

CHAPTER 17

Millie and Robert Franklin were quietly sitting in their comfortable home in New York when Dex Love came to call. Robert was still the minister at his church, but he was increasingly leaving many of the chores to the younger generation. The home had a slight chill, as November was well in hand, and even though the home was clean and filled with the accumulations of a lifetime, it seemed empty.

Robert was pleased to welcome this man of God into his home. Having known of his son and his church and the good works they were reported to have accomplished, it seemed quite an honor. Millie fussed. It was nice to have visitors and even though many of their congregation were friends and called upon them frequently, she always felt alone.

Seated in a comfortable chair by the front window, Dex supped on his coffee and a good piece of pie and exchanged pleasantries. "What a wonderful pie, Ms. Franklin." Dex said.

"It is so good of you to say so, but, please call me Millie." "Millie it is, then. And you, Pastor Franklin..."

"Robert will be fine." interjected the Pastor, smiling.

"Then you must both call me Dex. However, I am afraid I have not come just to exchange a pleasant afternoon with the both of you, enjoyable as that may be."

"What did you have on your mind?" asked Robert.

"Well, there seems to be a problem with a young man in my neck of the woods, and I have found that it could be related to you." said Dex.

"What kind of problem?" asked Robert.

"Well, and I find this somewhat embracing, but he has started a foundation for helping people.

That in itself is not bad, but he has been conning people, including my son, into giving to this organization because of some special gift he has received from God. Or so he says."

Robert and Millie stiffened in their chairs and exchanged worried glances. "Did you have a name for this individual?" asked Robert.

"He mostly goes by James." said Dex, "but his mother is or was Cindy Franklin. Your daughter and grandson, I believe?"

"We have neither seen nor heard from our daughter in over thirty years," said Millie.

"That is a shame," comforted Dex. "I assume it was over some sad personal family tragedy?" "Yes, it was." said Robert curtly. "What do you want us to do about your problem? It seems to me you or your son claim some God-given special gift and have formed an organization. Why shouldn't James be allowed the same opportunity?"

"That is true," said Dex, holding his temper. These people aren't going to be nearly as easy as

I had hoped, he thought.

"Yes." said Millie. "What is wrong with having a foundation to help people if it is all being done in the name of God?"

"Well the problem is that, he has never publicly proclaimed himself a preacher or his foundation a work of God. He offers no form of worship, nor any of the other accoutrements associated with a church. In short, he is using his 'special gift' from God for personal benefits and taking away money from those that the church could truly help in the name of God."

Robert stood and turned his back to his guest, thinking. "Has James ever stated what his special gift was?"

"No, but his continued efforts to take money from the church would most assuredly cause me and others of our faith to publicly confront him on the subject," said Dex, smelling an opening.

"Well, what would you have us do?" asked Robert resignedly.

"Put some of your family differences aside and come down and talk to him. You know, straighten him out before he gets into too much hot water."

"That could be more difficult than you realize," said Robert.

"Well, it is your daughter and grandson. I hope we can save them from public humiliation. I'm sure whatever it is could not possibly affect you here in your congregation." Dex rose to leave.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Robert.

"Nothing really. You just know how tabloids are. If it is anything embarrassing, I'm sure they will want your comment, you being a man of God and all. After your years of faithful service, I'm sure your congregation will understand anything that happens."

"That sounds like a threat to me," said Robert.

"It did? Well, I did not intend it to be. I just thought you would like to help your family. If you want, I can provide transportation for you to see him next month. I would hope you would take that as a gesture of friendship, and an apology for any offense I caused," said Dex smoothly as he reached for the door.

"I'm sorry." said Robert. "I should not have taken your offers to help as a threat. After all, you needn't have even come to inform me. It's just the family tragedy is so painful"

"No apology needed," said Dex. "Why don't you meet me at the airport the fifteenth of next month? I'll have you as guests and it will allow you to talk comfortably with your grandson. Maybe we can head this off before too much damage is done."

"That is too generous, but we'll take you up on it," said Robert, reaching to shake Dex's hand. "Fine. I'll see you next month," said Dex taking his leave.

"Are we really going, Robert?" asked Millie.

"Yes."

"Why now? Why now after all these years?"

"Because when the family shame was limited to the family, we could hide it and control it.

But when the shame is made public and used to hurt innocent people, we must correct that shame."

"But won't the congregation find out what we are doing?" asked Millie.

"Not if we handle it right," said Robert. "If it is handled properly, there will be no repercussions. We will be able to finish our lives with our wrongs righted and our livelihood intact."

"Our livelihood? What do you mean by that Robert?"

"Do you possibly think that our church would retain me as minister if they knew our shame? I'm too old to begin again, Millie. If this gets out we could lose the church, our pension, and our way of life. No, we have to go and right the wrong."

Millie just looked at Robert in a state of confusion as he headed up the stairs.

The meeting was at the office of the Cardinal. Brother Francis had arranged to make it later in the day, and Sister Genny stationed herself to assure that there would be as few people as possible in case James was recognized. Both were worried that Cardinal Michael might recognize James right off and wondered what his reaction might be. They were also worried that he might not recognize James right off and wondered what their reactions might be.

James walked into the office of Brother Francis slightly before the appointed time. Brother Francis rose to greet him. "I am so honored that you came, James. Is there anything I might get you?"

"No, Brother Francis. Please relax. All will be well. Nothing is going to happen that will put you in a bad position." James smiled.

"Oh no, it's not me I'm worried about. Well, maybe a little. I just don't wish to... Oh, I don't know what I wish," said Brother Francis resignedly.

"Well, why don't you announce me to the Cardinal, then?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. I can do that." Brother Francis turned and knocked on the door to the Cardinal's office.

"Enter," said the voice from the other side.

Brother Francis entered the door and went inside, closing it behind him. Shortly, the door opened again and Brother Francis motioned James on in, exiting the room as James entered.

James was standing in front of the door before the Cardinal. Cardinal Michael looked up from his desk and concentrated for a brief time on James. But, before James could make a decision as to whether the Cardinal recognized him or not the Cardinal rose and spoke.

"Your name is James, I presume. That is all Brother Francis has told me. Is there some other name with which you wish to be called?"

"James is fine, Cardinal Michael," James stated, moving forward and extending his hand.

The Cardinal shook James' hand. "Please, then call me Michael. Would you please take a chair?"

"Thank you," said James, sitting down. "What may I help you with?"

"Me?" said the Cardinal. "Nothing really. I am just representing the Church and we, I mean the Church likes to keep a tab on the charities we support. We have few if any programs we support outside our faith, and it would seem important to know the people with which we do business."

"A wise course of action. How can I assure you that your contributions are well placed?"

"Oh, Brother Francis is doing that job and I trust his judgement implicitly." Said Michael. "I just wished to meet the man behind the organization in case we decided to, uh, increase our contribution. After all, some may question this, and I would have to say I am comfortable with the people in charge."

"And are you comfortable with me?"

"Most assuredly, James. Is there anything I could do for you right now?"

"No, we are fine. I am having a wedding soon and my time is taken up with those plans, but if I need anything should I contact you or Brother Francis?"

"Brother Francis can probably handle all your requests. But if you run into trouble, please don't hesitate to reach me," said the Cardinal.

"By the way I have asked Brother Francis to my wedding and I do hope it won't inconvenience you," said James.

"Not at all. With my blessing."

"It would please me if you could come also, Michael." said James.

"Unfortunately my schedule usually is full. However, if I can make it, I would consider it an honor to be in attendance. Thank you for the invitation."

"Well, if that is all?" said James, rising to leave.

"Yes, well, quite." Said the Cardinal, rising to show James out.

They both walked to the door together. Cardinal Michael opened the door and James exited. The Cardinal never took his eyes off James. After James left, the Cardinal Michele motioned eagerly for Francis to come into his office.

Closing the door, Cardinal Michael turned looked at Brother Francis and with a release of pent up emotion said, "Do you know who that is!"

Brother Francis grinned the biggest grin of his life.

"My Good Lord! I would have never believed it if I hadn't seen for myself." continued the Cardinal. "The Son of our Lord was right here in my offices. No wonder He doesn't see too many people. Why didn't you tell me, Francis? Oh, good Lord yes. I would have thought you a fool. What does he want? What does this mean to the church to the world, to me?"

The Cardinal looked up questioningly at Brother Francis.

"I don't believe it means anything other than that our Lord does exist," said Francis.

"Oh, but it must. Don't you see it could herald the end of the world. There are great forces at work here. No wonder John went to Jerusalem. He was summoned. And why summon the son of an evangelist preacher? Is this some test for the Church? Have we committed some wrong? Why

didn't He summon the Pope? I told the College of Cardinals that we must become more strict in our dealings with the parishioners. We must come back from these reforms before it is too late! I must inform someone. The Pope! No, he would think me mad. Yet, I think I am somewhat mad. Imagine, the Son of Our Lord, in the same office as me!"

Brother Francis began to react with alarm when Cardinal Michael started to invoke telling the Pope.

"The Son of Jesus, Cardinal. That's who he really is. Did you let him know that you knew who he was? Did you speak to him of your concerns?"

"Are you mad?" said Cardinal Michael. "Casually say to the Son of Jesus, 'Oh, by the way, I see you're related to Our God. Anything I can pass on to the church?'"

"I understand your feelings, but James is quite charming and very gentle. I do not think that he would be offended if you asked him any of your questions. However, I do believe he may be offended if you proclaim throughout the world his existence. Besides the fact that you, yourself may be committed for saying so," said Francis.

"A point well taken. Besides, if there is anything we or the church must do it would be best to find out before we start jumping to conclusions."

"Well thought, sir. Is there anything I can do? I need to return to my duties." Said Francis.

"Duties?" said the Cardinal. "Francis, your duty just walked out that door. Give your full attention to James and keep me informed. And Francis?"

"Yes?"

"See if we can arrange another meeting between me and James. I do have questions I need to ask. Besides, did you know he was getting married? The Church must send something. A crock pot will definitely NOT do." Cardinal Michael retreated to his desk.

Sister Genny paced nervously outside the door James had used to see the Cardinal. Shooing away fellow nuns and priests was becoming a hard chore and she was relieved to see James finally exit.

"Thank you, Genny." James said when He saw her.

"Oh, thank you," said Genny. "Was there any problem? Did the Cardinal recognize you?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to play poker with the man." said James. "I think he recognized me, but I couldn't be sure. However, the meeting went fine and I don't think there will be any problems."

"Well, good. I'm going to wait for Brother Francis. If you don't mind, we'll call later to let you know if there is any trouble. You better shoo along if you still want to keep your identity secret. Sister Margaret and Brother Luke are coming and neither one has been boasted about for the keeping of the vows of silence."

"I'm going. Thanks, Genny. I'll wait for your call." James headed for a parked car.

James' car had just left when Brother Francis exited the building with a look of concern across his brow.

"Has he gone?" asked Francis of Genny. "Yes. Why? Is there a problem?"

"Well, I don't know," said Francis. "Cardinal Michael did recognize him, man of God that he is. However, he quickly came to conclusions of worry and remorse instead of joy. He was quite concerned for the church as a whole and upset that James didn't come to us first. Anyhow, he has assigned me full time to James and I was able to get you assigned to him also. He also wants to meet with James again to ask some questions and I think calm the Cardinal's heart. I don't know. It seems innocent enough. But, joy of joys, we are assigned to be servants of Our Lord's Son.

"Yes." said Sister Genny, equally as pleased.

"How did it go son?" asked Thomas as they sped away in the car.

"Well, I think. Anyhow, I don't think we will be getting a reduction in our monthly stipend."

"Now, boy, don't you go worrying about no money to keep your foundation afloat. There will be money enough if you need it, I'm sure," said Thomas.

"Don't worry, dad. I know things will be taken care of," said James quietly. "How's mom and Ingrid doing? Katy and Maggie still runnin' round like scairt chickens?"

"You are just itchin' to get your tail whupped. Well, it won't do you any good. I gotcha now and they are waiting at the tux shop for you and the boys to try on the monkey suits." Thomas grinned.

"You traitor!" exclaimed James in mock horror.

"Traitor or coward, you going, boy. I gots to go back and live in that house of wimmen and I ain't takin the dive for you."

They pulled up to the tuxedo shop and sure as his Dad had said there stood all the ladies, each with one of James' friends in tow. Katy opened the door as Thomas pulled to the curb.

Grabbing James' hand, she pulled him out of the car, kissed him and said, "Come on, big boy, time to suit up."

Laughing, they all went into the shop and began trying on outfits.