

CHAPTER 9

It's been eighteen wonderful years since John was born, Dex reflected. Now it was his birthday, and he was not only his son but, a prophet, a minister, and soon to be recognized by all as a man come of age. What a party this was going to be. All the great evangelists, Hollywood stars, and even a few politicians were coming for his son's birthday. Yeah, he and Brother Robert had done well in presenting his son to the world, and the boy had taken right to it. His mother seemed a little against it at first, but as soon as those presents and donations came in the night he was born she had let Dex take over the raising of their child.

Boy, what a night that was, he thought. We were in the center of that light. The nurses and doctors on that staff just came a running to see this child. Course, that call to the TV station didn't hurt either. Yeah, the scientists claimed some supernova scientific phenomena happened, nothin' miraculous. But the believers and the rubes weren't takin' no chances.

As soon as the story had aired there were more donations of cash and goods than Dex could have ever dreamed. Life after that was a piece of cake. Everyone wanted a look at the child and to pray in his presence. Hell, even ol, Dex could have believed it was Christ reincarnated if he hadn't been there at the beginning.

It hadn't been an uneventful eighteen years though. That Bishop, I guess he' a Cardinal now, would not leave us alone. Every trip, every appearance seemed to have one of his representatives there. He and I constantly sparred over my denouncing John's birth as nothing more than a normal occurrence. The more our church grew the more he applied pressure. What was it with him anyhow?

John wasn't much better for a while. As soon as he learned to speak he started to ask for a "friend." Years went by when every day he would ask who his friend was. Thank God he seemed over this by the time he reached twelve. "He about drove me nuts with that question." said Dex to the walls.

"Maybe I should invite that Cardinal over to the Party," Dex mumbled. "I sure would like to rub his nose in it some. Oh, to hell with the bastard, it's time to celebrate.

"Christmas and Jame's birthday." Cindy sighed happily to herself. She was always in her best mood at this time of year. "His Father's birthday, her Son's birthday, and the celebration of Christmas itself. What a great time of year!"

"What? What did you say?" Thomas asked. "You need something?" "No, Thomas, just being you know, happy!" exclaimed Cindy.

"You and Christmas," Thomas teased. "Body would think it was the only day of the year that mattered."

"But..." Cindy started.

"It's so special." Thomas laughed with her as they finished the sentence together.

"You gonna help me peel these potatoes for dinner?" Thomas asked. "Aunt Jenny will be here soon and ready to eat, and I'm not gonna be chewed out again about my kitchen shortcomings cause supper ain't ready."

"Well, Aunt Jenny's right," teased Cindy. "If you would spend more time helpin' 'round the house, you wouldn't do so poorly in the kitchen. Romping and playing with our three young 'uns every night does not count as 'helping.'"

"That's right, child. You tell him," Aunt Jenny said as she came through the back door. "I knew you'd have dinner late if I didn't come sooner."

Aunt Jenny looked menacingly at Thomas through smiling eyes. Thomas, his big hands holding a potato peeler in one hand and half-peeled potato in the other, smiled first at Aunt Jenny and then a laughing Cindy. He shrugged and put the peeler and potato down on the counter.

"A man should know when he's lost and I definitely have." Thomas laughed. "And I'm retreating to the front room with the kids before I lose some more."

"You know, he's not only good looking, but smart," said Aunt Jenny. "Get on out of here. Let people who know do the cooking." With that Jenny shooed Thomas into the front room, shook off her coat, and began to take over the kitchen as only a woman practiced over years in the art of loving homemaking could.

"Cindy, finish them potatos," said Jenny as she began to rattle the dishes and warm the house with her presence.

"Can you believe it's James 18th birthday?" asked Cindy. "No, shor cain't. What has that boy done with the spatula?" "Over here." Cindy gave Jenny the utensil.

"Just seems like yesterday his Father came and delivered him to me. You think He thinks we've done a good job raising him?" worried Cindy.

Aunt Jenny raised her hand as if to speak.

"Oh, I know," Cindy interrupted. "Jesus and I speak all the time and He has always smiled upon me. But, you know He is the Son of God, and was raised as a man. And you know how men are never really letting us in on their feelings and emotions. But I love both of them so much, and I just hope I did all right."

"Child, no one could have raised a baby better than you and Thomas. He's been happy and warm and taken care of. You and Thomas have given Him a brother and a sister and treated all with love and affection. No one child has suffered for lack of attention or want of another child. You did well, darlin'. And that's a fact. By the way, where is James?"

"On the hill talkin' to His Father," spoke Cindy. "You know how He likes to speak with Him on His birthday."

"Oh that's right. Now where is that bowl?"

Cindy started to peel potatoes and looked out onto the hill that James sat on. I really love

that child," she thought. It has been a good eighteen years and I never would have believed it would have gone as well as it did. Imagine! Raisin' the son of Jesus Christ. Would he throw tantrums? Misbehave? And what if He did? Could you spank Him? Ground Him? What would Jesus do if He disagreed with your solution? Strike you down with a fireball? Condemn you to hell? This wasn't only another man's child, but Jesus' child. It wasn't like Thomas was conversing with God as she had been. For some reason, God only spoke to her and occasionally to Jenny never to Thomas. Talk about being handicapped. But Thomas seemed to handle it well never questioning and always being there. He treated James as his own son and was there for him whenever James wished.

Cindy remembered the first day James truly misbehaved. He was just two and did not want to go to bed. A regular tantrum was being played out right there in the living room. Cindy did not know what to do and heard no word from Him. Thomas waited as long as he could and when Jenny did nothing picked James up leaned him over and swatted his behind. Thomas then placed him in bed and told him to go to sleep. Jenny had just frozen, sure that God himself was going to strike. But no noise was heard and Thomas had gone back to reading his paper. Cindy had then gone to check on her now sleeping son. She realized then and there that Jesus had chosen not only her, but Thomas to raise His child. And to raise His child to live in a world of men.

"What about those people that came a week after James was born, Cindy wondered. One white older lady and one small Asian man. A little weird, but nice and very Christian.

Both had come to see James and both prayed in his presence. When they left, the Asian man gave Thomas a good job at one of the local factories and the lady had given them the deed to the house next door to Aunt Jenny's, taxes paid in full for as long as James, Cindy or Thomas lived. Thomas still had a job at that factory and they still lived in that house. They never did see those people again.

Cindy was still lost in her random thoughts when Jenny said, "You done with them spuds yet, dear? I got the water boiling and we're ready for them."

Cindy wiped her hands as the last potato was cleaned and took them to Jenny.

"Here they are," she smiled. "And can I have some cheese on mine?"

"Lord, she is a handful," Jenny said as she looked upward. "Yes, child, I'll fix you some special. Now check on that bird and make sure the table is set."

Aunt Jenny. Cindy thought again as she started to check on the turkey. She has always been there from the first. First to believe, first to care and first to help.

The kids including James had always called her "granma". This thrilled her to no end, but had saddened her also. She was not aware that Cindy knew she had gone to New York to speak with her father and mother. To this day, Aunt Jenny had never talked about it and Cindy had never seen her parents since she had left New York with Thomas before she gave birth to James.

Thomas' parents knew full well the extent of their son's generosity and could not avoid Aunt Jenny if they wanted to. They had come within two months of James' birth and knew immediately

of His importance. Some people were well aware of James' identity upon meeting him, but the majority left confused and disbelieving if they left feeling anything at all. Thomas' parents were most proud of their son and treated Cindy and her children well, enjoying their newfound status as grandparents. Cindy had cherished their companionship and love and loved them as her own parents.

"Bird's bout done," said Cindy. "I'll go check on the table."

John walked into his father's study. It was a large room with a big patio attached, bright and airy with modern comfortable furniture. It was subdued enough for his father's associates, but rich enough in frills and niceties to underscore his Dad's taste for the expensive. Dex sat behind a large solid oak desk across from the fireplace.

Dex was still awed by his son's looks. Six foot somethin', jet black hair, squared jaw, dark complexion, obviously healthy and strong. After years before the pulpit, he carried an air of mild arrogance and self-assuredness. He smiled at his father.

"Dad, how you doing? You look happy."

"Fine, son," Dex replied, "Just spendin' a little time being a. father. Reflecting on my life since you've been born."

"And what have you found out? That you'd have been better off being single?" John said, smiling and half-laughing.

"No, definitely not. Well, maybe that one time," Dex teased back.

"No. No. No, don't bring that up again," protested John. "I thought I had heard the last of that episode."

"Not as long as I am alive. Did you need something, son?"

"Yeah, Dad." John looked more serious. "After the end of term, I've decided to spend some time with myself. I don't want to go on the revival tour this summer. I need time for myself."

Dex sat silent. This is the only time I can remember that he has ever expressed a desire to do something for himself or made a decision on his own, he thought. He knows how important the summer tour is. It's half our total income for the year. His presence is the only thing that keeps the people coming. Dex's face started to get flushed and the heat of anger started to well up in him. John was looking scared, but he wasn't backing down. His son's aggressiveness in the face of his dad's anger cooled Dex's temper somewhat and allowed a little ray of hope to enter.

"Why?" Dex quietly asked.

John gulped. "Dad, I've been an attraction and a minister since I was born. I've always done what you asked and believed you were doing what was right. But, I've never been alone. Who am I? I gotta make my own mind up someday, and if I don't know how to stand on my own two feet away from here, how can I stand on them when your gone and no longer able to counsel me?"

Dex thought for a moment. "O.K., John you can go."

John eyes widened. "I...I can?" he stuttered.

"Sure," said Dex, "but I will do the tour, only we'll announce that you're going on missionary work. That your mission needs additional support and prayers. That ought to make up for the loss of your presence on the tour. Also, I expect you to keep in touch and be back in a year."

"Great, Dad," John said happily. "I'll do it."

James came into the warm kitchen and immediately smelled the perfume of turkey, mashed potatoes, and dressing. "Man, oh man, that smells so good," he said with a smile. "Aunt Jenny, where are you Aunt Jenny?"

"Chile, I'll have your father whup you good if you make any more ruckus." Jenny said as she came in from the dining room.

"How are you, boy? And how did you know I was here?"

"Only one person can cook so well that a body could feast on the smell and not be hungry for a week after. How 'bout a taste of those sweet potatoes?"

"Get your hands out of the pot, James, or I'll swat you myself," said Cindy, wielding a large wooden spoon.

"Granma, you gonna let her treat me like that on my birthday?" James pleaded.

"Don't start, chile. Don't even start. You do what your mama says and don't put me in the middle." Aunt Jenny laughed.

"Okay." grinned James as he took one last swipe at the potato bowl and headed for the door. "Mom, where's Dad and Russ and Judy?"

"Where do you think they'd be on Christmas with new toys in the house?" Cindy rolled her eyes.

James laughed at the thought and yelled at Thomas as he went through the door, "First dibs on settin' the train up."

Cindy just smiled. Thomas had taught them all the importance of play and having fun. And it had been a point of real pride that although James always referred to Jesus as Father, he referred to Thomas as Dad. It seemed to signify the importance of both individuals in James' life.

She sighed. So much had happened in the last eighteen years. School; first grade was a major trauma for Cindy, Thomas, and Aunt Jenny. James was aware of his status by then and they all wondered how the other students, parents, and teachers would react if their child blurted out his significance. But nothin' happened, as it was in all phases of school life. James mere presence

seemed to dissuade conversation from the subject, and those invariable times it had come up, James had offered sensible explanations. Whenever he was asked his religion, he always smiled and replied, "Christian."

His grades were always good, but the Lord did not give him the gift of universal knowledge yet. He had to study his fractions. Then there was little league, and guitar, and all those pickup football and basketball games.

Friends and girlfriends were also his to enjoy, although James seemed to pick his friends quite carefully. The ones he had were ones he had had since first grade, and only a few had made his inner circle since. The girlfriends were usually a couple of dates and no more. He had been able to avoid the inevitable trap of teenage love Cindy and Thomas had experienced, but he was by no means uninterested in the opposite sex.

"Good lookin boy." Aunt Jenny said.

"Well, he is good lookin." Cindy agreed. "Tall, six feet one if he's an inch, and dark, like Thomas, and handsome. Those brown eyes could melt any cold heart."

"Well I agree with the eyes part ennyhow" retorted Jenny. "He's used those more than once to get an extra cookie out of me. Now help me bring in that food and call God's creatures to the table. I'm lookin' forward to some meat, taters, ice cream and birthday cake."

"No, no James," Russ yelled, "the engine goes in the front."

Judy squealed as her dolly went round and round on the freight car being pushed by the errant locomotive.

"Thomas, you gonna let them fight again, or you gonna stop it now?" Cindy said as she started to raise her voice at a grinning Thomas.

"Come on, boys, time to stop. Eats are on," yelled Thomas. In a second, all were heading for the table.

Aunt Jenny and Cindy surveyed Thomas' work at the table. As usual there were seats and place settings for all and an extra one at the head of the table. Thomas had always asked that the Lord join them at every meal, especially Christmas, and since he figured he'd asked it would be improper not to have a place for him to sit. Cindy and Jenny respected Thomas' wishes and always set a place for Him to eat should He ever join them. James always seemed to appreciate the gesture and always sat beside the empty chair. Thomas sat opposite the chair and Jenny and Cindy sat opposite.

They placed the turkey dead center on the table, yams next to Thomas, mashed taters next to James. Aunt Jenny retrieved the birthday cake from the kitchen and placed it on a old credenza next to James. James smiled and acted as if he was going to steal a bite of that delicious cake right then.

"You wanna keep them fingers till next year, you'd better put them where they belong," quipped Aunt Jenny.

"Aw Granma, please," teased James.

"Don't you Granma me," Aunt Jenny fired right back. "You eat your supper first, then we'll get to your cake."

As the last minute scurrying went on, Thomas looked around. The heat from the furnace

kept them warm and cast a slight smell of burned oil in the house, but other sights and smells just filled the air, the Christmas tree by the window, the scent of fir wafting through the air, the turkey, and candles. It was beautiful, it was warm, it smelled good, it was love.

Thomas looked into each and every face around him. Cindy was proud and pretty, confident and happy. Aunt Jenny was older, but wiser, the look of hard work and pleasure written in the wrinkles on her face. Jenny seemed to know the better times were ahead, but was enjoying the moment. Judy was playful and every bit papa's little girl. Russ was strong and ruddy, in perpetual love of his older brother. And James was strong, handsome, and content. You could look at him and feel secure and at peace.

Thomas leaned forward after each person reached his seat. "James, it is your birthday. Would you please ask the blessing?"

James raised his eyes toward heaven as the others bowed theirs. "Dear God and my Father, we are about to partake of a meal dedicated in your honor and with your bounty. We ask that you join our table to share in this wonder of your great works and bless this house, this food, this family, and all others with your grace. Amen."

Then, as Thomas looked up, the man who had been the doctor sat at the chair reserved for Him, covered with sweet light, and smiled. James smiled also, as he knew that his Dad was finally seeing the Father who had been sitting with them for years. Cindy smiled also aware that Thomas was now a witness to His presence.

Thomas stared, mouth open, eyes wide. Jesus was talking to him and Thomas heard his sweet calming voice as clear as a bell in early morning. James was aware, and so was Cindy at what he was saying. But Aunt Jenny and the kids just cracked up and talked as if no one was there. They seemed to have all the time in the universe.

And Jesus spoke and Thomas heard. Jesus was thanking him, Thomas, for all his work in helping bring up his son. He was saying how it was now time for James to leave and take up his lessons in the world, that Jesus would now look after his son and guide him through the years. That a Father could be no prouder of Thomas' accomplishments with his son and was pleased James chose to honor Thomas with the title of Dad. Thomas looked at Cindy and she was crying tears of joy. James was proud and humble all at the same time. Jesus' presence seemed to make it all perfect, and Thomas was humbled at His generosity and praise.

"Close your mouth, Thomas," said Aunt Jenny.

"Huh?" said Thomas.

"Huh! What?" said Aunt Jenny. "I said close your mouth at the dinner table. You brought up in a barn?"

Thomas looked at Jenny, and just as quick the light was gone and the stranger had left.

James was smiling, and Cindy had tears streaming down her face. For once there was some half-eaten turkey and dressing on His plate. The cake on the mantle had a piece taken out of it.