on the hooked rug, he did it over and over again, giving himself to the cycles of gently embracing *i am* and losing it in the glorious expansion of inner silence. After a while, he crawled back onto the bed, resuming his cross-legged sitting position with the pillow at his back. Then he did it some more. He was filled with awe and gratitude to have *i am* caressing him deep within.

It was only the beginning.

That night John awoke with a start. He looked at the clock. It was two-thirty. He was upset. He didn't know why. He sat up in bed. He felt the brush of a luminous feminine hand on his cheek. The curtains rustled in the quiet night breeze. Then she was gone. Immediately he knew what had happened. Christi Jensen had just died. She touched him tenderly as she went. He didn't understand how she could be gone. He felt alone. He tried to meditate with *i am*. He couldn't. His heart broke as he lay back down, sobbing into his pillow.

*You gave me the greatest secret. It won't be wasted. I promise you, Christi Jensen, it won't be wasted. I will grow in i am, and I will pass it on.*

He slowly faded off to sleep, filled with a new determination, a new hunger for God that would carry him rapidly along his road home. The new hunger was Christi's gift to him. With her last breath and final touch, she quickened *i am* in him.