

CHAPTER 12

"We should go, James." Said John.

"I know, I just hate to leave and not take her with me," said James.

They were at the airport in Jerusalem. John's private jet was ready and packed. All his friends were on board as well as Maggie, but Katy was heading back home to pickup a few things before she joined him in Atlanta.

"I feel the same way about Maggie. Katy will be all right. Besides, she has already made up her mind. She will not meet your mother until she is ready, and that has nothing to do with you being the Son of God. Believe me, I know."

James smiled. "Heck, I wouldn't even meet my mom if I wasn't ready, let alone Aunt Jenny." Turning on his heel, James headed for the plane. "Let's go."

Maggie smiled as James got on the plane followed by her husband. It had been a whirlwind couple of days. Coming back to town, getting the friends onto the plane, avoiding all the press and crowds. She had had precious little time to digest what had happened in the last few days.

It was odd to never have any doubts, not needing faith. Sure of the afterlife and knowledge of God. Maggie had never known the difference between knowing and believing until two days ago. When that dove came out of the Heavens, she did not ever have to doubt again. There was comfort in knowing.

Now they were going to Atlanta. What a howl the press and her father-in-law would put up if they found out James was born that night in Atlanta in the center of that circle of light, the circle of light that everyone had said had given John his divinity. Plus, he was black. She would love to be the one to tell them especially her mother-in-law, but she knew she would not. She did not need to hurt them, and John was born within that light, for reasons they were not aware of. It was pleasing to be married to the man who baptized God.

Russ was at the airport with Judy and Thomas. "There it is, Dad," commanded Russ when he saw the plane carrying his older brother come around the side of the hanger.

It had been twelve years since Russ had seen James and he was excited as ever to wish him welcome home. Judy was already in tears before the gangway had been pushed next to the exit.

The pilot opened the door and James was the first one out.

"James! Over here," shouted Russ as he ran the last few steps to the stairs. James shot down the steps and embraced his brother halfway down. The others started filing out of the plane and James and Russ struggled to get the rest of the way down the ramp.

"Judy!" James exclaimed, and put his arms around his sister.

"Dad!" James yelled when he saw Thomas walk forward. Grabbing first his outstretched hand, James reached past and gave Thomas a huge bearhug. His brother and sister gathered around and hugged them both. James turned to his friends and introduced each one, ending with John and Maggie.

"I thank you for bringing my son and his friends home," Thomas said to John. "Considering your schedule, it was very good of you to do this favor for us."

John replied, "With all candor sir, I cannot think of anything that would have interfered with this service. How is... well, I only know her as Aunt Jenny."

Thomas laughed. "Well, I only know her as Aunt Jenny. And she waits patiently for this youngster to come home."

"Our best wishes to her." said Maggie. "We better get home, dear. The children will be wondering what happened to us."

"James, would you or your father mind if I stopped by some time to check in on her, and your family?" asked John.

James smiled. "You are always welcome in our home."

Thomas smiled too. "The home of the Lord is the home to everyone." With a wink at John, Thomas and the rest headed for home.

"Where's Mom?" asked James.

"She's with Aunt Jenny." replied Judy. "You know Momma wouldn't leave Aunt Jenny if she was in any kind of pain. You'd think they were mother and daughter."

"How is Aunt Jenny?" asked James.

"In charge." Russ laughed. "As always. She is not even going to think about being sick if you're coming home. She will defy everything and everybody to do what she wants, and she wants to see you."

"Well we better get going then," said James. "The last time I was late gettin' to her was the last time I'll ever be late."

"Uh, excuse me big bro', but what about the herd?" Judy pointed to James' friends, who had been following him ever since they left the plane.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, Dad, can the guys stay with us?" asked James.

Thomas grinned. "They can stay at our house since Mom's mostly at Aunt Jenny's next door.

We'll make room. I suppose none of them have enough money to get a cab out to our place." Thomas was met with blank stares.

"I thought so," he said. "Here, take this money and go see Hank at the cab stand. He'll get you to our house."

"Thanks, Dad." James smiled. "Let's go see Mom."

"James!" said Cindy, with an air of happiness that only moms can generate for their sons.
"Hi, Mom."

"It is so good to see you, chile. Turn around. Let me look at you. You look hungry. A little skinny. Have you eaten yet? We better fix you some supper it's late. Judy, put some water on to boil and cut up some 'taters, your brother's hungry."

"Mom," James tried to interrupt Cindy as he turned around for inspection. "I'm fine. Don't send Judy fixin' any food for me. Tell me, where's Aunt Jenny?"

"She's next door. I'm on my way over there now. You want to come see her?" asked Cindy. "She said I didn't have to try to reach you, that you would know she was sick and wanted to see you. Darned if she wasn't right again."

Cindy led the way out the back door next door to Aunt Jenny's.

"Twelve years, son. Twelve years. You'd know the only thing that'd get you back here would be Aunt Jenny," Cindy teased.

"Mom, you know I'd come back for you too," James said.

"I know, darlin'. But it doesn't hurt to hear it," Cindy smiled.

"Aunt Jenny, look who I brought over to see you," said Cindy as she led James into Aunt Jenny's bedroom.

"If n its that quack doctor again, I'll boot you both out," grumbled Jenny as she turned in her bed and fetched her glasses.

Sitting up on one elbow she looked across the room.

"James!" Aunt Jenny squeaked in a hoarse, excited voice. "James, come over here, chile. Turn around, let me look at you. He's skinny, Cindy. You eaten, baby. Cindy, put on some water and cut some taters. This boy's hungry."

"I tole him, Jenny. But he wouldn't have nothin' to eat 'till he saw you. Said he wasn't hungry."

"That's nice of you, James. But don't you listen to him, Cindy. Boy as skinny as that needs some food in him. Tell Judy to fetch some bread from the cupboard and get some of that hamburger out of the fridge. Put up some coffee. Now get or I'll get up and do it myself."

"Okay grandma, you win. I'll eat," James said. "But you stay in that bed or I'll not touch a thing, and you know I can be stubborn. Go ahead, mamma. I'll stay with Aunt Jenny awhile."

"Alright, chile. I'll bring some food over when it's ready." Cindy smiled as she walked out the back door.

"Is she as good a cook as you, too?" giggled James. "I see she's acquired your demeanor."
"Don't go sassin your momma." Aunt Jenny said. "And there ain't nobody as good a cook as your Aunt Jenny, though your mom comes close."

"Sorry, Grandma." James smiled. "How are you doing, really?"

"I'm old," said Aunt Jenny. "Your Father is about to call me home. I'm glad you came back to see me before I left."

"Are you scared, Grandma?" asked James quietly.

"No. I know there's a heaven, thanks to you, child. But what is dying like? Will it hurt? It's the unknown that concerns me. I mean, will I be able to cook? I really like to cook." Aunt Jenny looked frail.

"Oh grandma, it will be wonderful." James brought his hands against Aunt Jenny's cheeks and held her face. Then warm light filled the room emanating from within James. James eyes were all that Aunt Jenny could see. She felt young again, warm, content and happy, and the pain went away. This was the first time James had used the gift his Grandfather had given Him at the baptism and Jenny's eyes shone with gratitude. The pain and fear were gone for James had given her a glimpse at what was to come.

Aunt Jenny cried. James released his hold on her and put his arm around her shoulders. "That was wonderful. Thank you for that," said Aunt Jenny.

They sat together for awhile and waited for Cindy to bring supper.

"What is that horde of young men doing in my house?" Asked Cindy as she walked in Aunt Jenny's room with supper.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you." said James. "Those are my friends. Pierre and Tommy have been with me for almost all of my twelve years on the road, and the rest have joined us at different times. They won't leave me, and I have to admit I would miss their company."

"Well it ain't your company I'm worried they might miss. Your sister Judy has been eyeing that Mobu, Mobut..; oh whatever, ever since he got to the house. I'm not havin' none of that under my roof."

"Don't worry, mom. Mobutu wouldn't hurt or offend you or any of my family for the world. Besides, Dad said they could stay here for a while and I'm sure he doesn't want to mess up free room and board." James grinned.

"Oh, he did did he? Well, your dad can just do the cookin' and cleaning for that bunch. I will have a word or two about this with him," said Cindy sternly.

"Now mom, he didn't offer, I asked. These are very dear friends of mine and I do wish they could stay with me."

"Well, I probably know now how your Grandmother felt when your Father brought home all those disciples." Cindy grinned.

"Now don't you worry 'bout room there's plenty here in this house," Aunt Jenny said. "Do me some good to have new company 'round 'sides your mama always fussin' 'bout me. Maybe we'll get those boys to tell us some tales 'bout your travels too." She laughed as she tried to rise from the bed.

"And just where do you think you're going?" said James and Cindy in unison.

"Well there's supper to fix and beds to be made. And, oh, all right. I'll stay in bed." Aunt Jenny grumbled as she lay back down.

"That's better," said Cindy. "Don't worry, I'll send Judy over and you can tell her what to do. Miz Marcum down the street will help with the food and chores, she'll be more than glad to do for James."

"Well, Maddie's a good one to ask. Least she can cook. But I don't want to feel useless," grumbled Jenny again.

"Well, you won't," said James. "Tommy and Pierre have been dying to visit with you as all my friends have. Something about getting the scoop on my early years as a child. I told them if you wanted they could speak to you. But I'm warning you, don't be tellin' them stories they can use against me." James laughed.

"Send them on over, chile. Send them over. I'll be good as I ever was and pass on some real juicy tidbits." Aunt Jenny smiled.

"That is precisely what I am worried about."

"She's gonna die soon, isn't she James?" asked Cindy. "Yes, mamma. She has but days left," replied James. "Your Father tell you, son?" asked Cindy again. "Yes, He did." James answered.

"Your Father wouldn't tell me. I think He wanted to spare me the pain. But I knew instinctively she wouldn't die 'till she saw you one last time." Said Cindy.

"Well, she's now waiting for a visit from Katy. But she doesn't know it." James smiled. "Katy? I don't know any Katy. Is it some angel or messenger from your Father or Grandfather? Wait a minute. What is that big toothed grin on your face? Chile, are you bringing home a girl to meet Mom and Dad?" Cindy squealed.

"Well, sorta," James said sheepishly.

"And just when were you going to tell me? When she was at the door with my head in curlers? James, I will beat you." Cindy laughed as she hit him softly in the ribs.

"Well, it's nothin' to get upset over yet. She's just a real good friend. She won't even be here for two days."

"Two days. All these people in my house, Aunt Jenny sick and dying, and I only got two days. Chile, I hoped you learned a lot about men in your twelve years traveling with your Father, cause you learned nothin' 'bout women." With those words, Cindy trotted to the house.

"Oh! Your birthday. I done forgot your birthday. And Christmas.." said Cindy hurriedly. "The most special time of the year," said James, ending her sentence for her. "Don't worry, mom. We got plenty of help. It will get done." James smiled one of his big warm smiles.

Cindy smiled back. "If you say so, James. But I better get some help. There just ain't enough

time for all this."

"Where did he go for those twelve hours? Who are those strange men with him?" asked Cardinal Michael.

"I don't know, Your Eminence," stated his assistant, Brother Francis.

Cardinal Michael had been following John Love's career for over twelve years now, thirty years if you include watching him grow. His ministry had caused numerous petty problems within the Church, and indeed the Pope himself had authorized Cardinal Michael to keep an eye on this preacher. Truth be known, I would have done it without authorization, thought the Cardinal. I do believe he will be trouble for the true Church, but he is interesting to watch, I have to admit.

"Did you say something, Father," asked his assistant.

"No, just thinking to myself. Where did you say these 'associates' of Mr. Loves went after he let them off the plane?"

"I didn't say, sir. We don't know," replied Brother Francis. "Do you think we could find out?"

"We'll try."

"Good. If you do find out, maybe we could ask them what he was doing while he was gone. Well, don't approach them unless we need to. After all, it seems little was done or said that could prove troublesome to the Church. Still, it is curious that he left so hurriedly and returned so quickly, without any apparent need."

"Daddy, Mommy, where have you been? We thought you were going to miss Christmas." cried Mary, smiling from the top of the stairs.

"You know I called you from where we were and told you we wouldn't miss being here with you," said Maggie to her little girl.

"I know, but I still worried," Mary said quietly in Maggie's arms.

Maggie laughed and wondered if she looked the same. She was so proud to be married to the man who had baptized James. John just glowed.

"Pickup that other young un', John, and bring him into the parlor to see the tree." Said Maggie.

John picked up Luke and carried him into the other room.

Lori Jean and Dex were waiting beside the tree. "Well it's 'bout time you two got home. We were wondering why you took off like that. Worried us to death, although stopping in Jerusalem before Christmas did bring up the pledges by 2%," grinned Dex.

"Maggie, you and John are positively glowing. What happened on that trip to the desert?"

Asked Lori Jean.

John and Maggie looked at each other, and then turned to face his parents. "You wouldn't believe it all if we told you. But I will tell you that I finally met that 'someone' I been tellin' you about for thirty years," replied John.

"Thomas, I cannot find anything in her. Where is that comb? Where is my dress? Where is that boy of mine? I will beat him, Son of Jesus or not. And I will have a few words with his Father when this is all over," fumed Cindy. Only a man would do this, five strangers living in Aunt Jenny's house, Aunt Jenny dying, Christmas Day, his and His birthday, my son's girlfriend being brought home to meet me, and then this. Imagine! Inviting Reverend Love and His wife and kids to Christmas supper. Reverend Love, only the most respected religious man in Atlanta. Like it was no big deal.

"Where is my makeup?" screamed Cindy.

"What you carrying that garbage can lid for, daddy?" asked Judy.

"Chile, you do not think I'm going in that bedroom without a shield the way your Momma's acting?" Thomas grinned as he slowly opened the door to where Cindy was getting dressed.

Thomas walked in and closed the door. Judy looked up to see Russ enter the back door with James. She put a finger to her lips so that they would be quiet and motioned them to the back of the kitchen.

"Where'd you find him, Russ?" Judy grinned.

"Back on the hill talkin to his Father," smiled Russ.

"James, you do know how to cause a stir." Judy smiled. "Momma's 'bout ready to have you talk to your Father person to person."

"Everything will be all right. Long as I can keep outa Momma's line of fire." James said. "You do as I asked, Judy?"

Judy nodded. "Miz Marcum and some the other ladies is bringing over supper. The church said we could have some of the tables and chairs and Aunt Jenny's lettin us use her linen to purty it up. Your boys are cleaning and hauling the furniture out the living room and dining room to make space for everybody, and we got 'nother bed in my room for Katy. There's always someone with Aunt Jenny and we moved her bed closer to the window so's she can direct and see what's going on. And boy, for a sick lady, Aunt Jenny can still give orders." Judy shuddered.

"That's great work, Judy," James smiled. "Well, you owe me, Bro'." Judy laughed.

"Russ, I hate to do this, but I think I should stay here and help Momma and Judy. Would you take Dad to the airport and pickup Katy?" asked James.

"James! You will not!" exclaimed Judy. "You will not have some sweet girl come to a new country to meet your family and not be there when she lands to give her support. Men!"

"You, dear brother have just been told by your younger sister." Russ laughed.

"Well, then. I be going now, Miss Judy." James smiled at his younger sister. "Tell Momma I went to the airport to pick up Katy." He dashed out the door.

Judy turned to Russ. "Go tell Momma James left for the airport."

"Me!" Russ exclaimed. "What about you?"

"I got to fix Jame's birthday cake and we cain't afford me getting killed now." Judy smiled and turned on her heel to get the cake out of the oven.

"Be careful, daddy's already took in the garbage can lid for protection." Judy laughed as Russ stooped over and knocked on the bedroom door.

"I'm definitely stayin' low." Russ smiled as he heard Momma yell for him to come in.

It was not as clean as Cindy hoped, and Aunt Jenny was scowling too. But it would do. It would have to. James was just minutes away with Katy.

They had carried Aunt Jenny to a comfortable chair next to her spot at the dining room table. She was wrapped in blankets, but one of the women had at least helped her with makeup and a hairstyle.

"Chile, wipe them spots off that glass. Ahmed, take those newspapers out of here and throw them in the trash. Cindy, you better check on Judy's cake. She's a good cook, but she ain't seasoned." Jenny wheezed.

"Yes, Aunt Jenny." They said.

Cindy turned and headed for the kitchen, overhearing Aunt Jenny talking about telling Jesus to teach men to clean.

Cindy opened the swinging door to the kitchen and was met with the beautiful sight of her daughter dressed in a red Christmas dress and holding a wonderfully decorated birthday cake out for her inspection. The kitchen was clean with the food ready and prepared to serve. The smell was delicious. Cindy looked around and back at her daughter, caught up in reverie. "It's Christmas."

"Well, Momma? Is it good enough for an unseasoned cook?" Judy asked anxiously, showing her momma the cake again.

Cindy took another look at the scene before her and her lovely daughter and said, "It's perfect."

Judy put the cake down and mother and daughter hugged. Just then, the front door opened and they heard James.

"Let's go see what your brother brought home," teased Cindy to her daughter. They both hurried out the kitchen door to meet Katy.

Katy was wonderful. Cindy liked her right off and Aunt Jenny even invited her to sit next to her at dinner. Judy treated her like a long lost sister. Thomas felt as if he had gained a daughter. Katy was overcome by the generosity of spirit and the kindness and leaned against Aunt Jenny and teared with happiness throughout the dinner.

Reverend Love and his wife arrived promptly at 6 P.M. bringing their two wonderful children. Without encouragement, those two urchins went to James right off, holding his hand and sitting in his lap and talking to him as if there were no other place to be. Reverend Love, or Maggie and John as they insisted on being called, brought a bottle of wine, and shared its contents with all.

James was right also. There seemed to be plenty of room, warmth and food for all. Judy worried there wouldn't be enough cake for everyone, but James told her there would be plenty.

It was one of those times when the friendship, companionship, warmth, love, and happiness combined in perfect harmony. There was plenty of light talk, sweet flirtations, and laughter for all.

Then it was time for Judy's cake. All gathered in hushed tones as she brought out James and Jesus' birthday cake. When she placed it before them on the table, a general applause broke out as all felt it was a beautiful cake. Aunt Jenny asked to have it brought closer and upon her inspection, deemed it acceptable, the highest compliment she'd ever given anyone's cooking.

The candles were lit and all sang a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday" to James. Then, before the candles could be blown out, little Mary reminded James it was her daddy's birthday too. All joined in another round of "Happy Birthday" to John. When all the singing had been done, James and John bent over the cake and blew out the candles.

Together they took a knife and sliced the first piece. Cindy picked it up and took it to the empty place at the head of the table reserved for Jesus. Another piece was cut and placed on a plate for James. All waited in anticipation for James to take the first bite, but instead he placed the cake before Aunt Jenny. She looked up into his eyes, as if to ask why, and James just said, "Thank you." Jenny teared up, cut a piece of cake and ate it. Everyone cheered and pieces of cake were distributed for all to enjoy. And just as James had said, there was enough for all to eat.

It was 10 P.M. when the Love's left, about 11:30 when Judy took Katy to bed. Cindy was cleaning her kitchen and Thomas was washing dishes when James came into the room.

"Mom, Dad? It's time." said James.

"Now?" asked Cindy, close to tears.

"Now."

Thomas grabbed Cindy by the waist and ushered her into the room. There, centered among James' friends, was Aunt Jenny. The room was lighted by candle and all James' friend's heads were bowed in prayer. Upon their entry, the roomed glowed with a white light that Cindy had seen a number of times. It only meant that James' Father had come. Cindy moved toward Aunt Jenny, tears streaking down her face.

"Don't be sad for me, child," Aunt Jenny said. "This is a great day. It has been perfect in all

respects for me. And I'm finally meeting James' Father."

"I'm happy for you," said Cindy. "I'm crying for me. I will miss you. You are such a help to me."

"You did well, chile. Keep doin' well. This whelp still needs help." She pointed to James. "And this one," she pointed to Thomas, "needs you more than you will ever know."

Thomas leaned down to give Aunt Jenny a hug. "Thanks, Aunt Jenny," was all he could say.

The light moved closer and became warmer. A familiar face appeared in the haze with an outstretched hand. Aunt Jenny took hold of His hand in hers and the light faded.

James, Cindy, Thomas, and James' friends stood in a circle of candlelight looking at the friend that was no longer there.