

## CHAPTER 18

Robert and Millie checked into an Atlanta hotel a week before the wedding. Dex Love had made all the arrangements, and even flew them down in the corporate jet. Dex had made sure that John or James knew nothing of the visit. Robert had agreed to all these proposals, as he wished to keep his involvement as quiet as possible. Dex knew John would never make arrangements again for him to visit with James. Indeed, their relationship was quite sour after their last episode. As Dex was wondering how to introduce the grandparents to their grandson and John at the same time, Robert spoke.

"I have to thank you for your help, Brother Love, but meeting my grandson and daughter will be handled by myself. You understand this is a family matter and I wish it to remain private."

"Oh, I understand," said Dex. "However, please allow me to make the limousine available to you at your stay in Atlanta."

"No, thank you. That would be too generous."

"Please, I insist. Remember, you will be doing us both a favor and any assistance I can offer, allows us to conclude this business sooner. Besides, I understand you have little knowledge of this area and my driver knows Atlanta. I will leave you my driver." Said Dex waved off further protest.

"If you insist, I accept. You are a good man, Brother Love," said Robert.

"Please, the name is Dex. And call me if you need anything." He handed them his card and headed out the door.

Dex love closed the door and turned to his assistant as they headed toward the elevator.

"Make sure the limo stays with them at all times and have the driver call me when they head to James' residence. You understand? Good," said Dex as the elevator doors slid closed.

"Is that all he said? Did he recognize you at all?" asked Tommy.

"I'm sure Brother Francis will call to let us know what's up, if anything," James said.

Just then the phone rang in the front room of the Aunt Jenny Foundation house. Judy called out,

"James, it's for you. Brother Francis."

"See? Like clockwork," James said to Tommy as he headed out of the kitchen to the living room.

As James hung up the receiver, he turned to Tommy and said, "Cardinal Michael did recognize me, but the reaction Francis received when I left and the Cardinal came out has him and me concerned. I asked Francis to come over to discuss it some more."

"Trouble, James?"

"I don't know. It could be, if we don't head it off." James was thoughtfully distracted.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," said Tommy.

"It's just that the Cardinal looked upon my birth as a sign, as possibly the end of the world. Or at best a renewed call to the stricter teachings of my Father."

"I think you're a sign, too," deadpanned Tommy. "A sign of trouble."

"Well, at the least we will have new free help around. The Cardinal has assigned Francis and Genny to us." James grinned.

Tommy looked up. "Really? That will help immensely. They are quite a good pair."

"James!" Judy screamed from the front porch of his mother's house. "Come quick. Mom needs you!"

A quick look of fear crossed James eyes as he exchanged glances with Tommy. They both bolted for the door.

James was the fifth one in the door after Judy screamed frantically for him. Mobutu had beaten him by thirty feet, Tommy and Pierre by a full four yards, and Katy had beaten them all, even though she had been across the street visiting the neighbors. The rest, including Thomas and Russ, followed as quickly.

Cindy was in a chair, weeping. James had never seen her upset so. Katy was already holding her in her arms and sent Ingrid into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"What's wrong? Was she hurt?" asked James frantically, eyes wide and searching his mother for a clue to her grief.

Thomas worked his way through the crowd, took one look at his wife and the desperation in her eyes, and faced the growing crowd.

"Thank you for coming to help. You will all leave now."

Everyone left; filing out the door in bewilderment, yet unwilling to face the force that emanated from Thomas' eyes. When the door shut behind the last of them, he turned to his wife, still cradled in Katy's arms. Thomas took the glass of water from Ingrid and directed Judy to take Ingrid and Katy out to the kitchen. Katy started to protest, but Thomas had hold of both of Cindy's hands, and with one look from Thomas' eyes, decided to swallow the objection growing in her throat.

James looked on in awe. He had never seen his Dad so loving, so protective of his mother, so forceful. Thomas kneeled before Cindy, who was still sitting in her chair, sobbing.

"He called didn't he?" Thomas asked.

Cindy nodded, unable to speak.

"Is he here in Atlanta?" asked Thomas.

Cindy nodded again. Somewhere in the distance James could hear a phone ring, as if it too must be answered and had an extreme emergency.

"I'll take care of it," said Thomas. "Judy, Katy. Take your mom to her room and stay with her." Both women burst through the door as if they had been leaning against it trying to hear every



word.

As Cindy was led to her room, a slight tap was heard on the kitchen door between the front room and kitchen.

"Come in," said Thomas as he sat wearily down in the chair vacated by Cindy.

Ingrid peered from around the corner of the door and stammered, "James? John is on the phone. He says it's urgent."

James was frozen in place. "Should I take it, dad?"

Thomas looked up, tired but resolved.

"Yes, but when you're done we need to talk, son."

"Yes, sir." James hurried out the door to take the phone call.

Thomas heard James from the front room. "He did what? I know, I know. Yes, if you can. We'll wait."

James burst through the door from the kitchen.

"Is that what this is about?" James asked heatedly.

Thomas looked up and nodded.

"Listen, son. We have to talk." said Thomas.

James sat down across from his dad.

"If it's about Grandpa Franklin, I know the story. He proceeded to tell his dad of his first and only meeting with his grandfather. Thomas listened in silence.

When the story was finished he said. "I had suspicions that you had visited Millie and Robert. You must also be aware that he never forgave your mother or me because we never wavered in our testimony to your true heritage. He refers to your mother in the most vile of language. Calling her whore, as well as you a bastard. The name-calling I can handle, but the alienation of her dad's affection continues to hurt your mother. You see, she still loves your grandfather. And she wants to please him so much and wants to be with him, but to do so would mean she would have to deny you and her God, something she could never do. So it hurts her deep inside. And what hurts her hurts me."

"Apparently, I am why they are here," said James.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, that was John on the phone. His father, Dex, has apparently found Millie and Robert in an effort to expose my 'fraud' before John so that I no longer will take money from John or Dex's church. He also wants to ensure that I could not interfere in his churches proclamation that John was the only one born on Christmas of our birth year which is the whole basis of their funding."

"Well then, Dex has found a convenient ally," said Thomas. "If I know your grandfather, he feels this is one last wrong he has to right. And one shame that he must keep hidden in order to keep his position."

"Always about power and money," said James.

"Quite often. One can lose his soul in search of power and money. They are strong temptations, but they can also be used for good. In this day and age, of business this and business that, it is easy to forget the people. There has to be a balance. Otherwise, you get businesses selling to business and no one caring for the people. Of course, you can go too far the other way and care too much for people and not enough about the business."

"I know. I know. Moderation in all things, including moderation." James grinned at his dad. "But what should we do about grandpa?"

"Well, let's get John over here and discuss this. If I know Robert, we have a few hours before he gets here to make our plans," said Thomas.

"I'll get on the phone right now and we'll meet at Aunt Jenny's. Do you mind if we tell some of our friends?" James gestured towards the window at the throng gathering outside.

Thomas looked up. "Oh Lord. We better tell them something. It would be wise if Katy, Maggie, Ingrid, Russ, Judy and the boys were there also."

"How about Francis and Genny? They are on their way over," said James, heading for the door.

"Fine. I don't think it would hurt."

James headed out the door to arrange a fast meeting.

Everyone was there within an hour. Heated words were spoken of the man who had injured their Cindy. Fear, concern and determination gripped the room in which they were seated. Katy had been perfunctorily informed as to the meaning of the meeting and had decided to stay with Cindy at the other house. Brother Francis and Sister Genny were outraged at the thought of Robert and Millie accusing their daughter of lying about the birth of her child. No one could believe that a man who had spent his life in the service of the Lord could so quickly dismiss or even recognize the significance of James.

"He will want to confront you all," said Thomas strongly as he entered the room. A hush fell over the gathering.

"What do you mean, confront?" said Pierre in the awkward silence.

"Robert Franklin is a man of the church with deeply held beliefs, but that is his problem. He only believes, he does not know. Because of this, he feels that you have been misled by my James, that we have somehow brainwashed you all and forced you to join this Aunt Jenny cult of his. Robert Franklin believes that he must open your eyes to the evil that James has led you into in order to save your souls for Jesus our Lord. For this reason, he must meet with each of you collectively or singularly and challenge your knowledge of James' birthright."

"But what of Cindy?" asked Sister Genny.

"He will examine her most of all. For to get her to forsake James, would be to reclaim his



daughter and publicly disavow James' Father," said Thomas.

"Then he shall not have her. She shall not be judged by him!" Shouted Russ.

"I shall, if I choose. And I do choose to confront my demons," said a quiet voice from the doorway.

"Cindy, you do not have to," said Thomas with tears in his eyes.

All parted as she made her way to Thomas and stood by his side.

"You have protected me many years, Thomas. I knew I would have to meet my father sooner or later. I know the God who gave me James and no man, not even my father, shall shame me into renouncing Him."

Cindy was quiet and yet forceful. "You all know my James for who he is. We did not ask for belief, nor did we seek it. His birth and his heritage are your knowledge, given to you by your own goodness and the way you have lived. You know his birth as you know you are thirsty. It just is. I do not question you, for to do so would be a waste of time. The question before us then is what do we do about my father."

James spoke. "I say we give him what he wants."

"What?" asked John.

"Let's give Robert what he wants, an audience. Let him use the best weapons he has, his speech and religion, and allow him the privilege of doing his best or worst. I am secure in what and who I am. I feel no doubt in anyone in this room about what and who I am. Maybe, if he uses everything that he has, every argument that he may make, we may finally get through to him and make him understand."

"I don't know, James. This isn't really your fight. It should be between your mother, Robert and I," said Thomas.

James smiled "I am the problem, and you and mother have protected me long enough. Robert, my grandfather, and Millie, my grandmother, must, if we can help them, learn the truth."

"Yes," said John, and a chorus of agreement swept the room.

Sister Genny moved to Cindy's side. "I'll not let your mother face this alone, James. Don't even try to dissuade me. I'll guess I'll defy God before I'll let her face this alone."

"You and me, sister," said Katy, grabbing Cindy's other hand.

"Thank you, ladies," said Cindy, smiling weakly.

"Then I guess it's settled then." Said Thomas. "But let's try to give ourselves a little home field advantage. Judy, you think you and Ingrid could whip up some coffee and cookies? And Tommy. You think you and the boys can make this meeting house look like a living room with enough seating for everybody? Let's get started."

They came in the limo. By arrangement, John had gotten his father to come along and meet James and him at the foundation house. Dex was thrilled, trying to play a somber host, yet rejoicing

inside that all his plans were coming together. I'll teach that young pup to mess with me and my family, thought Dex.

John met them at the curb. "Mr. and Mrs. Franklin? I'm John Love. Nice to see you. Dad. Come on into the house; it is a little chilly. You'll have the opportunity to meet your daughter inside, Mr. Franklin."

"Thank you, son. Thank you for helping to arrange this meeting," said Robert.

John helped Millie up to the porch as Robert and Dex went on ahead. The front room was warm and comfortable, just as Thomas had directed. Cookies and refreshments were laid out as if to welcome a friend. Furniture was strategically laid about to provide seating for all, but not so intrusive as to suggest a court or meeting room. Thomas met Robert at the door.

"Welcome to this house, Robert, Millie, and Reverend Love. Come in and make yourself at home." Thomas ushered them into the center of the room. "May we take your coats or offer a drink?"

"Thomas?" said Robert, quizzically looking at the man in front of him. "Yes, Robert, I am Thomas."

"We need nothing from you," said Robert with rebuke. "Where is my daughter?"

"My wife is sitting in front of you," said Thomas, gesturing to Cindy, who sat between Katy and Genny in front of Maggie. Millie took one look and made an effort to move forward, but a slight tug on her arm by Robert brought her back to his side.

"Is this some type of inquisition?" asked Robert, suddenly surveying the room about him.

"Is it?" Asked Thomas. "You suddenly call my wife after abandoning her, me and the children for thirty years. Frighten her over the phone insist on a meeting to discuss long dead issues, and you ask me if this is an inquisition."

Robert was taken aback by Thomas' assault. This is obviously not the child that ran away with my daughter, he thought. Dex had squirreled himself away in a corner of the room to watch the action and offer support. He was thrilled with the exchange so far and was glad for the audience to witness James' destruction.

"What is it you want, father?" asked Cindy from her chair.

"I wish to speak with you alone." Said Robert with a look of authority.

"That I will not do. You abandoned me thirty years ago. With that, you also abandoned your rights to dictate to me what you wish. If you speak we will speak before my friends." Cindy gave Thomas a look that held him still in his place.

"If you so choose. For what I have to say to you will concern these folks as well as you. It is no great as shame for me as it was and is for you."

"You speak of me," spoke James from the shadows. He stepped forward to be more easily seen.

"Of your birth and your mother and father's claims," Robert said, "Truly a family matter,



that does not concern these good people. Indeed, if I were them I would feel uncomfortable to even be a participant at this stage."

"These are my friends, grandfather. They know well of your beliefs. And since the object of your beliefs is an attack on them, they wished to participate. No one forced them here or is making them stay," said James.

"That seems quite fair, Robert," said Dex from the back. "They should be present if we are to resolve this whole situation."

"Well, enough then." Robert took a seat in front of Cindy and Thomas in the center of the room, seating Millie beside him.

"I have come to resolve this issue before I die," said Robert.

"What issue is that?" Said Cindy. "My marriage to Thomas? The birth of my children?"

"Must you play games?" Retorted Robert.

"Speak your mind. It is you that play the games. You wish to resolve an issue, speak plainly and tell us what it is," said Cindy.

Robert was furious.

"Daughter!" he began.

"In name only! You gave up your rights as father the day you threw me and my child out!"

Cindy was warming to the challenge. Robert was temporarily speechless at this outburst.

"I came to resolve the issue of your claims that this man is the Son of Jesus Christ. There, are you happy now that I spoke your shame?" said Robert perfunctorily.

"I would not be happy having any shame spoken aloud, among my friends or in private. But I have no shame in speaking of the birth of the Son of Jesus. This I am proud of and speak of willingly," replied Cindy.

"What blasphemy, child. Do you dare speak it in front of these good people, the Reverend, and a priest? Have you no shame at all?" Robert was in shock.

Dex was astounded to hear these words. Could John possibly believe this black man was the Son of Jesus? Oh, Lord, what a con, thought Dex. This should be easy to dispel. I am so glad I came to watch this destruction.

"Shame? Yes," Cindy said. "For the right reason. Shame my father threw out his only daughter in her time of need and understanding. Shame, because he has never acknowledged the birth of his three grandchildren. Shame that he has more time, belief and trust in others than he has for his own. Yes, I have shame, but I will never have shame in producing the Son of Jesus." replied Cindy strongly.

"You cannot believe this!" Shouted Robert. "You conceived a child in the back room of a storefront church in New York City, a bastard child as defined by God and man. This man, Thomas was your companion and you wish me to believe that James is the Son of Jesus? Please, child, confess your sins. God and I will forgive you."

"To confess what you wish of me would be to turn my back upon the Lord Jesus. He would never forgive me for such an act. Can you not see that to keep my soul I must defend His and my child? My Lord, can people only believe the worst in themselves and not the best?" Cindy began to weep openly.

Robert turned to the others in the room. "Can you not all see the fallacy of this belief? James cannot be the Son of Jesus. My Lord, his skin color is not even the same as Jesus." Said Robert.

Dex chimed in, "Come on, people. This has been a good charade, but it is too obvious. A black girl from New York City, the daughter of a storefront preacher, given the gift of Jesus' Son out of all the great women of the world Jesus had to choose from? I mean she is pretty, but hardly a Venus."

John stepped forward at these words and as he was about to speak, Brother Francis stood up.

"Yes, I can see your logic, Reverend Love. It would be the same ludicrous scenario as if a peasant girl, the daughter of a shepherd, gave birth to the savior in the middle of a desert. I mean, why would anyone choose Bethlehem and the Jews when He could have Rome and a Roman queen?"

Dex started to sputter as Robert looked at the priest in disbelief.

"You cannot believe this? We know where and who conceived this child," Robert said in disbelief.

"I grant you know where. But how do you know who? Were you there?" Asked Francis. "Are you a voyeur, sir?"

"How dare you!" said Robert.

"Then it is possible you were wrong," Brother Francis said. "And to us, it is unbelievable that you do not know the father of this man. Especially if you say you are the man of God you claim."

"How can you have this belief?" Said Robert.

"Because there is no belief, there is knowledge."

"There must be belief," answered Robert.

"Then will you believe this?" said a soft and gentle voice.

The room grew warmer and time seemed to stand still. A bright light engulfed the room, and He was there standing before them all. James smiled, Cindy rose and took his hand, Thomas stood beside them both.

"It cannot be! It must be some kind of trick." Robert said. He looked about the room and all save Mille, Robert, James, Thomas, Cindy and Jesus were in what seemed a state of suspended animation.

"I believe this is a family problem." said a voice. "No need to include anyone else in our affairs."

"I am to believe you are Jesus?" said Robert.



"I was that person in life on this earth," replied Jesus.

"And how am I to know? How do I know that this is just not some trick of the mind or some dream?" Asked Robert.

"Ask yourself," replied Jesus.

Robert thought, then Robert knew. The knowledge was overwhelming. He fell to his knees and started to cry.

"Why did you not reveal yourself to me earlier, my Lord." he asked.

"Why did you not listen? I have spoken with you many times in many ways and always you turned your back."

And Robert suddenly realized the significance of Aunt Jenny's visit and the other times he had denied even the conversation about his grandson.

"My greed and arrogance has denied me and my wife of even the tiny pleasures of our grandchildren. I don't know if I can ever forgive myself. But I do ask for yours and James, Cindy's, and Thomas' forgiveness."

"It has been granted many times over in the prayers and thoughts of your daughter." With that, the light disappeared and they were thrust back into the present.

Brother Francis was about to speak again when he noticed Cindy and Thomas standing beside each other and James holding His grandfather and grandmother in his arms as they wept. Genny and Katy rose, wondering how Cindy escaped their grasp and stood with Thomas. John knew, however and began shepherding the people to the door to let the Franklin's reestablish their connection with their family.

"Where are you going?" Dex asked. "It isn't over. You must understand that you are misled. He isn't the Son of Christ. He can't be. You fools!"

John collared Dex and took him outside.

"Go home, dad. You're embarrassing me." Dex got in the limo and left, fuming.