

## **THE BOOK OF JAMES**

### **CHAPTER 1 (GENESIS)**

**S**he was black. Not in dress or mood, but in skin color. Not completely black, but rather that skin color uniquely suited to her race that gave them the right to claim the color as their own. Sixteen, black, and a woman in the biggest ghetto in New York City, these were the attributes first noticed when one met her. However, she had an aura, an attitude about her that made one feel her presence.

If you looked closer, you would see that behind the tank top and jeans skirt, she was attractive, a little more than average, but with a beauty born in youth. Conversations with the neighbors would assure you of some of her finer qualities. Her virginity still intact, her avoidance of drugs, and her devotion to her church gave her a rare status, particularly in her neighborhood.

Cindy was her name. Cindy Franklin. Some other day might find her reading or watching the soaps on TV, but today she sat on the front porch stoop of her apartment building. It was hot, humid and there was no air conditioning to cool her down. Their only fan had long since given up the task of cooling the apartment shared with her father and mother.

She reflected on her dad and wondered where he may have gone. Being a self-proclaimed man of God, founder and preacher of the New Faith Freedom Church, he often left for hours during the day with no word of where he could be reached. He never came home drunk, but when asked about his day he would reply, "I been ministerin' to them in need." Mama never asked much about it

because he was a good provider. Besides, she was too busy with the church women and church functions to be concerned.

"Cindy!, Cindy Franklin, what you doin', girl ?" The sudden yell and calling of her name brought her out of her reflections and drew her attention to a tall, swaggering boy coming down the street. A smile quickly crossed her lips as Thomas, her somewhat steady boyfriend, came to greet her. She giggled softly as she reminded herself that his name was Thomas, not Tom, a sore point that she used whenever she was want to tease.

"Nuthin much, cept swelterin' in the heat" she replied. What you doin? "

"I come to ask you for that time together you been hintin' bout. You gonna be able to squeeze me in tonight? "

" Not less you go with me to the church tonight. Papa wants me to play for the choir practice."

" Aw Cindy, you know I don't want to. Cain't you tell your Father you got plans?"

" You know I can't. `Sides, there's gonna be some cold drinks and the air-conditionin's working. Sounds a lot better than hangin' round some corner with a flat broke would-be Romeo."

" How you know I ain't got no money? Could be I had a movie in mind with some burgers later."

" Well, if you had, it'd be the first time, you ain't known for bein' Mr. Ritz. Look, if you serious bout seein' me, come on down to the church about ten and walk me home. It could be a long walk if you on time."

" I'll be there, if that's the best I can get. Wanna walk with me for a coke? "

" No, Thomas, I got some things to do before tonight. Besides, it's too hot to walk. "

" Then I see you later. Gotta meet Smitty `bout some bizness."

" Don't you get talkin' an forget `bout me."

" No way, Sugar, no way."

The "church" was really an old storefront in one block of many undistinguished blocks. The front was old clapboard that held little memory of the white paint that once covered its facade. Above the gray, peeling door was a hand-painted sign proclaiming in large blue letters, " New Life Freedom Church. " The large windows that once held merchandise for sale was now covered by self-sticking multi-colored plastic to produce a stained glass look. Inside, the combination of the plastic covered windows and light green walls seemed to create an atmosphere of cold green mist. This settled lightly on the thirty tattered kitchen chairs and bare floor that made up the sanctuary.

The smell crept inside you as you entered, the stale smell one frequently finds in old abandoned buildings or the homes of your elderly aunts and uncles. The back of the building housed the altar, a mere pedestal taken from some long-forgotten hotel. Flanking it on the right was a sturdy wooden chair, distinguished only by the addition of armrests and its command of the room. Behind the altar, directly against the back wall, were two rows of six chairs each. There sat the choir. Directly to the left of the altar was the old upright piano, its tunes reminiscent of the honky-tonk bar it came from, but entirely serviceable in giving thanks to the Lord. Beside the piano, between it and the back wall, stood a wooden door that opened upon a threadbare office that held a desk and two more chairs. On the far wall, a similar door led into the alley.

Cindy had been coming here for six years to hear her daddy preach, and she assured herself that her father was one of the best preachersmen, if not the best, to ever give praise to the Lord. He had a congregation of over fifty members and it was said if any sinner came within a block of his voice when he was fixin to save, they would immediately stop what they were doing and get down on their knees and pray. She knew she was impressed, and her own virtues were a direct result of this reinforcement. She loved to hear her daddy preach. It filled her with joy and made her feel a true part of all that was good in the world. She would dance and sing, throw in a few "amens," and begin to get such an emotional high that she thought she may never come back down to the squalor that surrounded her. But tonight was choir practice, and the air conditioner stuck in the wall was going to add a new voice to the already off-key melodies that filled the hall.

Cindy had been first to come tonight. The sun was still up even though it was late evening, and she wished for a few cooling minutes of solitude. Her thoughts were mostly on Thomas. He was quite brash when in front of the others, but she had seen him alone and knew him differently. He was kind, gentle, and never condemning. They talked a lot and he never pressured or ridiculed her even when she disclosed her deep passion for her religion. He accepted her for what she was and she felt at ease with him.

The jar at the door grabbed her attention and in walked an elderly gentleman. He wasn't of her congregation or this neighborhood, but her startled expression was immediately replaced with a gentle calmness that radiated from within the man standing there. He was of a lighter skin color than hers, not brown like a few of her friends, but a lighter shade of black. He wore a sedate three-piece suit and carried a glove and cane. Despite the heat, he was not sweating. As he stood in the

doorway, it seemed as though a glow surrounded him.

" Cindy..., Cindy Franklin?" He called and no other sound could be heard, not the air conditioners, the street noises, or even the scuff of her chair as she rose to meet him. His voice was not only crystal clear, but had the deep rich timber of a large old bell.

" How do you know my name?" Cindy asked.

" If you're Cindy Franklin, then I have some glorious news. You have been chosen. Of all to be brought before Him, you have been chosen to carry the new Son."

As he moved closer, Cindy grabbed the first chair she could and held it high above her head.

" I dare ya. You come one step closer and this chair will become a permanent part of your body. Who do you think I am that you could come up with some harebrained story and make me just lay down and give my body to you? And to blaspheme in a church of God. If Jesus wanted my body to deliver his Son then willing I would give it, but not to some slicked-up fool walking though the door. Now get out!"

" But Miss Franklin, you misunderstand. It is not I\_\_\_"

She threw and missed and immediately picked up another chair. "If I'm gonna be raped. I'm going down fightin'," she thought.

" I only wish to prepare you. You will carry His Son and He will visit you tonight to plant his seed. I wish you the best and pray for your future." With that, he dodged another chair and left.

" I don't care who your pimping for and I'll give them the same I'm giving you," she shouted as she followed him out the door. She ran smack dab into Mrs. Jamison.

" What's wrong, chile? "

" Where did he go? "

" Who, dear? "

" That man, the one who tried to attack me! "

" No one came out before you. Are you sure you're all right? Want some water or a cool drink? "

Cindy looked around and wherever he came from he was gone. Cindy let Mrs. Jamison take her inside and give her a cool drink.

It almost felt like it didn't happen, and for some reason unknown even to her, Cindy felt compelled not to speak of it with Mrs. Jamison. She accepted the offer of a cool drink and tried to settle the gut wrenching feeling inside. When questioned, she mumbled a response and slipped over to the piano and began to play.

It was a quiet song, a love song, and the melody stilled the air and quieted the anger that had left a hollow feeling inside her. Mrs. Jamison busied herself with humming along and greeting the rest of the choir as they entered.

It could have been the beat, or the tune, but somehow the song started to overcome every unseen objection, every slight conversation, and every barrier to its music. All crowded close and quietly listened. Once again the room seemed to shut out all sound but the piano and its beautiful tune. Cindy started to sing, and her crisp clear voice filled the hall with the true passionate unqualified love that only youth, not hardened by years of heartache, could feel. As the final chords melted into the evening, her father lightly touched her arm.

"Who you singing for, darlin'?" he whispered.

"Jesus." she answered softly, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Someone else slid next to her on the bench and held her close. She cried softly, but the tears were not those of sorrow, but rather of love\_\_ true love. The quiet inner knowledge you feel when someone you know loves you for who and what you are. And when you realize this it is sometimes too much to bear, and the tears begin.

The choir made their way to their positions at the chairs and her father asked her if she wanted to continue playing. With a joy she didn't even know she could possess, she said yes and lifted her head and began to play the favorite gospel tunes with which she had grown up. The choir quickly joined in and soon a full time, earthshakin', righteous-making, God-fearing melody pounded the air. They were swaying and singing and the sweat was pouring off the brothers and sisters as they shouted their praise to the Lord. Cindy didn't let up and carried them to new highs as she led them from one song to the next. One sister collapsed from the emotion and another fell to her knees, asking forgiveness. One of the brothers begged her father to save him and her father, in a fit of divine inspiration began one of his Bible banging, Hell damning, fire and brimstone sermons that had built his reputation. All singing and playing stopped as they listened to what surely must be the Lords true words. Amens and hallelujahs filled the air, and after thirty minutes of truly some of the best preachin' ever, they all collapsed into one repentant mass, spread over the altar and chairs.

Cindy had never ever felt so alive, so loved and loving. She had to draw a breath and regain herself. She again cried freely as she had earlier and made her way to the back office to get another cold drink. As she walked in and closed the door behind her, she felt a warm light engulf her, a light

that should have been blinding, but yet she could see. And she knew Him, for she had sung to Him, and she felt no fear. Willingly she walked to Him and she lovingly went into His warmth.

Cindy woke to a tapping on the outer door. Opening her eyes, she looked directly at the leg of the chair beside the desk. Startled, she sat up and listened again. "Where am I? How long have I been gone?" she wondered.

Her senses began to return as she recognized familiar surroundings. The tapping was becoming annoying. She stumbled over to the door and asked, "Who's there?"

"Well it could be Santa Claus, but it ain't." said Thomas. "I'm here to walk you home or did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget." She haltingly opened the door.

"Whoa girl, what's wrong? You okay?" Thomas grabbed Cindy as she nearly fell.

"I'm a little tired. What time is it?" she asked as she held on to his arm.

"Ten P M, just like you'd asked."

"Did you see anybody or anything outside or in here when you came?"

"No..., was I 'posed to?"

"You didn't see a light or nothin'?"

"Not a thing. You sure you all right?"

"Yeah. Let me go tell Papa I'm leavin' and we'll go. Oh, and Thomas?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's go slow."

"No problem, sugar, no problem,"

Cindy said goodnight to the choir and told her dad she'd meet him at home. Papa said goodbye and as she started to walk, a very warm feeling began to grow within her womb.

## **CHAPTER 2**

The inside of the tent was hot and humid. The recent rainfall had done little to relieve the heat and the lack of a breeze made the cramped space a hot house that caused the people to be drenched in their own sweat. Thirty people had crowded under the canopy, all listening intently to the speaker, hoping to be transported by his words to a higher place that could possibly allow them to be graced by God Himself.

Dexter Edward Love watched from aside of the stage. He had seen it all before and was still amazed at the ease with which Bobby could convince these people to give their hard-earned money to him. Bobby, or Brother Robert as he was called at the pulpit, could read a few phrases from the Bible, save a few souls, swear that all would be damned to hell, then pass the hat and collect a good

bundle of cash.

"Truly amazin, however, the way that dress clings tightly to that blonde is also something to behold," he said to himself.

He looked closer and saw her glance his way. He thought he saw a possibility, and why not? He was only twenty, six foot, black hair, and the model of righteousness. He looked good in his white suit with sparkling black shoes and a smile that exposed a set of perfectly white teeth. Maybe after the service he could get closer and take her off somewhere. Those southern girls always seemed a lot more agreeable after being convinced, by Brother Robert, of the need to give unto their fellow man.

Dexter's attention was quickly jerked back to the business at hand when Brother Robert fell to the floor and started screaming for the Lord to have mercy on the souls of those present.

New twist, Dex thought. He must be needin' some cash bad if he was goin' this hard.

Quickly he rushed to Brother Robert's aid and began pleading with him to calm himself. "Surely the Lord had heard and would save the souls of those present. He would help Brother Robert to continue his good works by entering the hearts and souls of these sinners and bring them up into the spirit of Christ."

Words spilled out freely as Dex and Bobby struggled on the floor together. Bobby acted unconvinced that anything short of self sacrifice would save these forgotten people, and Dex tried vainly to calm his troubled friend. Soon the crowd rose from their seats, slowly at first and then as a human wave, pleading and shouting for God to forgive them, promising to help Brother Roberts in words and deeds if only He would release him from this terrible pain.

Slowly Bobby seemed to calm down. An occasional relapse kept the people glued to the spectacle before them. Brother Robert acted as though he was entranced and looked glassy-eyed toward his audience. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you. Your prayers and faith have saved me from a tormenting hell." Then, on cue, he cried.

Dex saw his cue. "Thank you Lord, Thank You. Only with Your help can we overcome the evil that lurks within us. People, my brothers and sisters, please help us pass on the great miracle that has happened here today. Tell your neighbors, your friends, anyone you see about the true power of the Lord. Help us pass this message on by digging deep into you pockets for the offering that we will take in your behalf to instruct others in His way.

Dex jumped down and took the collection from each individual, blessing them as they gave their soiled and worn dollar bills to him. He looked directly in their eyes as they gave and with his pleading stare, made them give more than even they knew they could give.

Slowly the crowd filtered out, clasping Brother Robert's hand at the tent entrance. The blond wandered out slowly, lingering until she and Dex were the only ones left in the tent.

"Hello, waitin' for someone?" he asked.

"For you," she responded as she handed her cash to the pile Dex held in his hand.

Sweat dribbled down her chest and disappeared into the front of her dress as Dex watched.

"My name's Dexter Love. You got a name?"

She giggled. "Lori Jean, Lori Jean Baxter. Is that your real name?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Can you live up to it?"

"On occasion, if the partner's right. Want to go for a cold drink?"

"Sure. Poppa won't mind me bein' out with a preacher man, `specially one named Love."

"Good. Let's get the Chevy and drive to town. I'll drop you off after we're done."

Dex grabbed her by the hand, took a few bills for himself, gave the rest to Bobby and drove off. A few hours and a few cold drinks later found Dex and Lori discovering their own brand of salvation on a deserted back road.

### **CHAPTER 3**

Father Michael had been parish priest in the outskirts of Chicago ever since he was ordained. Years had passed and with the good grace of God, he was at forty years old, going to be elected bishop of the Catholic Church. By God's apparent will he was also going to remain in Chicago and serve on the Cardinal's staff, both plums as he saw it.

He readied himself in front of a full-length mirror. "Must be perfect for this day." he said to

himself. Never know if it will ever happen again, he thought. There are only a few bishops, fewer archbishops, and even fewer cardinals.

A good man devoted to the scriptures, and an excellent player of internal politics, Father Michael had many friends in high and low places. His primary interest, however, was The Bible, God's true word, and he had made a good study of it. Few were as well versed in its passages and their various interpretations as he. Indeed, debates even among his own colleagues were often settled by a ruling from him.

It pleased him to realize that so many considered him an expert in this subject. As long as he was able, God's teachings and God's true ways would be defended by him from all imposters, and they would honor God in the time tested traditions of the Church.

He reflected upon his knowledge gained through years of study, and also reflected on the challenges to the Bible's teachings from reformists in his own Church. "They'll never win as long as I hold a breath. The Bible's teachings are God's words and not to be altered by any debate of man. It's plain to see their meaning and I as a true Christian and man of God will defend them, unaltered, until my death."

## **CHAPTER 4**

It was the rain. Cold, miserable. Cindy watched it pound the side of the bus and was reminded of her father and his reaction. Just as cold, dark, and unyielding as the metal on this modern beast of burden in this dark and gloomy night.

What had happened? Pregnant. That's all she knew. Instead of acceptance, she was rejected

as another worthless "nigger" child with a bastard baby. Her father, the one who had counseled countless girls bearing fatherless babies, threw her out of the house, enraged with the shame she had brought upon her church and family. Her own mother turned her back as if she had never borne her.

Thomas had found her and took her in. Not once did he ask who or why, though it must have killed him to keep still. She could see it in his eyes, the hurt the anger, but, she couldn't tell him; she wasn't so sure herself.

He only knew she was hurt and needed help. Who would have thought that this cocky young man would be the one to come through when he was needed most? Of all the things she thought of him she never believed the depth of his caring and love for her.

Thomas slipped his arm around her. She felt warm and secure in his strong embrace. "What you thinkin' girl?" he asked softly. " 'Fraid of whats ahead? Don't you worry none. I explained all that was happenin' to my aunt an she said 'Come on'. I know its a long bus ride to Atlanta, but the beds are warm and the love is theah. 'Sides, I'll be beside you all the way. You get to feelin' poorly, let me know an we'll get the driver to stop awhile to let you rest."

"Yes, Tom, I'll let you know." Cindy looked up into his eyes. "I'm not 'fraid long's you're with me." Cindy hesitated then whispered "Thank you." Tom just squeezed a little tighter as they boarded the bus.

The trip was long and uncomfortable. Cindy had worried the whole trip down, alternately crying and sleeping, enjoying neither the scenery nor the company. However, they did arrive and were met by a middle aged woman, worn, dressed in rags, but radiating with such love that Cindy

almost didn't see the teenage boy standing next to her. The woman moved quickly toward them and began speaking before she even arrived. She was a whirlwind of motion.

"Jeremiah, get them bags. Thomas, you gonna drag that chile all over Atlanta? Set her down right here and let her catch her breath. Go help Jeremiah get the bags and hold the cab until we get there."

"Hello to you to Aunt Jenny." said Thomas, smiling.

"Hello to you, too, Thomas," said Jenny. "Now get on with what I tole ya and Let me take care of this little lady."

Aunt Jenny turned to Cindy. "I'm Jenny White. Call me Jenny or Aunt Jenny. Most everyone else does. I figure you must be Cindy the way Thomas holds onto you."

"Yes, ma'am, I am" Cindy said.

"I tole you, my names Jenny an I won't have any of that ma'am stuff around me if we gonna get along. Makes me feel old. Now, what can we get for you? Bein' you first chile, I suppose you need sumpin'\_, food? Cool drink? Or just plain rest?"

Cindy looked lovingly into those wide anxious eyes and felt the warmth that she had missed for the past five months. She took hold of the woman's sleeve and fell into her arms. Crying gently, holding tight, she released all the pressure that she had held in, in one long quiet embrace.

All that could be heard was Jenny's repeated "poor, poor chile."

Quite unexpectedly, Aunt Jenny's eyes began to widen and her voice grew quite still. Cindy, realizing the change, pulled slowly back. No one in the half-empty depot noticed, but to Jenny it was as if the whole world had just changed. She looked directly into Cindy's eyes and whispered, "It's

His child, isn't it?"

"Thomas had nuthin' to do with it. I swear," Cindy pleaded.

"I'm not talkin bout Thomas and you know it," Jenny replied.

"How do you know?" Cindy was wide-eyed with wonder.

"Listen, chile, I never believe any wild tale on faith. I've always insisted on discovering the truth. I look for facts. But somehow, I just know, feel, or believe that this is His chile. While I held you, I received a warm feeling, calm, peaceful, so overwhelming that it seemed to explain everything, even questions I never asked. Now tell me, before Jesus himself and all that's holy. Tell me to ease my mind. This is His chile, isn't it?"

"I don't know." Cindy said hesitantly. "With all my heart I wish to believe it's that simple. But how can I, a black child in the middle of this vast world, believe that I have been chosen to be the mother of Jesus' chile?" Then with anger, fear, and helplessness all welling up inside her, Cindy looked darkly at Aunt Jenny, pulled away and said, "Do you know what you are saying? What you ask me to believe and admit? How could I know? Who am I to debate the reality of God? For all I know this chile could just be the wicked games of the Devil hisself. What do you want of me? To admit that I alone am the chosen one and leave me and my child up to the ridicule and shame? Especially for some nigger woman in Atlanta?" With that outburst, Cindy fell, heaving great sobs upon the floor of that cold, impersonal building while Aunt Jenny, overwhelmed at the cold feelings Cindy felt, slowly regained her composure, gently wrapped her arms around Cindy, and led her to the waiting taxi.

They fell into the back seat of the cab with Thomas looking on, wondering but not daring to

ask what had happened. By the look in Aunt Jenny's eyes, he felt immense sorrow and did not wish to interfere in its healing. Jeremiah gave the driver the address and they took off for home.

Forcefully but quietly, Jenny told the driver to pull over. The break in the silence jarred Thomas and disoriented him for the moment. When he looked out the window they were at the entrance to a large Church. Jenny was stepping out, gently encouraging Cindy, who had yet to let go of Aunt Jenny, to follow her up the steps.

"Come on, Cindy. We need to talk," said Aunt Jenny.

"Cain't it wait? I'm so tired," said Cindy.

"No, chile, this is too important to leave till we both feel better." With that she and Cindy approached the front doors, when Cindy froze at the top steps and refused to go any further.

"What's the matter, Cindy?" asked Jenny.

"I don't wanna go into a church." Cindy said with a cold expression on her face.

"Why not, chile?"

"I fear It." said Jenny. "I fear the answers to all those questions. I fear God."

"Shall you forever live in fear. You have to face it. Just entering may answer the question of whether or not its Satan's chile. Do you think Satan could come into such a Holy place? Do you think God would want you to live in such fear? Come, Cindy. Come on in. It's warm and soft, quiet and peaceful. We can talk and we can pray if need be. We have to understand this. You need the answers; no woman can go to have a chile with such fear in her heart. Come, be at peace, come on in God's house."

Cindy slowly walked in. Like a small child, wide eyed with fear and wonder, she stepped

closer, then rushed through the doors as if she was jumping into a cold pool on a hot summer's day.

Cindy closed her eyes immediately inside the doors, held tight to Jenny and realized she was holding her breath. She waited to see if any cataclysm might befall her, then slowly released her breath and opened her eyes. Aunt Jenny was smiling the smile of triumph and laughter. She placed her arm around Cindy's waist and led her towards the altar.

"How long you been away from church, Cindy?" Jenny asked.

" 'Bout four months," Cindy said.

"All that time. All alone and no answers. Feel better?" Jenny asked as they set down in the first pew.

Cindy did. She felt as she did whenever she entered her father's church \_ \_ warm and comforted. At rest with the world.

"Now how did this happen?" asked Jenny.

Cindy began to speak, and as she retold the story of the odd man and the bright light, the following months, and trouble with her family, She became quite peaceful.

"Well," said Aunt Jenny, "from what you tole me, it most definitely is Jesus' baby and you should be quite proud."

"How can you be so sure?" said Cindy quietly. "How can you know what I do not? Do you realize what you're saying? I know I am not a woman of the world, but I do believe in God and the Bible and nowhere is there any word that Jesus will return to earth and have a son. And why do you believe a little speck of a person such as me could be the mother of such a baby? These are things for good men and women, strong men and women, not such as I."

"Oh, chile. Why is it that people can always believe the worst in themselves and not the best? Why do we always doubt ourselves so?" asked Jenny. "If you cain't believe in yourself or your God, believe in the baby. You love the child, don't you?"

Cindy looked up. "Why, no one's ever asked me. All they ask is where it came from. No ones ever asked me if I loved the child or loved being a mama."

"Well, do you love the chile?" Jenny asked again.

"Yes," said Cindy brightly and securely.

"Then," said Jenny, "it don't matter whose child it is or where it come from. These things God will take care of in his own time. It's good enough that you love him, want to take care of him, and want him to grow to be your son. All else don't really matter. You do the lovin', and if there's any believin' to do, I'll do it for you. Together we'll work it out."

"Thanks, Aunt Jenny. Thank you for carin'"

"That's all right," said Jenny. "We better get home now. Thomas'll think we run off an left him. Besides, I'm gettin a bit hungry."

Slowly they walked out of the church, got in the taxi and headed to Aunt Jenny's home.

## CHAPTER 5

Lori Jean waited quietly in the hotel room flipping through the Bible, reading what Dex called "trash magazines " and generally feeling miserable. She had found Dex quickly after she realized their few minutes of pleasure had a lasting result, found him before her poppa found out and threatened him with exposure if he didn't do something to help her out. Brother Robert couldn't afford the exposure of one of his staff to the sins of Satan and quickly gave Dex an ultimatum. Dex agreed to the marriage, but the conversation with Brother Robert soon turned her pregnancy into a religious event. She was now carrying a prophet of Jesus, and even her own father did not question the discrepancy in the dates of her marriage and the child's birth. His pride at being the grandfather of such a wondrous child seemed to blind him to all truths.

Lori thought about the people she saw and wondered if they were all as blind as her father seemed to be. It didn't matter, though \_ \_ the scam worked. She was married, they were making more money than ever, and she and Dex actually seemed to like each other. In fact, it was becoming so perfect she was beginning to wonder if the child might not truly have some place in Heaven's plan. All she really knew was she had never been as well off or as happy as she had been recently. Happy, except for the pregnancy. She was gettin' fat, she waddled everywhere, and always had to go to the bathroom. God, she was miserable and couldn't wait for the child, prophet, or whatever to be born.

Dex came into the room. "Lori, I have a plan. Listen up. Do you realize our baby will be born in the month of December, with a good chance of being born on Christmas day?" Dex was excited now and Lori watched those beautiful eyes light up as he got more and more into his thoughts. God, how beautiful his eyes became when he truly was swept up in his emotions, she thought. But, what was that about an early delivery?

"Lori, do you hear me? I said if the baby isn't ready, we could even get a doctor to induce labor so the child can be born on Christmas. Don't you understand? With the groundwork laid down by Brother Robert on the possibility of our child being the new age prophet of Jesus Christ, we could reap thousands of dollars in new donations. Better yet, we'll bring up the child on Biblical sayings and teach him our trade from birth. That way we can use him in the show and really turn up the pressure on those rubes. Hell, we might even give Ol' Billy a run for his money on the national circuit."

"Hold on, calm down, wait a minute." Lori said, her eyes even wider than normal. "I am not a cow made to deliver a baby at your whim for some religious scam to make money. What about the baby? What if it's a girl? What makes you think I'm gonna let you take this child of mine and make it some freak show for your benefit?" She was starting to scream now and Dex had stopped in mid-sentence, amazed not only at the woman, but at her protection of the unborn child.

"Lori, Lori, Lori. Wait a minute. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come off as some insensitive jerk. I just got excited at the possibilities. I was only thinking of you. You complained so much about your weight and how you felt, I just thought... well, if I could help you. You know, lose the weight a little quicker. Maybe you'd feel better and we could go and do some of those things you

been askin' about \_ go to the beach, see New York, and... well, my mind got to workin' bout how we'd need money to do all those things and... Oh, nevermind. I would never want to hurt you."

Lori had calmed down considerably. "Oh Dex, I'm sorry I yelled at you. I should have known you were only thinking about me." Lori's fantasy about Dex as her knight in shining armor restored, she quickly wanted to make amends with her lover. "Look, I'm not sayin' I'm going for any of this, but if you think it will help, I'll think about it. Besides, this baby could be just a 'girl', and wouldn't that spoil your plans?" Lori wrapped her arms around Dex.

Dex smiled. "Aw, I'd like a girl or a boy. But, you're right; a boy child would set better with the rubes. Anyhow, I know you wouldn't do that to me." Dex's eyes twinkled as he wiggled away from her grasp. He began to head out the door and said, "Look, I'll tell Brother Robert you'll think about it and to start heading for Atlanta. I want my wife and child, whatever it is, to have the best treatment. And Atlanta is where it's at."

Lori giggled as the door closed, picked up her favorite magazine, sure in the knowledge she had the best lover a woman could want. As least as good as these fake ones she read about all the time in these articles.

## CHAPTER 6

It was cold in Atlanta. Fortunately Dex had found a warm hospital bed near the center of the city. Lori didn't quite know why she was here. The baby had progressed nicely and the doctor didn't see any reason to hurry the delivery. He felt it would come soon any way. In God's own time, he had said. She had told Dex she wanted it to come naturally and she wasn't even having cramps yet. But here she was in the hospital; Dex insisting that she have another checkup before the baby came. He had been so good to her the past few months. He never asked her about inducing labor again, took her to the doctor's office himself when she needed it, and sat there with all those women until she got ready to go home. It really hadn't been quite so bad. Well, Christmas would be over tomorrow, and she wouldn't have to worry about his scheme anymore. Boy, my back is beginning to hurt! She thought.

Aunt Jenny put Cindy in the back bedroom that lay close to the house next door. This cut

down on the wind and with the space heaters and blankets on the windows and bed, it had a warm, almost surrealistic atmosphere. Cindy was sweating and beginning to know the pain of childbirth. She knew months ago this child would be born on Christmas. It seemed fitting, and she had tried to prepare herself for it. Aunt Jenny had sent for the doctor, but having delivered plenty of children herself in the neighborhood, only wanted him for "consultin' purposes." You'd have thought this child was gonna be hers, the way she was carrying on, thought Cindy. Well, I guess in a way, it will be.

Thomas was fit to be tied, as proud a future poppa as a man could be. He paced, he sweated, and got in Aunt Jenny's way one too many times. She sent him to the store for groceries that could only be gotten on the other side of the town.

A soothing chorus of some songs seemed to constantly fill her ears, although Jenny swore no records or radios were on. She had told Jesus she was gonna be Thomas' wife when she was done having Jesus' child. This seemed to give her greater comfort, and she was sure Jesus was pleased with her decision. She hoped if she and Thomas had any children it would feel as wonderful as bearing this child had. She had never really talked to Jesus in one on one conversation, but she had always felt they had talked for hours the last few months and she knew well what He wanted and that He knew well what she needed. No words seemed to ever pass her lips, but the feelings were always there. She..Oh, goodness, what is this? She thought in panic.

Cindy screamed. "THAT HURT!" Jenny just smiled and put another cold washcloth on Cindy's head.

Lori screamed in pain. "WHAT WAS THAT!?" she cried. Dex, who had been arguing with her doctor in the hall, came running to Lori's side. "What's up? What's wrong? Is the baby all right? Are you all right?" Dex asked anxiously. A worried look furrowed his eyebrows.

"THAT IS SO PAINFUL!" Cried Lori again as another spasm hit.

The doctor was there as quickly as Dex and checked her vital signs. Looking hard at Dex, he said, "Looks like you may get your wish after all, needing no help from me. Apparently God has decided Lori is going into labor." With that, he left the room and proceeded to the nurse's station.

Dex was bewildered, then ecstatic, then smiling just a big a smile as the Cheshire Cat. "Hear that, baby? You gonna have a honey! No, that ain't right. Honey, your going to have a baby!" Dex looked down at Lori and seemed surprised at the look in her eyes. It seemed they had a lot of terror, anger, and a little bit of happiness. But his concentration on her looks ended quickly when the next spasm hit. Dex had remained too close and Lori was able to get a firm grip on the root of her problem, expressing in a physical way her entire feelings at that moment.

"Man!" Cindy didn't think she could take another one of those pains. Jenny called them "normal" contractions and did her best to make her feel comfortable. She had been layin' there for two hours now and the pains kept coming faster and faster and hurt more and more. She was beginning to wonder, since this was Jesus' child, why He couldn't stop the pain and just let the child pop out. And where is He anyhow? She thought, gasping. This is the son of Jesus. His daddy should be here. If doesn't show up soon, I'm gonna give Him a piece of my mind. Talk to His daddy. I'm sure Grandpa isn't going to take to kindly to Him not being present. Boy, is it warm in

here. Think a lot of different things when you havin' a baby.

"Honey, now you got to try to pace yourself. You got a long way to go yet," Jenny said. "Just cause he's Jesus' child don't make this birth any easier. You gotta remember, baby, this child's gonna live in the world of man and has to come into this world like any other child if he's gonna understand what it means to be a man." After Jenny spoke another stronger and more soothing song seemed to fill Cindy's ears.

"A few more hours! You've got to be kidding." Lori panted at the doctor. These pains seemed unbearable and the doctor wasn't ready to give her any drugs until the birth. Dex had since left the room. The doctor had sent him to the waiting room to nurse his injuries.

"You must remember," the doctor said, "birth takes time. It's not infrequent for labor to last days."

"You mean I'm going through this hell for days?" Lori said through clenched teeth.

"No, not you," the doctor said, quickly avoiding Lori's outstretched hand, remembering Dex's recent injury. "You're just about ready. Give it a few more hours and everything will be over."

Lori looked around. Those lights are sure bright, she thought. I must be sweatin' like a pig. Bet that 'glow' everybody talks about ain't so bright now. Damn this hurts. These bed sheets are warm. Why do hospitals always use white? Why is it so damn sterile in here? God, here comes another one of those pains. Wish I could reach the doctor like I reached Dex, make them understand what real pain is. Hee hee. The contraction hit.

The doctor hadn't arrived yet, and this made Jenny angry. Never did see her get mad, thought Cindy. This is the most irritated I've ever seen her. Cindy was breathing very heavily now and Jenny was trying to get her into some sort of rhythm. Thomas had come back and Jenny had him boiling water on the wood stove. Choppin' wood and boilin' water. That boy had never worked so hard. Wonder what he'd say if he new Aunt Jenny was just tossing the water out back.

The smell in the room was gettin' powerful \_ \_ Cindy sweating, Aunt Jenny sweating, Thomas sweating and keeping the stove hot. It smelled of old blankets, moldy wood, humid afternoons, and burning logs. Cindy felt like throwing up. She was keenly aware of all her senses\_ \_ the feel of the wet sheets on her back, the look of panic in Thomas' eyes, the taste of cool well water on her lips, the sound of the wind outside the house, and most particularly the smells. That and this pain.

It was almost time. Cindy hadn't seen or heard from Jesus since the start of labor, some 10 hours ago. She was beginning to feel quite alone. The music still in her head was pleasing, but she wanted the Father.

Then, through an old door, past the blanket draped across the entrance, He strode quietly in. Cindy knew Him and smiled with as great a joy as she had ever known. Aunt Jenny, in her hurry, didn't look up from her chores, but felt a feeling of calm and joy, and love, and security, as she had never known in her life.

Jenny turned toward the feeling. "Sir?" she said.

The doctor just smiled and, placing a bag next to Cindy's bed, sat beside her on the worn old

blankets. Placing a hand upon her forehead and then moving it gently down to her stomach, Cindy felt the release of all pain and the serenity of complete love. The music filled the air and the smell became that of the most beautiful perfume. It seemed as if room was bathed in the most perfect light and nothing could ever penetrate the complete comfort Cindy felt in His embrace. Cindy was only slightly aware that Aunt Jenny was in the corner, on her knees her face gazing softly at Him. Thomas was beside Jenny, transfixed by the miracle happening before him. And then there was the baby.

She was totally unaware she had even delivered this child, but yet knew it was hers and the pain of childbirth was over. She accepted her child from Him and then He held her in His arms as she held the baby. Looking first into her eyes and then the child's. She knew what he said even though he had not spoken. She nodded assent as if she were having a normal conversation. Then He rose and walked over to Aunt Jenny. Placing His hand upon her face and raising her look to His, He thanked her for all of her help in the same way in which He spoke to Cindy, through a look that said all and expressed more than could be spoken.

Finally, He embraced Thomas. The look of wonderment on Thomas' face probably brought more to the smile on His face than anything He had said to Him. Jesus then took Thomas by the arm to Cindy and the new child. He placed His child in Thomas' arms and placed Thomas next to Cindy. A finer, more perfect marriage could not have been had.

With a last look at all, the doctor then left, leaving behind the light, the chorus, and the glow of His presence.

Dex was beginning to worry. If Lori's labor lasted too much longer, they would miss the all-important deadline of midnight and their child would be born on December 26th instead of Christmas. Dex had tried to get the doctor to speed things along, but he had refused time and again. Only fate had begun Lori's delivery this morning. Dex had brought her in one more time, hoping to get someone to induce labor. He hadn't told Lori. Instead, he had been acting like a concerned father-to-be and she had gone along with everything. Now I really look good in her eyes since she went into labor, while she was in the hospital being checked up, thought Dex. He smiled as he thought about his good fortune. Boy, what that baby will bring in in donations if it is born on Christmas. What is taking so long? And what is that light?"

Dex had begun to notice a bright, almost too-perfect light shining through the hospital windows. As he started to get a better look, a nurse entered.

"Mr. Love? Your wife is being wheeled into the delivery room. It shouldn't be too long now. Do you want to wait next to delivery so that we can find you and tell you whether it's a boy or girl?"

Boy or girl? Geeez, Dex thought. I've worried so much about getting this child delivered on time, I've forgotten that it could be a girl. Well, it seems that God is still with us tonight. Hopefully it will be a boy and we can finish what we started.

"Mr. Love? You coming?" the nurse said as she headed for the door.

"Yeah\_ \_ Yes I'm coming," Dex said as he followed her down the hall.

The shot was wonderful, Lori thought. Let them do anything they want now. I'm beginning

to feel no pain. You know, I bet I do look ridiculous on this bed, in stirrups tied down like this. Oh God, here comes another one! That bastard doctor. Let him try to push, push, tied down here like this.

"DAMN," Lori screamed. "JESUS, this is HARD!"

And with those sentiments on her lips, Lori's baby was born. All wrinkled, all pink and red, with all fingers and toes, and screaming like a banshee.

"A boy?" Dex asked.

"A boy," said the nurse.

Dex leaped as high as he could, shot a fist in the air, and let out a whoop that startled even the nurse.

"Do you want to see your son?" the nurse asked. "What is his name, anyhow?"

"John," Dex said, "In honor of John the Baptist." Dex knew, after all this, that he could get Lori to agree to the name. Hell, hadn't he got a boy child born on Christmas Day? Man, he could do anything.

Dex was looking in on John when he noticed the slight disturbance all around him. The few attendants in the nursery were looking out the window and looking in on Dex's child. Funny, Dex thought, I do seem to have the only child born in this hospital today. That does seem odd for a city of this size.

Then Dex saw it. It was close to midnight, yet the sky outside was as bright as day. That perfect light again, Dex thought. He walked down the hall to a window where he could get a better

look.

It was coming from the sky, bathing an area around the hospital. He could see where the light ended just, about a mile from where he was standing, but the whole hospital itself was bathed in its light. Dex rushed downstairs and outside to get a better look. People were milling about him, trying for themselves to understand this phenomena. Dex realized that the hospital stood just inside a perfect circle of this perfect light and the light seemed to be emanating from a far off star. Dex thought, Now this will definitely be a benefit that I can use for my plans for my child. What a great day. He went in to see his wife, his child, and plan their future.

## CHAPTER 7

"I don't believe we have to do anything." said Dex to Bishop Michael.

"But don't you understand that it would be in the best interest of Christianity if we definitively put an end to this persistent rumor." Said the Bishop.

"I could see where it would be in the best interest of your faith and your church to whitewash this event. But I see no benefit to me or my congregation or for that matter Christianity to end this."

They had been going at this for an hour now. Dex, had been "requested" to appear before a gathering of his peers to discuss the religious implications of his son's birth.

"Brother Dex," said Reverend Martin as the Cardinal started to rise in anger. "Surely, you don't wish us to believe that your son is a miracle from God. A son of His, here again on earth."

"He is no more a miracle than any other child's birth," replied Dex coldly.

"That is not an answer." shot back Bishop Michael. "That will only lead to further speculation. How can you continue in this vein? To imperil the scriptures for your own personal gain. How arrogant."

"Arrogance!" Dex rose at this accusation. "It is a fine perch you sit on and pass judgement. The richest Church in the world calls me for profiting on my Lord's word? Judge yourself, least ye be judged."

"Gentlemen." said Reverend Martin. "Please be calm. Cardinal Michael, I remind you that Mr. Love is here at our request. He did not have to show, nor answer these questions."

"I apologize, Reverend Martin, Mr. Love," said Bishop Michael. "But I do get carried away

when I perceive an attack on the Scriptures."

"As do we all," said Reverend Martin. He waved at Dex to return to his seat and calm down at this last comment. "Mr. Love, you cannot deny the reaction the birth of your child has had in the world. Faith has been rocked in all religions, not just the Catholic Church. Please remember that we asked you to come here so that we may answer our congregations concerns over your son's birth. These 'rumors,' as Cardinal Michael wishes to call them, have your child as the Second Coming. If it is true, we must proclaim it. If it is not true, we must respond accordingly."

"And I repeat, I don't believe I have to do anything. My child's destiny is that of the Lords. I claim no divinity on his part, nor do I discourage any claims of his divinity on the part of others. Who are we and who am I to make a decision as to the divinity of this child at this age. The Lord works in mysterious ways. If my son's birth is the Second Coming it will be revealed soon enough and there is nothing anyone in here can do about it. If it is not the Second Coming, that also will be revealed in time."

"But this is unacceptable." said Bishop Michael.

"To who? You." replied Dex. "God is not on your personal agenda. As I recall He worked well enough before you got here and it appears He will work after you are gone. This is all I have to say gentlemen, my son is not yours for experimentation or dissection. We will do nothing and let God will be carried out in its natural course." Dex rose from the chair and walked out of the room.

Bishop Michael, stood and gathered up his papers, waving off Reverend Martin and the others. Motioning to his aid, he too, walked out of the room.

"There will be trouble over this," Michael said to his aid as they left the room. "My

recommendation to the Pope will be to keep a watchful eye on this Dexter Love and his son. Any hint on their part of divinity and we must be prepared to discredit them with hard evidence. I want full background checks on him and his wife. Get me reports from their doctor and the hospital if you can. Hopefully we will be ready to nip their actions in the bud." Bishop Michael entered his waiting limousine.

"That man, those people." said Dex to Lori. "They have been on me ever since my son's arrival. Disavow this, renounce that. Well how in the hell would I know whether or not John is special to the Lord? He is special to me" Dex stroked John's hand as he lay in his arms.

Lori got Dex another drink from the bar in their hotel room. "Don't worry about them honey," said Lori. "You're doing what's right for our boy."

"And that Bishop," said Dex "Honey, if you hear anything about a Bishop Michael, let me know. He has declared himself, judge, jury, and executioner over anything that is religious. I can't believe that he thought I should just announce to the world that my child was a normal baby with no religious significance, just because Bishop Michael had said so. What arrogance!"

"Now, honey," said Lori. "Just let it go. You back with me and John. There is nothing any mean ol' Bishop can do to you now."

"Just the same, Lori. You keep a watch out for him. He could mean trouble for us."

"I will Dex. I will. Now get some rest, honey, O.K." Lori put a blanket over both her men as they sat in the chair.

## CHAPTER 8

Aunt Jenny wasn't having nothing of it. That grandbaby had been born, and was going to know his family. Stubborn old fool, she thought. Jenny's bus was just about to pull into New York City. Aunt Jenny looked out the window and saw Millie waiting for her inside the terminal.

"Millie!" Jenny said as she debarked. "It's so good to see you."

"Jenny, You look wonderful." said Millie. "Did you bring me pictures of my grandbaby?"

"I shor' did. Where is that stubborn, ol' fool." said Jenny as she pulled out a handful of James' pictures for Millie to see."

"Well, I didn't tell him you were coming." said Millie. She grabbed the pictures and began looking closely at each one.

"Why not, Millie?"

"Well he is really stubborn, Jenny. You know that. And if I told him you were coming, he would have asked why. I would have told him why and then he probably would make sure he wasn't here to see you."

"Oh, he is gonna see me, all right." Said Aunt Jenny.

"Well let's get you home," said Millie. "And tell me all about my grandbaby and Cindy."

They arrived home late Saturday night. Robert Franklin was in the study working on his sermon for tomorrow morning when Jenny barged in.

"Hello, Robert." Said Aunt Jenny.

"Why, hello Jenny," said Robert. "Good to see you. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Got your grandbaby down at my house."

"Are they all right?"

"Fine, except for missing their family."

"Does Cindy still hold to her beliefs?"

"Yes"

"Then, she has no family here." said Robert turning to face Aunt Jenny, head on.

"I will not allow you to deny your own child and her baby, Robert. You cannot defy the Lord, forever."

"I will not listen to this in my home."

"You will listen. You have to listen. This is a great event. I witnessed it myself. Why do you deny it so?"

"She has you believing this tripe also? My Lord, Jenny your a woman of God. How can you? No. I will not discuss this any further."

"You will."

"I won't," said Robert and pushed past Aunt Jenny and headed for the front door.

"You cannot hide from me, Robert. We will discuss this." screamed Aunt Jenny as she followed him out side.

"Jenny! No." Said Millie. She grabbed Jenny and pulled her back inside. "I told you he would try to hide. He won't discuss it. Now come on in, maybe we can figure out a way to solve this problem. Come on, I got coffee on. We'll talk."

"He will hear me out." Said Jenny as he was led back inside. "I didn't come all this way to be shut up."

"I know, Jenny. I know. Lord, you always were heard." Millie looked at Jenny with a twinkle in her eye.

Jenny laughed. "Yeah, guess I have always been heard."

They had discussed for hours and still hadn't come up with a way to have Robert talk to Jenny. They both got ready for Church the following morning and hoped some divine inspiration would show them the way to resolve this problem. They sat down in the front pew as services began. Jenny gave quite a few disapproving stares at Robert, hoping to make him fidget. After the chorus, Robert began to preach.

"Let no false idol come before me," Robert began and looked straight at Jenny. She looked, unflinching, back at Robert.

"These are the commandments of our Lord, God." Robert continued. "And we shall not be saved and be in the blessed Kingdom of our Lord if we forsake these commandments. These are not negotiable terms to be discussed or argued about. These are God's own terms. To accept less is to be damned to Hell."

Jenny could stand no more. Rising from her perch she said, "Do you condemn your own

daughter to Hell? Your own grandchild?"

"Be still woman." Robert replied. "This is a house of God."

"Don't you shush me, Reverend. You chose this battleground, now don't try to stand behind the pulpit to avoid the fight."

"I don't stand behind this pulpit in fear. But I do demand you respect God's home."

The congregation was speechless at this outburst. You could hear nothing, but the verbal exchange between Jenny and Robert.

"God's home is exactly where we should discuss this," replied Jenny.

"I will not hear of this blasphemy in the house of the Lord," said Robert.

"Where then, when will you discuss your child and her baby."

"Where ever and whenever she repents this horrible, horrible sin and accepts her act of depravity."

"To do that would be to deny the very God you are defending."

"I will not discuss this. Jenny, I must ask you to leave these services until you interrupt no further."

"No, you won't Robert. I won't stay in a house of God lead by you. I'll not only leave these services I'm leaving your church." With that Aunt Jenny turned on her heel and headed out the door.

## 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's 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 anymore ruckus." Jenny said as she

came in from the dinning 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 as 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.

## CHAPTER 10

Finishing school was not a requirement for James. He had known early on that his was not to be the normal path taken by others. He had spoken briefly with his Father about this matter and knew for certain that although he was not to be a prophet for his God as His Father had been for His, he was not to be a common laborer either. He knew that his Father and God truly loved the world, and that his mission was to experience all that man and this world had to offer, to at times solace those around him and serve his Father, but mostly just to enjoy the existence of being in this place. It was not a heavy burden, but his God and his Father so loved the world they wished to share its pleasures with a son of their own.

To this end, when James started his journey after the first of the year, he had headed north for New York. Not having witnessed vast amounts of snow or rural people first-hand, he spent most of his days hitchhiking or walking. Through talking, seeing and experiencing his surroundings and the people, James was beginning to understand his Father's love for this world. James spent many hours in conversation with his Father and His God. Quiet times on the side of the road or in a park were often spent in discussions with one or the other or both of His Fathers.

It had become obvious through the conversations and his experiences on the road that his life

was not to become one long backpack trip into the most pleasant of circumstances. His Father was convinced that the true beauty of human beings and their surroundings could only be experienced by examining both sides of life. As surely as there was good, there had to be evil. Not even God had been able to produce an object with only one side. His Father and God felt that their son must be able to see the exquisite purity and beauty in the simplest of acts, in the greatest and smallest times of adversity. James had to experience these adversities and their acts of good and evil, as well as those things which were still pristine and pure in their beauty. For these reasons, both Fathers retreated to allow James these experiences as he reached New York.

Cardinal Michael had heard that John was off on missionary work, but did not believe it. For years he had heard about this young man. He was in the conference called to discuss this child when the roar from their parishioners had become so loud that the church could not ignore the fact that his birth was the only one to occur in this circle of light, on Christmas, the only birth recorded to have occurred in the whole world during this time period. Sure, others had been born on this day, but there were no recorded births in the world except John's for a four-hour time. There was also seemingly no other light to shine anywhere but on that birth. His parishioners were sure it was a Second Coming or a sign from God. After extensive ecumenical work and scientific evaluation over two months, the council concluded that other than the miracle of birth, there was nothing special about this child.

Yet the findings didn't totally end the reaction. Some still claimed his presence was a sign

from God, and pledged their loyalty and fortunes to this young man.

"Loyalty and fortunes, huh?" Michael scoffed to himself. "The only loyalty and fortunes went to his old man, Dexter Love, and his dippy wife. God created one miracle and gave us His son to save our souls. Why do they have to believe that He needs to come and see us again or send someone else to do it? It upsets the balance of the way things should be. The people should leave the interpretation of miracles to those of us who have been taught properly and accept our declarations. Why do they question us? It just seems such a waste of time to constantly deal with these side issues. Still, his emergence has increased attendance at church and increased the funding. We will just have to keep him under control."

Cold and gray, \_ \_ that was how James first saw New York City. It was one of those days where the air was chilled by the wetness in the air more than the wind from the north, and the clouds covered up any hope of warmth from the sun. Despair hung in the air, but James was enamoured with it all. He had seen Atlanta and other cities on His quest up north, but there was no place like New York, and this is where his grandfather and grandmother had lived \_ \_ the family his mom and Dad did not speak of for fear of hurting his feelings. But, yet how could anyone truly grow unless he knew his roots. He had to see his family. He had to try to reconcile the great gap between his mother and his grandparents. He had spoken often of this with his Father, but his Father always listened in silence. James knew about free will and faith, was taught well by his Father and his dad, but just did not understand why Jesus could not force the reconciliation upon his family. He hoped to learn why and to complete the task that eluded his Father.

The neighborhood where Cindy Franklin grew up as a child was just as desolated and poor as when Jame's mother described it. But, in his eyes, it had all the wonder of a forgotten world \_ \_ new avenues to explore, people to know and understand. The poor sign in front of an old building, now vacant, said "New Life Freedom Church." The windows were cracked and broken, and the door was chained shut with a heavy lock. Scraping off the snow on the sill and rubbing the dirt off of one of the panes allowed James to peer into the old sanctuary of that forgotten altar to God. It appeared much smaller to him than in the many tales his mother had told. He looked off to the side and saw a door leading to another room. Perhaps, he thought, that could be the room mom first saw my father. He decided to go around to the side and see if he could get in.

The alley where the door to the side room exited was far worse than the street, a feat James thought impossible. Litter crawled up the walls and what wasn't litter crawled also. After kicking a number of bottles and bags away from the door, James was able to fall into the side entrance to the building. Inside the reek of animal and human debris caused him to hold his breath and gulp for fresh air. But, in that pile of garbage rose a menacing figure of dirt and filth the likes of which James had never seen. It seemed to speak and advance, waving a bar of some sort. Jame's startled look was the only thing that seemed to keep this creature from striking.

Suddenly, James regained His senses and understood what the figure was saying. "Wha' you wan' boy!" the creature shouted. James' lack of response moved the creature forward into the light from the door and he was able to make out that this fearsome creature was just a scared, frightened old man.

James regained his composure just enough to warble out, "Nothing, I want nothing from

you."

"Then what you doing here, boy?" shouted the threatening figure.

"Lookin," said James.

"For what?" cried the man, now close enough for James to smell the filth and whiskey on him.

"For a past," James said calmly and looked the man right in the eyes. Suddenly, the man dropped his raised hand.

"You the boy?" The man asked, his eyes peering violently into James.' His gaze followed all the contours and folds of James body and clothing.

"What boy?" Asked James.

"The one they said was His. The one it's said was made right here in this room. You Him? You the Boy?" The man asked, almost pleading.

"My mother did conceive me in a place such as this. But, why do you ask?"

The man pulled James into the light and looked deeply at him. Suddenly, the man smiled. The anger, the frustration, the despair melted with that smile and the man began to cry quietly. James reached to support him, but the man stood tall once again and waved James off.

"No, boy, no. I won't be needin' any more help standin'. I been asked to give you a message. If you should come, I'm to tell you that the family you seek has moved ten blocks North and one block over. The Church's name is the same and your grandmother waits for you."

"You been waitin' for me?" asked James incredulously.

"Dear Lord," quietly cried the man, "We all have." With that, he walked past James into the

alley and left.

James stared after him, unable to move at the suddenness of the confrontation and the news that accompanied it. He looked one last long look around the dingy, rat infested, filthy room, then turned and left to begin his hike ten blocks North and one block over.

John had an expense account, connections, and cash. Although he was experiencing the world by himself first-hand, his mother and father had insisted that there was no reason why he had to suffer through any hardships on his trip of self-awareness. Although John knew in his heart that his mother truly loved him, he was sure a shopping trip in New York City was the main reason she wished to accompany him on the first leg of his "missionary" work. Such a dependence on material things was one of the many reasons John wished to take a year off from the work of the Church.

John had always known the circumstances of his birth. His father and mother had never lied to him about his natural conception. He, as his parents, never committed the sin of claiming to be God's child, but had let the people come to their own conclusions. Funny, he thought, but the more we protested against divinity, the more we were christened with it.

John also knew there was someone else out there with which he had a connection. Always in the back of his head, in his heart, he knew. He had asked his dad, then his mom, who his "friend" was. His parents would look puzzled, replying, "why, everybody," and then just laugh a little nervously. So John just quit asking, but he always knew there was someone out there he had an allegiance to, but he never knew whom. That was part of this little trip; maybe he would find this person. This person and many other things, John thought with a smile as he looked down from his

first-class cabin window on the big city of New York.

"You know, being famous and rich has its advantages," John chuckled as the young flight attendant checked on him again with that little cute smile of hers.

The limousine from the hotel was John's first clue that he was going to have a hard time finding himself. He had looked forward to renting a car, driving in traffic, even getting his own bags. But even before he had written down the address of his hotel to the cute attendant, the chauffeur from the hotel had gathered his luggage, brought the car around, and met him at the gate to shoo away the "groupies."

John recognized the desire to please him and do his job, so he made no fuss as he got in for the ride to the hotel. But, after arriving and checking in, John noticed that a car rental booth was in a corner office next to the hotel. He resolved to complete his car rental that evening and went to his room, hoping that at least the attendant might take him up on his offer of dinner. However, before he even took off his coat, the phone was ringing. He answered to find another minister on the other end wanting to know if he would like to join his church for dinner that evening.

"No, thank you," John replied. "I just got in and have yet to unpack. If you could call me tomorrow maybe then. Thank you for the offer, but I have to go. Thanks again, goodbye." John quickly hung up, and then took the phone off the hook.

"Man, this is going to be a lot more difficult than I thought," said John. He stood up from the bed, grabbed a duffel bag full of clothes, and headed out the door of his room to the elevator. Pulling a baseball cap close to his head, John took the elevator to the first floor and snuck across the

lobby to the car rental office. There, with the keys to a Buick and a dash out the side door, he began his quest to find "something."

The church was bigger, and it was a church \_ \_ no storefront sanctuary for a few good-hearted people. James' grandfather was now the pastor of a full-fledged, bell-tolling, bank-mortgaged, pew-standing, stained-glass church. A modest size, but James could tell by the chorus of parishioners inside that it was well attended. What day is it, anyhow? James thought. Better yet, what time is it?

James walked toward the front doors of the church. Suddenly, he froze. What am I gonna say? He thought. Hello, grandpa, I'm your forgotten grandson. Or better yet \_ \_ hello, this is your bastard grandson. He took a few more steps, grabbed the door handles, pulled, and walked inside.

It was warm inside, blessedly warm, not just from the heat of the furnace, but from the joy of standing in a sanctuary of God. James never could get over the warmth he felt being in a house of His Father and Grandfather. There was another set of doors leading to the main sanctuary, set open. The doorway made it easy to see the robe-draped man preaching at the front of the church. My Lord, thought James, this is a powerful speaker. Standing at the doorway, James became mesmerized by the powerful, simple statements of faith so forcefully and eloquently stated before the congregation. Quite a few "amens" and "Hallelujahs" emanated from the audience. Then the chorus began, beautiful, sweet, and powerful.

The robe-draped man was beckoning for James to come forward and have a seat at the front of the church. James looked closely. Could it be his grandfather? He had graying hair and wrinkles

around his eyes and face. He smiled as if he had the answer to all happiness and only wished to bless James with this knowledge. He was not quite six feet tall, but stood ramrod straight, giving the impression that he was much taller than all those around him.

James made his way to the front pew, never taking his eyes off the man, sitting down where he pointed and listening only to the thoughts within his own head. The chorus was reaching a crescendo of faith. James had only been slightly aware of the older black lady dressed in yellow that he had joined in the pew. But a touch on the arm made him turn and look into the eyes of the woman with which he had been seated. Then it seemed that the music, the preaching, the congregation, all froze and passed out of the realm of his consciousness. The old, gray-green eyes of that woman were crying and smiling all at the same time. Her wrinkles joined in a smile as big as any he had ever witnessed in Aunt Jenny's face, and she put a finger to her lips and bid him keep quiet. She continued to hold him tight and he continued to stare at her. He could begin to hear the music and the congregation and James knew he had found his grandmother.

As the congregation filed out of the church, James' grandmother continued her hold on him. As they filed past the man who had been preaching, she said, "Robert, this young'uns goin' home to supper with us. He got no place to stay and nothin to eat and it's God's will we provide for those less fortunate."

Robert looked quizzically at James, then smiled at His grandmother. "I am not goin' to stand in your way wife. I've seen that look before an there ain't no use trying to dissuade you." Turning to James, he said, "You're welcome in my home for supper. Please take my wife on ahead and I'll be

with both of you shortly."

James, surprised at the turn of events, mumbled his thanks and was led away by his grandmother.

"Chile, it is so good to see you," his grandmother said.

"How'd you know who I am?" asked James.

"Because your grandfather may rule the roost, but I rule the house. Here, let me show you."

As they turned the corner, his grandmother reached in her purse and pulled out a wallet stuffed full of pictures. And there his family was \_ \_ Russ, Judy, and James. "I been gettin' pictures of the family for years. Aunt Jenny been keepin' me up to date on all your affairs. Lord, I miss bein' with my babies." With that, she started crying.

"But why don't you come to see us? Why don't you call my mama? Why haven't you been there, gramma, why?" pleaded James.

"Oh, darlin,' don't you know how I wanted to hear you call me granma? And don't you know how I wanted to be with all of my young uns', babies as well as my own daughter."

James and his grandma stumbled on together toward a brick row house with a sturdy front porch. "Chile, don't ever think I don't love you. But, I chose your grandfather long before we even thought of your momma. He's a good man, but when his own daughter, the apple of his eye, turned up pregnant, well..."

"It hurt him deep inside, it hurt his pride. I called Aunt Jenny. I knew she'd take care of your momma and I figured in a few years we could all get together again. But, Lord, when Cindy claimed you was the child of Jesus himself, and denied having had relations with your daddy, your

grandfather disowned her. He not only felt she was denying her own sins, but committing blasphemy and diminishin' his faith and work." Granma sighed.

"Come on in the house and don't tell granpa who you are," she went on. "He still hasn't forgiven Cindy and thinks you a bastard child. We'll eat, spend some time together, and when he's gone to bed we'll catch up on family. Jus' do as I say for now \_\_\_, here he comes. We'll talk later." Grandma smiled.

James looked bewildered as grandpa came up the steps. What once was a certainty in his life became instant confusion. His grandmother had known all about him, kept in touch with them through his Aunt Jenny, and he knew nothing about it. Even his Father had not divulged this secret. What does it mean he wondered.

"Ya look confused, boy," said his grandfather as he came up the steps. "Well, don't be. It's the Christian way to offer hospitality to those of us less fortunate. Come on in. Let us feed you and offer comfort. Besides, it would be a sin against God himself to deny anyone the chance to taste my Millie's cookin'."

James entered the doors ahead of his grandfather and looked around. He was in a small entranceway. A worn but decent throw rug was in the center of the floor. The house was heated well, but the walls and floors fairly reeked with the love a community had given to one of its own. Pictures, plaques, and knickknacks cluttered the area. The door to the right was made into a sitting room, covered with thick carpet and even thicker drapes. A fire roared in a fireplace set against the wall. A big cozy couch set directly in front of it. The sides and back were set high and covered with some kind of cloth that captured the heat and made a soul feel as safe and comfortable as a babe in

its mothers arms. Where does the light come from? James wondered. "Maybe set off by the mirrors," James said aloud.

"Did you say something, son?" asked grandpa.

"I was thinking how the mirrors seemed to reflect the light. What a fine home you have, sir."

"Thanks. We like it fine, and it is nice of you to say so. By the way, what is your name? Millie didn't seem to pass it on at the Church."

"It's James, Robert, and if you would pay attention you'd know these things," grandma said, bustling in. "I did tell you at the church, but you was so busy with the deacons you didn't hear me again. Now come help me set the table. James, you wash up in that bathroom off the side."

The smell from the kitchen immediately reminded James of his Aunt Jenny's cooking. It must definitely run in the family, smiled James as he hurried to clean up. It had been awhile since he had had that kind of home cooking.

It was as if he had jumped into a pool of memories. The yams, potatoes, chicken and that pie were reminiscent of home. Grandpa, Robert, had allowed him to say grace, and grandma Millie doted on him, making sure he had enough food, claiming he was wastin' away by walkin' down the road.

Millie kept the conversation light and James was pleased to give her the deception. Her recent revelations had totally destroyed any resolve he had practiced while on the road. The few minutes spent around the table allowed James to regroup and rethink his approach to the whole situation with his grandparents. He had changed from seeking a relationship with his family and

establishing some roots to possibly reconciling the father with his mother. Yet the recent conversation on the front stoop with his grandmother suggested that that subject may still be taboo in this house. How could old disagreements continue so long? Thought James. And how could a man so devoted to His Father reject so completely his Son?"

As Millie had predicted, Robert excused himself shortly after dinner to take his Sunday afternoon nap. James offered to help with the dishes as Robert went upstairs. "Grandma, why don't you and Grandpa see Dad and Mom? What's really up? I know Mom really misses the both of you so much."

"Oh chile, we miss her so much too," said granma.

"Then go see her granma and call, or write a letter. What's the problem?"

"It seems so simple to you, James. But if it were just a few bad words or an argument, we probably would have resolved our differences long ago. But it involves more. It involves who we are and what defines us. In essence, it is our souls we are defending."

"I can't believe that my birth could possibly be a definition of someone's soul," James said quietly.

"Oh chile not you. Not even your birth, honey. It was your mother's reluctance to accept her responsibility for your birth. Oh, we were hurt deeply that she had become pregnant and not been married, but even that wound would have healed. But her insistence that you were the Son of Christ, not just another child but the actual Son, to claim divine intervention, even an immaculate conception, to hide her shame \_ \_ that was a wrong we could not forgive. We even asked her to recant. We explained our views about her statement, but she never retreated. Her father prayed for

and with her, explained again and again how she was committing a sin. He explained how it was hurtin' him, me and his church. Your momma just wouldn't accept her responsibility, so your grandfather sent her away. To accept her would have been to accept such a belief. To accept such a claim would have destroyed your grandfather and my beliefs, the essence with which we had defined our lives." Grandma was crying slightly.

"So I called Aunt Jenny and sent her down south. We thought that with less pressure and some help from others, she would see her errors, accept her responsibility and come home to us. Then, instead of Cindy, Aunt Jenny came North. We couldn't believe your mother had convinced her of the divinity of your birth. Your grandfather denounced anyone who would blaspheme the Lord in Church that Sunday. But your Aunt Jenny stood up and called him on it right there in church. Lord, it is still talked about today. They had words and Jenny walked out. Never did come back to the house. I had to send her clothes back by parcel post. Your grandfather and I decided right there never to contact the family again until such time as Cindy regained her senses. We prayed every day for the Lord's intervention and a sign that she had returned to the fold. And I suspect," added Millie, crying softly, "you're that sign."

"Let me understand," said James sitting down next to Millie at the kitchen table. "You think that my coming to the church to seek you and grandpa out is a sign that my mom has accepted the fact that Jesus is not my father?"

"Yes, chile. Why else would you be here? And as soon as he gets up I'm goin' to tell your granpa, then we'll go down to Georgia and see all my babies. Take you with us, too. You gotta be wantin' to see your moma."

"Oh Grandma, I am so sorry." James said quietly. "I may be a sign, but if you want to go see Momma, you will have to go knowin' she hasn't changed her mind one bit. And I wouldn't disavow my Father for the sake of your beliefs or any others. You will have to accept me and your daughter for who we are. I'm not here to reconcile you and my family, and I'm not here to change any beliefs. I am here to see my family, to let them know they are loved and missed, and to let them know the only ones suffering are themselves by denying the company and comfort of their family. For one of the most wonderful gifts God has granted us is family."

Grandma's tears came a steady stream now. "You gotta be my sign. I waited so long an I cain't wait any longer. I want to see my daughter, my grandbabies, but I cain't leave my husband. Cain't leave my life. Oh James, you cain't believe your Jesus' Son. What shame, what life will you live? How will I ever be able to see my family?"

"Why do you deny that I am Jesus' Son? Why?" desperately asked James.

"It just cain't be, chile, cain't be. It wasn't prophesied, wasn't planned. God didn't let us prepare, let us know. What could this mean if you were? Is it the end of the world? Are we all heading for hell? What would it mean?" Grandma was fairly shaking now.

"Why does it have to mean anything, grandma?" asked James quietly. "Is every birth prophesied? Is every birth a symbol or sign? Can't a birth merely be the act of love between two people? Couldn't Jesus have had a child because he just so loved the world?"

"But, Cindy?" Grandma was quieter now, dabbing a hankie at her cheeks. "Cindy wasn't good enough to be the bride of Christ. She wasn't trained. Wasn't prepared."

"Wasn't good enough?" James spoke forcefully, in hushed tones so as not to wake his

grandfather. "She was prepared enough and good enough to be cast out by her own family, yet hold onto her beliefs in the face of all her detractors. Why will you only believe the good in others, the quality of others, but not the quality of your own family? Do you spend so much time with the people in your own family that you're only able to see the warts in those closest to you? You and Grandpa raised a good child \_\_\_, out of all the billions in the world, Jesus chose her to have His Son. Instead of being proud, you worried about your own position, own wealth, own beliefs. I am the Son of Cindy and Jesus Christ. You will have to live and deal with that and reconcile yourself. If you wish to see your family and resolve your differences, go south. They will greet you with open arms. It is only your own prison that keeps you here, and you have the key to the gates that will set you free."

"I.. I don't know if I can," weeped Grandma.

"Can what?" said Grandpa, opening the kitchen door. "Millie, why are you crying?"

James stood up, turned and faced his grandfather. "She doesn't know if she can accept the fact that I am the grandson you and her abandoned so many years ago," said James.

Millie stood up between the two, trying desperately to shush James. "Robert, this is your grandson James," she said "Cindy's first child. I've known all afternoon."

Robert stood motionless, then reached out his arm as if to shake James hand. Startling both James and Millie, Robert grabbed him in a large bearhug, tears streaming down his face. "James, is it James? Oh, thank the Lord I was able to see you before I died. Your momma is she O.K? You will stay, won't you? What about your family? Are they all right?"

James was overwhelmed by the sudden change in the emotional atmosphere and short of

breath by the hug given by his grandfather. "Grandpa, ya gotta let go."

Grandpa released his bearhug, but held on tightly to James' shoulders. "Tell me everything," he said, sitting down at the table. "Millie, please get us something to drink."

"Well everyone's all right. Russ and Judy are in school, last I heard. And \_ \_"

"Hear that Millie? There's two more grandkids. We got three grandbabies." Grandpa was beaming. Millie forced a smile and looked pleadingly with James over Robert's head.

"Yes, Robert, I was told earlier," said grandma.

"Three grandkids \_ \_, can you imagine?" grandpa smiled.

"You think Cindy will let us see her and the rest of them babies, James?" asked grandpa.

"I don't see why not," James said.

"Well, son, you know we had a fallin' out."

"From what I heard, momma thought you didn't want to see her."

"Never. Never said I didn't want to see her. I said I couldn't see her if it would condone the actions she had taken. I suppose considering your here and she's doin' fine, she must've finally accepted the responsibility of her actions. Otherwise, her claims would have led to her destruction." He turned to Millie. "Told you that trip would straighten her out Millie."

"Grandpa, the trip didn't straighten momma out. She's known who she is for a long time," replied James. "It appears to me you and Grandma are the ones who are lost."

"What you sayin', son? You can't believe that tripe your momma has been claimin' all these years. You would have to know it's not possible. I mean can you make miracles? Walk on the water? Change water to wine? Do you have some divine aura that gives you special insight?"

James shook his head.

"Well, you admit yourself you're not special. Now let's get on with this visit and forget this fantasy of your mothers." Grandpa smiled again.

"No, grandpa. Just because I am not blessed with miraculous powers does not mean I am not the Son of Jesus Christ. Where is it written that a Son of Jesus has to heal the sick and call the faithful to worship? Jesus does not put his plans or his Son forward for the approval of man, nor does he feel obligated to reveal himself to his children."

"Don't argue Scripture with me, child," grandpa said sternly. "I was studying scripture before you were born."

"Who is arguing Scripture? We are arguing what is. None of this is written, none of this is foreseen. This is what Jesus wants, and he does not ask your approval or judgement," stated James.

"Well, I can see this is going nowhere." said grandpa, standing up from the table slowly, his hands trembling. "Your mother has raised you as she wished and it will cause you no end of grief and heartache. I tell you now, grandson, if you proceed with this vile notion, others less generous than I will see to your destruction. I myself cannot be a part of this blaspheme. I ask you as I did your mother to recant your statement and come back to the loving arms of Jesus."

James sighed, a tear falling from his face. "You will not understand that to do as you ask is to deny the God that you embrace."

"If you will not recant, you must leave. I will not have you in my house, shaming me in front of the Lord!" Grandfather's voice rose with each syllable.

"Then I leave. Grandfather, I love you. Goodbye." Turning to Millie, James said tearfully.

"Grandmother, you hold the key to your freedom. Use it if you can. I love you. Goodbye." With those words, James walked to the front door, turned to look at his angry and proud grandfather, his crying grandmother, opened the door, walked out and never looked back.

The ride out of New York took much longer than John thought. Man, is this city big, he thought as he asked another stranger for directions to the quickest highway out of town. He felt he had been running around in circles for hours.

Finally, he reached a highway and headed west. He had no idea where he was going, but he just had to have some time for himself. After putting about forty miles between himself and the city, John spied a motel sign at the next exit, pulled off and went in to see about a room.

"You have a room available?" John asked the female receptionist in a sweet, good-natured tone.

Looking up, the woman smiled and replied, "Yes, sir. We have a couple of singles left. The cost will be \$65.00 a night. May I register you?"

"Sure, sounds good to me. What do you need?"

"Well, I need your driver's license and a credit card and to fill out this form." The lady pushed a small, postcard-like paper to him.

John retrieved his wallet and produced his identification, then proceeded to fill out the form.

"You know you're missing?" asked the receptionist.

"What?" said John.

She pointed to the television in the lounge.

There on the screen, John's image was projected with the word "missing" and his name juxtaposed under his face. The commentator was finishing a report that the police in a nine county area were on the lookout for him and there was suspicion that he may have been kidnapped.

"Lord, if this is what happens when I take off for a drive, what kind of reaction will I get when I order a pizza?" John thought out loud.

"Well, ya better call somebody if ya don't want everybody worried about you." The receptionist giggled. "An I don't wanna be around when you order that pizza. Couldn't stand the religious significance of that. Make going to Pizza Hut a trip to Church."

John started to laugh. "I wouldn't know if that would help their sales or force them to shut down. You equate church to some things and lots of people will avoid it like the plague."

The receptionist laughed. "Yeah, but we could make those that order anchovies do it in the confessional and take penance for that sin."

John laughed again, then smiled. "Well, nice thought, but it doesn't answer my question about how I'm going to let them know I'm OK without letting them know where I'm at. And I better let them know soon before somebody gets in trouble, including me."

"Just call from that pay phone over there. If they do track it, they'll ask me if you were here and I'll say no." The receptionist smiled.

"Ah, but what if they check the registry and my credit card?" asked John.

"Well, the registry don't show John Love booked, Mr. Waters, and you just happen to be paying in cash." the receptionist smiled again as she started to burn John's earlier documents in a convenient ashtray.

"It appears everything has been worked out for me. So what do I owe for this inspired act of deceit, Miss?" John grinned.

"Maggie, just Maggie. And the price of this fortunate act of deception is an autograph, pizza and a blessing." She smiled coyly.

"Ah, the autograph is no problem, and the pizza is acceptable if you do the ordering. No anchovies. But the blessing, you know, does not carry the word of God. Just my best wishes." John smiled as he headed toward the phone.

"Well maybe we aren't talking about the same kind of blessing," said Maggie. "Tell you what, make your call, take this key, and I'll see you in your room with pizza after I get off in an hour."

"Done." said John as he picked up the phone and took the key offered from Maggie. John dialed the phone, quickly reached his father, and tried once again to explain that he wished to see the world.

Maggie was as good as her word. One hour later there was a key in the lock and there was Maggie, large pizza in one hand and cold beer in the other.

"You always keep a key to your guests suites?" asked John, rising to give Maggie a hand.

"Only the cute ones. Don't forget to fork over the cash for this pizza preacher boy or I turn you into the Feds." Maggie laughed.

"Mr. Waters has never in my experience welshed on a deal with a lady." John handed her more than enough to cover the cost.

"Thanks. And now shall we partake of our sustenance?"

"Please, lets do." said John, seating the pizza on the floor and crowding around it with Maggie. John stopped briefly before eating to whisper a blessing.

"Wow," said Maggie, "you are a preacher boy. Never did see anyone bless a pizza before. 'Course, considering this is one of our local boys specialties, it probably needed it."

"Well, I do believe in Jesus and His Father, and it don't take nothin' to say thanks," replied John, grabbing a piece of pizza.

Between bites Maggie asked, "Then what are you doing out here? You seem to have your head on straight, God on your side and serenity in your voice. At least it appeared that way when you said the blessing."

"Searching," said John, reaching for another bite.

"Lord, you aren't one of them people trying to 'find' themselves, are you? Seems every other boy or girl I see in here needs to find themselves. As if anybody would take the time to hide their 'self' from them."

"Well, yes and probably no," said John.

"Strange answer," said Maggie. "Sounds like a story."

"I've never told it even to myself, so I'm not sure how it goes."

"Well, we got half a pizza, four more cold beers, at least six hours before I'm due anywhere. Besides, you still owe me an autograph and a blessing, so you best be talking 'cause I ain't going nowhere till I hear what's troublin' our number one preacher boy."

"Okay, you win. I'll talk, but when it gets boring, make me stop. I can't stand to be boring

and I can't stand to hear boring people." John winked.

"So far you are boring, but go on anyhow, maybe it gets better," she teased.

"Well, most people know the circumstances of my birth." John said. Maggie nodded assent.

"Well, what they don't know is all my life I have felt a connection to something...no, no, someone. As if we are meant to be together. I need to find that someone to complete whatever task that is. It feels as if there is a big hole inside me that can't be filled unless I find that person and complete that task. So, in essence, I'm trying to find myself by finding someone else."

"You mean that once in a lifetime permanent companion?" Maggie purred.

"No, not a wife or kids." John smiled back. "But someone who will piece together my life."

"Well, it all seems interesting, but how you gonna do it? I mean with your connections, seems you could spread the word from the pulpit and your companion would come running to you."

"No, I don't think so. You would have to understand my lifestyle to realize the number of 'individuals' that would easily volunteer to be my companion. No, I have to find him myself, untainted with the trappings of my life. I just seem to feel this is the right way to approach him...or her."

"So how you gonna look for him or her and how long you got to tramp around the world to find this soulmate?" Maggie said playfully.

"Well, I got a year before I go back. I guess I'll just throw the dice and see where they land, if nothing else, maybe I'll see a lot of country and meet a lot of nice people like you."

"Honey, you don't know how nice I can be." Maggie giggled, leaning forward to John and planting a long sensual kiss.

"Wow" said John as he fell back against the bed.

"Now, honey, bout that blessing you owe me." said Maggie as she slid off John's shirt.

"This isn't the position I usually give blessings," said John.

"Didn't say you was giving the blessing." murmured Maggie as she kissed him again.

John woke up on the floor next to the pizza a pillow at his head and a blanket partially covering his body. The smell of stale beer permeated the room. John looked around, but Maggie had obviously left earlier. Sunlight through the window indicated it was probably midmorning. John rose from the floor went to the restroom to clean up and recap what had happened.

Maggie and he had finished their intimate relationship, and then continued talking into the wee hours. He laughed as he remembered that she wanted his autograph on her bra. Luckily, he had resisted and signed an extra T-shirt instead. She had helped him to decide on a path for his year of discovery and he was anxious to get a start. It was hard for him to understand some of the things she had brought up, like how his life was an inspiration to millions in need of hope. He had always known he was an attraction, but a celebrity and an inspiration? Hell, he was lucky just to be able to learn how to drive a car. He thought it was funny people thought of him that way. Maggie had laughed when he protested that he was by far the last to be a worldwide inspiration.

But maybe his parents did keep him too protected. He knew that he had rarely ever seen TV footage of his appearances. His father had meticulously scripted any contact he had with the public. Even his friends were the children of his father and mother. The private schools and tutors kept him isolated also. He laughed at himself. He had never before analyzed himself like this; it was starting

to become obvious that he had a lot of learning to do.

"Well, she was right." John said to himself. "I've got a lot to do and learn and I better get started." He entered the shower and started humming to himself as he cleaned up.

John left his room about an hour after showering and headed for his car. He decided to head west, driving some of the time, flying some of the time, and walking some of the time. He was going to take Maggie's advice too. He was going to see some of the churches large and small along the way, as well as the scenery. He planned to spend about three months in the U.S., then travel overseas and do the same thing. Maybe he would get a feel for whom he was and what he was to do. Maybe he'd also find that someone in the process. Anyhow, if later encounters with the people were as great as the first encounter, this was going to be a great trip.

John threw his duffel bag in the car then headed for the front office. He walked up to the counter to check out and asked the attendant if Maggie was around.

"No." the attendant replied, "She won't be back until the night shift. Would you like to leave a message?"

John slid an envelope with her name written on it across the counter. "I already have the message. Would you see she gets it?" John asked.

"Sure will." The attendant said and looked up to take the envelope. "Man you look awful familiar. Do I know you?"

"Probably not." John smiled. "It's the first time I've been in this town. Thanks for your help." He turned and walked out the door.

Getting in his car, John started it up, took a deep breath and shifted into gear. Heading for

the highway, John took the first exit that said west.

James had headed toward the harbor. Not knowing what to do and receiving no direction from his Father, James had walked and found himself on a pier. What to do now? He thought. The last few months he had had a purpose, but now that he had met his grandparents and apparently made things worse, he was truly free and the whole world lay ahead of him.

"Now what?" he said to himself.

There was no litany of priests to guide and provide for him. He was a man, a single entity in the vastness of the world and universe. James sought the solitude at the end of the pier and talked to his Father.

James didn't think it much of a productive talk. His Father wanted him to experience man and the world, but what to do and how to do it was left totally up to him. James couldn't exist without eating, he knew that much, so a job was in order. But what kind? He wondered. When you have the whole world at your feet what do you do where do you go? Worse, how do you do all this and experience man and the world? Just then, a ship's horn blew.

"God will provide," James said as he headed for the ship.

"It was a bloody coronation," thought Cardinal Michael. He had been watching reports of John Love's travels across the world, probably more closely than most. His belief that it was probably just a chance for John Love to sow some wild oats may or may not have been correct. Whatever, the original intent John had just blew the religious and secular community out of the

water. Never knowing where or when he would show up, indeed admitting he had neither itinerary nor agenda, but leaving his travels to the will of God, had been a streak of genius. This week in a Midwestern church, the next day at the slums of Chicago, one day in the Cathedral, the next week heading for the Orient, he was everywhere, taking the whole world with him. It was as if he was introducing all the neighbors down the street to one another.

His presence had made politicians commit to human rights projects they had rejected for years. Even the hint of his appearance created immediate responses to the human condition. His popularity was at an all-time high and the press was in perpetual hunt of his next appearance. His ability to disappear and reappear at will, no doubt with the help of the believers, had the press in a quandary and the public laughing at their ineptitude. It had added to his mystic and made many more believers.

Cardinal Michael just didn't know how to deal with it. John had never claimed divine intervention, never professed the ability to perform miracles, and never, ever claimed this trip was more than missionary work. But the parishioners were asking questions almost daily about what the Church's stance was on this supposed "miracle man." The Cardinal was getting very short in his answers to the parish and in conversations with other priests. The Church would only acknowledge his good deeds and welcome any help from a fellow man of God. They by no means would even hint at divinity especially if John himself professed no special anointment.

"But, heavens, I will be glad when this tour is over and we can get back to the Scriptures," sighed Cardinal Michael.

## **CHAPTER 11**

It was quite a trip, John thought. I would have never believed that when I returned to

Atlanta, I would be changed and so would the world. I new I wanted to be a preacher and do good works for everyone, but as Dad showed me when I arrived back, the Church was no longer ministering to the regional audience but had truly become worldwide. At the sanctuary, television cameras broadcasting to all the corners of the globe were positioned everywhere. Interpreters were hired to translate Sunday sermons. They had to buy a building just to handle the amount of donations in all forms of currency. There was even said to have been a goat or two sent from Third World countries. John smiled as he gazed upon a faded old T-shirt hung up in his private den behind glass and a frame.

Twelve years ago next week, he had headed into his father's office to ask to go on a trip of discovery. I would have never thought the difference that test of will would make, thought John.

He rose from the desk to go find Maggie. What a wonderful life he had had with her. He had two kids, Matt and Mary. Maggie was supportive in all his efforts. He had never had to doubt her love. I'm glad I was able to find the motel again, John thought. After all, I had left her a note saying I would meet her back at our room one year later. I even told her not to forget the pizza. Boy, I looked forward to that day. I registered as Mr. Waters and waited in my room. Sure enough, at the exact same time and in the exact same clothes, carrying the exact same pizza and beer, Maggie had come callin'.

After a year, a guard had shown up at his offices at the studio with that raggedy old T-shirt, saying a woman outside wished to see him. The guard must have thought John had a spring in his chair considering how quickly he jumped up and ran out the door. The poor guard tried as hard as he could to keep up shouting directions on where he got the package, as well as trying to

communicate to the other security on what was going on. He saw Maggie behind the security gate, and yelled at the guard to open up. She came running through and he picked her up and spun her round and round. They had laughed and giggled right in front of the whole church staff until his Dad and Mom had shown up, demanding to know the cause of such a stir."

The wedding was a media sensation, and John's Mom and Dad were just thrilled with their new daughter-in-law. The only news greater was the birth of their children. But, as happy as they were, Maggie knew there was still the emptiness.

The home was a mansion. "Maggie! Maggie!," John shouted. He laughed. He knew she hated when he yelled for her like that.

"John Love, you stop that shoutin' right now, ya' hear?" Maggie scolded from the top of the curved staircase.

"Well, where is everybody?" John asked.

"Why, you lonesome, you little baby?"

"Not now that your hear," John teased back.

"Well, if you would pay attention to me once in awhile, you would remember that the nanny is taking the children Christmas shopping, the butler is visiting his family before our Christmas dinner, and the maid is off today."

"You mean we are all alone in this big house?" John eyes grew big and a sly smile crossed his lips.

"Oh no you don't. Don't even think it. Last time this happened I had Mary nine months later." Maggie started to smile and ran back up the stairs.

John had just begun to tear off after Maggie when the front doorbell rang. "Saved by the bell." John laughed and headed to open the door.

"Wait, John." Maggie said forcefully. "Nobody was announced by the front gate."

"Well, it's probably the guard or the kids needing a hand to carry the gifts. Besides, what are we to do? Hide in the kitchen until a butler comes to open the door?"

John reached for the handle and opened the door. Outside stood a small woman dressed in a cotton dress and no shoes.

"Mr. Love?" She asked.

"Yes?" John said. There was something strange about her. How did she get here? He wondered. Was she one of the religious fanatics? Somehow it didn't seem to matter.

She handed him a letter. John took it and turned to open it. Before he could look back, the door closed. John reached and opened it again, but the messenger was nowhere to be found. John stepped on the porch to search for her, but couldn't see her anywhere. John stopped looking for her and started to read the note that was in the letter she had left. John stared at the letter until Maggie touched him on the shoulder.

"What does it say, John?" She asked.

"Maggie, I have to go." John said. "Now" John turned and headed up the stairs. "Call the plane and tell them to get ready for take off. Tell them to set a heading for Jerusalem."

John had dropped the note on the floor in his hurry to pack. Maggie picked it up and looked at it. It was just a blank sheet of paper.

"John, what are you doing?" Maggie asked. "What does this piece of paper mean to you?"

She was worried now. John had never seemed anxious in all the time she had known him. It was as if he was being driven by some inner fire.

John turned, tears were on his cheeks, but a happiness and peace engulfed his soul. "He's calling me. He needs me now. It's the Somebody. It's time."

Maggie started throwing clothes in another bag and making phone calls. "What are you doing?" John asked.

"Honey, I've heard about this someone for 12 years. If you think I'm not going to see for myself who this someone is, you do not know the person you married." Maggie said, tears streaking her cheeks also.

John smiled, helped Maggie pack her things, grabbed their bags, and headed for the airport with Maggie.

James sat under a fig tree in near Jerusalem. Soon he would make his way to the river. He knew John would be waiting for him there. It still was a little unsettling to have this advanced information \_\_ Twelve years and now it was time to go home. He had felt that Aunt Jenny wasn't all that well for the past few days and he knew that she was waiting to see him before she went to be with his Father. He had hardly had time to write to his family \_\_ a few notes here and there, a small gift and an occasional phone call when he could manage it. He knew his Father was looking after them; it was the only prayer he ever made to his Father and the one he knew He kept.

It seemed forever since he had finagled his way onto that cruise ship, working his way across the ocean as a bus boy. He had had time between chores to think, eat, and rest. This is when he had

met Pierre. He was taken a little aback at first when Pierre had approached him. Having been away from home for over two months and without close companion for the same amount of time James wasn't used to people recognizing his significance. Pierre had kneeled before him in their quarters after a shift and asked for His blessing. James, eager to have a friend instead of a disciple, asked him to sit with him and talk. It took some coaxing and assurances of James' divinity to finally get Pierre to settle down, but after an evening of conversations, they had been close friends ever since. Pierre, for his part, couldn't believe that he had formed a friendship with the child of Christ, but had accepted his good fortune and James' company.

When they had reached France. Pierre asked if James wanted to see his family and spend some time in Paris. James readily accepted, and had begun his habit ever since of taking various jobs and spending time with many different families and people. In England, he had met Tommy, in South Africa, Mobutu, Arabia, Ahmed, and in China, Lu Chan. All had stayed with him through thick and thin. Each had known instinctively of his divinity, and each had stayed with him innitially because of his position. However, each had become a friend, and although his status did not alter they looked on him more as a brother than a Son of Jesus.

That was not to say they kept him from harm or from living His life as a man. His trip to Sweden with Pierre and Tommy for a year almost cost him his soul. It was there that James had begun to see the evil that could exist in concert with man. The trip into the wasteland of mankind began in the tired souls of a brothel. Not surprised to find out that James was still a virgin but, taken aback that he wanted and needed to discover the sexual side of himself, Tommy and Pierre had laughingly taken him to a brothel. James remembered being half-afraid to hear his Father admonish

him for such transgressions, but he heard nothing and went ahead.

"I haven't done anything like this before," James stammered as he looked at the woman seated on the bed.

"Oh, don't worry, baby," she smiled. "It won't hurt you."

"What do I do now?" James asked.

"Well you just stand there and I'll take care of everything," she said. The woman stood up walked slowly over to James and started removing his clothes.

James' embarrassment is what he remembered most. He was more afraid of his own body and its appearance. He still was especially surprised at how much significance he put into his physical performance. He was so wrapped up in the feeling of self that he barely remembered the girl.

"You satisfied, sugar," asked the whore. The conquest itself was over in minutes.

James nodded his head and headed to the streets somewhat poorer in purse and, he felt, his spirit. None the less, the physical release had been wonderful and he had resolved to return another night and explore more fully this side of man.

"You want a date, sugar?" The whore smiled a worn smile. She was dressed in a faded pink top, with a dirty blue mini-skirt. She had weather worn white stiletto heels on and leaned a little too much from drink.

"Why sure," said James as he lifted her up on the bar. "Two rounds of whatever, barkeep."

"We celebrating, sugar?" Asked the whore.

"I always celebrate," said James lighting up some 'smokes ' from his pocket.

"That the good kind, honey? You got some for me?"

"Take a little toke on this one, baby." James was feeling good and starting to get high again.

"Whee!" she said taking a drag. "That was good. Lets go party in private, sugar."

James fondled her breast and grabbed her ass as he lifted her back onto the ground. "Lead on, sweet thing."

The room was dimly lit and smelled of stale beer and cigarettes. The tables were worn down to the wood of which they were originally made. One door led to a decaying street reeking with the stench of a hundred establishments such as this. The lady plied one more drink from James, before he fell headfirst in the old booze that covered the table. Seeing no more life or money in her 'date', the whore walked over to the bar and waited for another man to entertain.

For almost a year he had frequented the strips of Sweden, seeking comfort with the people of these districts. James had experienced his first cigarettes here, and drugs. The combination of sex and drugs was extremely overpowering and James loved it. Tommy and Pierre had stayed with him, protected him, during this whole process, but had never tried to keep up or stop him. But now they were trying desperately to convince him to leave to move on. No amount of coaxing seemed to help. James had lied about his whereabouts and even snuck out and hid from them. James realized that a coldness had come over him. A despair, an evil he could not explain; even though he did not wish to hurt people, he did not care\_\_ he only wanted his pleasure. He knew he was losing himself, and did

not know how to leave. This was when he saw Katy.

"Well what do we have here?" said Katy when she saw James in the pool of beer.

"He's used up, ducks." shouted the whore at the bar. "I just took his last mark."

James half raised his head from a drugged and drunken stupor. His eyes were glazed over and he could barely make out the tramp in front of him.

"He seems to have some life left girl? You sure you got it all." said Katy. Katy was an old soul of 28 years.

"Best I could figure. Rifled his pants when he passed out on the bed."

Katy saw a desperation and sadness in that look James had given her. Just as she was about to turn Tommy and Pierre came in the bar.

"James." said Pierre and rushed to his side.

The tenderness and care with which they handled James kept Katy's attention on the drunk at the table. James tried to stand up and run from his friends and fell towards Katy.

"Whoa, big boy." Said Katy as she held him up. She looked directly in James eyes and saw a plea for help from the lost.

She motioned to Tommy and Pierre to help her.

"Take him up to my room, its close." she said. Tommy and Pierre stood motionless. "Hurry now!"

At her last command they finally moved. It took two days and a lot of coffee, but James sobered up enough to talk. And they talked. James confessed the very torture of his soul and without blinking, without missing a beat, Katy told him to just seek God. Like that, she knew what

he should have known.

James did. He left her bosom and walked to a soft dark corner of the night and spoke with his Father for the first time in almost a year. He asked for help and his Father answered. He lost his addiction to tobacco and drugs that night. James stayed another week with Katy and regained his strength. On his last night there, Katy had invited him to her room, where they had shared love \_ \_ no money, no trade, no drugs, no liquor, no requirements, just two people being together to share the moment and the company of each other. It was the first time James had ever experienced sex or tenderness together in such a fashion. It was far better than any intimate moments he had shared with any other. He felt envy for those that shared this extraordinary bond done with love. James still had sexual desires, but he knew now that to have the true togetherness with a woman there had to be trust, respect, love and a mutual giving. He left shortly after that night, but Katy's memory steeled him and prepared him for his future.

He had learned a lot in that trip into the wilderness. He had learned that the absence of care and morality were the true evils in men. The absence of God the true Hell. He had learned to respect men who did what was right, who cared and did so without the confirmation of a heaven or hell, but with a faith in justice, goodness, and the Lord. He did not ever have to develop faith, for he had always known of the existence of the Lord and His blessings. But to act without that knowledge was one of the true glories of man.

"I do understand now why my Father so loved this world." James had said. "Only mixed with the cruelty of evil can one see the great significance of good. It is real irony that one has to

have both to understand either one. It does make for interesting combinations and keeps a body totally fascinated with the results." opined James.

"Now on to the Jordan," he said now. "I suppose John will be there shortly and I hope Katy will join me."

James rose to go. He had asked his Father not too long ago to allow him to service the poor and the poor in spirit. Having traveled so far in so many years, he was inspired by the acts of those who did so much with so little and wished to help them. As opposed to his Father, who was sent with a specific course of action, James was choosing what he hoped was a vocation that he could keep until a very old age, at which time he could then reside permanently by his family and Father.

When James had spoke to his Father about this, it was evident that his decision greatly pleased Him. His Father asked that before he begin his work that he be baptized by a descendant of John the Baptist, in the location that He Himself had been baptized. It pleased James to thrill his Father so, and he readily agreed. His Father made all the arrangements and sent for the descendant. That was how James knew that John would be waiting.

James was certain of the direction he would now go in life, but still wary of responsibility \_ \_the responsibility of being the Son of Jesus and the responsibility of guiding and helping those in need. He was aware that the baptism was more than a sprinkling of water into his face. It would allow him some of the powers of enlightenment that were granted his Father and although he was not going to be a prophet or priest, he would be accepting a mantle and responsibility only one other in the history of the world could know. James was, in effect, accepting and declaring who he was.

Katy was there. James ran to her. Surrounded by Pierre, Lu Chan, and Mobuto, it was difficult to make his way to her side, but his friends finally relented and allowed them to embrace.

"I thought you were just a fond memory, James." Katy smiled.

"There has not been a day I did not think of you in the last twelve years," James said warmly. In a world of women, his thoughts had always turned to her and her tenderness.

"Well, I couldn't believe it when this short Frenchman came calling at my door. I asked if he was hiding you and he just grinned and invited me to Palestine. I said it was quite a ways to go for a baptism, but considering it was you and the trip was paid for, how could I resist?" she grinned. "Oh, it is so good to see you. I had hoped that you would not forget me."

"Forget you? I was scared to death that you would have nothing to do with me. That I was but one of... Oh, you know what I mean," cried James.

"I know and I never forgot you. You dear, sweet man." Katy sighed.

"All right, enough of that," said a familiar voice.

"Tommy!" Katy squealed. She grabbed James' hand and they both rushed over to greet him.

"Enough, enough," protested Tommy as he was hugged by Katy and the rest of the crew. "James, all is ready as you requested." Tommy smiled as he turned to face James.

They had been standing in a field up from the shore of the Jordan River. It was a small oasis in a hot land and one could hear the river flowing nearby. The area of the baptism was shielded by the bank and a fence of trees and bushes from peering eyes, but was definitely the spot that James' Father had been baptized some 2000 years before.

"Well, now we just need the preacher," said Mobutu.

"And here he comes now, I believe," said James.

As they looked across the field, a small jeep stopped and two figures emerged from the vehicle. It was quite a ways to the road, so they weren't able to get a clear view of the people approaching for a few moments. As they grew closer, it was evident that they were dressed in khaki and one was a woman and the other a man, both about the same age as James.

"Do you know these people?" Katy asked.

"Never have had the pleasure before," James replied without taking his eyes off the new guests.

"Then how do you know who they are? How do you know you can trust them?" Asked Katy worriedly.

With that question all of James friends and James himself turned simultaneously and smiled at Katy as if she was the only one not in on the joke.

John got out of the jeep first. He had never been in this part of Palestine, but knew instinctively where to go. He had paced nervously for two days before he had been summoned to this point. Maggie, God love her, had just stayed right by his side, never questioning or second guessing his motives. When the call came he had to sneak out of the motel, as it had not been more than two hours that the world had known he was there. The usual reporters and believers crowded the motel as soon as they knew he had arrived.

He used the skills developed in his first world tour to avoid the crowd and ended up right here. And there James was. In that crowd of people, there he was.

John slowed enough to let Maggie catch up and looked more closely at the group ahead of him. There were two black men, two white men, an Asian man, an Arab, and a white woman.

For a brief, shining moment, John knew, and the vision overwhelmed him. John fell on his knees before the Son of His Lord, tears of joy welling in his eyes.

"It is I that should ask for a baptism from you," John said as he looked into the deep brown eyes of James.

"You have served our Father well and answered His call when asked. Your father, whose name you bear, went into the wilderness and preached of my Father's coming. For his faith, he baptized my Father. For your faith and work and in honor of your forefather, my Father has asked that you baptize me."

"As was the honor of my forefather, so is the honor with me," replied John.

"You know we can talk plain old 'merican'," laughed James. "It may be a momentous sacred occasion, but I would hope the world has progressed enough to dispense with some of the more formal religious dogma. Besides, I would also hope that the man who would baptize me also share my friendship." With that, James put his arm around John and led him towards the river.

Katy was bewildered. Maggie stood and gaped at her husband and the man with him. They both turned and looked at each other, then giggled openly at their expressions.

"What do you make of that?" Maggie asked, extending her hand. "I'm Maggie. And you are?"

"Katy, pleased to meet you," said Katy, taking her hand. "And after knowing James, I am not surprised at anything that may happen with him around."

Tommy shouted to them from the edge of the river. "Come on, ladies, or you'll miss it."

"Nice of them to remember us." Katy laughed.

"Yes, well I think we should at least hurry on to see what my husband dragged me 5000 miles for," said Maggie, trotting ahead.

"You don't know?" asked Katy, catching up.

"No."

"Why, It's James' baptism," replied Katy.

Katy and Maggie reached the edge of the bank to see James, draped in a white robe, enter the waters of the Jordan with John. Maggie stopped still, looked incredulously at Katy, then at the scene before her. Katy just nodded.

Why would John travel 5000 miles to baptize some black man in the River Jordan? Maggie thought. Then her attention was drawn back to the scene before her.

There on the bank were the various men she had met just moments before. Tommy, the one who had yelled to them was on her left looking towards the water and her husband. The rest were arranged in a semicircle on the bank with the short, French-looking man on the right. They were all wearing white robes and intently staring at the scene before them.

Maggie suddenly felt the stillness and heard her husband's voice as if it were in a cathedral. The words were the familiar incantations he had said a hundred times before, but each syllable, each sound was crystal clear, as if she were standing beside him in the most quiet of all places. She smelled the air and the fragrance was like no other she had ever known. It was immensely pleasing and soothing. She exchanged glances with Katy and realized they were both experiencing the same

sensations. Maggie could hear every word, every creature, every ripple of the river as clear as if it were the only sound being made, yet no sound interfered with the smooth, beautiful words being spoken by her husband.

Katy's glance at Maggie confirmed that she was not alone in her feelings. Her skin felt so smooth her body so alive. She just wanted to be at one with all around her. It had been so long since she had known peace.

Because they had been so intent on the feelings and scene around them, it was Maggie and Katy who first saw it. As James ducked his head under the waters of the Jordan, Maggie and Katy both looked up to see the source of the flapping sound that had entered into serenity of this moment. One white dove descended.

Then James raised His head above the water and Katy and Maggie knew. The light enveloped them from above. The dove landed upon the hand of John that was placed upon the shoulder of James. Music of immense beauty filled the sky and all the company felt joy. Tommy, Pierre, Lu Chan, Mobutu, and everyone were dancing and laughing and joyous. James smiled upon John as they both walked out of the water and the dove circled overhead. And Katy and Maggie fell sobbing to the ground.

Tommy was the first to reach Katy and Maggie. Dropping to the ground to hold onto Katy he reached to grab the hand of Maggie. "It is quite overwhelming isn't it" Tommy said.

"Overwhelming?" Katy said incredulously between sobs. She started beating her fist against Tommy's chest. "Why did you never tell me? Why didn't you warn me how special this, he, was?"

Tommy smiled, looked into her tear-streaked face and said, "Would you have believed me?" Tommy looked over to Maggie. "Would you have believed your husband? Or would you both have thought us nuts?"

The light was fading now and the music had dimmed, but the joy was still felt by everyone. James walked over to Katy and Maggie. They not knowing the right way to greet the Son of the Lord, cowered back and sank closer to the ground. Then James smiled and they rose to greet him. "My Lord..." Katy began to say and James held up His hand to ask their silence.

"James, Katy, my name is James. Baptized here before God and my friends. I realize that I am more than you can comprehend, but yet I was born and raised a man. While in this form I am James and you shall be, if you will allow me, Katy." said James lightly.

"I have come to this earth with no other desire, but that of my Father's. And His desire was to have a son raised upon the world He and His Father so truly loved. Therefore I am here, born as you were into this world to experience the joys and sorrows that make this planet and its people so wonderful. I have chosen to follow in my Father's footsteps in that I wish to help those that need to be lifted up and give hope where none exists. The same noble profession your husband has chosen." James looked at Maggie.

Turning back to Katy, James continued. "Therefore I am and have been a man Katy. Born to greater expectations than any can think yet still a man. I know it cannot be as it was, but I do wish that before you call me Lord, you could call me friend. I do treasure your friendship greatly, and hope that you would also treasure James' friendship."

Katy smiled and rose. "I do not think it would be so bad to be the personal friend of the Son

of God." She giggled embracing James. Pulling away, she said, "Although it has always been a great honor to be the friend of James. So, therefore, I shall always be James' friend, whether he be the Son of God or not."

Maggie stood aside and watched as Katy and James spoke. John had come to stand beside her and put his arm around her waist. "What of you, Maggie?" asked James. "Would you too, be my friend?"

"I do not know you as James to say whether I would be his friend, but I feel I would be a fool to deny the friendship of the Son of God." Maggie smiled.

"Then I will use that advantage to try to influence you to know and be James' friend," chuckled James.

"Done." Maggie clasped his hand in friendship. "I hate to ask, but would there be anything to drink?"

"And eat!" Exclaimed Mobutu. With that, four or five coolers were brought from under a bush and all sat down to have a picnic with the Lord.

## **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 sometime 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, momma. 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 awhile 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 your 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, momma. 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 letting 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 pickup 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.

## **CHAPTER 13 [ROMANS)**

The funeral was held in the biggest chapel in the neighborhood and there still wasn't enough

room for all. Reverend Love showed with his wife and children, which caused a small media stir. But the friends of Aunt Jenny made sure she was properly and respectfully laid to rest. Hundreds came to say goodbye, and visitation lasted for over twelve hours. The church was filled with flowers and those that could also donated to Aunt Jenny's favorite charity. She was laid to rest with the ceremony of a great member of state, which in her world she was.

James read the eulogy. Close friends carried the coffin the short block to the cemetery, where hundreds more lined the streets to say their last good-byes. Thomas, Judy, Russ, James and Cindy walked behind the casket, followed by James' friends. She was laid to rest under the sunshine and between magnolia trees she had loved to smell in blossom.

The food donated to the family to help with cooking during their time of grief was overwhelming. James attempted to try every dish, but had no luck. Finally, leftovers and untouched dishes were donated to the local food pantry. It was a sad time a time of loss. Everyone missed her presence, yet James and Cindy seemed at peace and smiled warmly at the mention of her name.

Judy received the linens and cedar chest in order to start a "hope chest." Cindy received all Aunt Jenny's pots, pans, and dishes, with strict instructions to pass them on to Judy when it was "time." Her pictures were divided between Cindy and Judy. Russ and Thomas had the pick of the rest of her possessions.

The surprise, however, belonged to James. Aunt Jenny, in little need of money, rich in friends and family, had invested her meager sums over many years and left a sizable sum to James. She had also bequest her home to him, with instructions to "begin your task with the seed I have left you."

James was unaware she had even known of his desire to help people, just coming to that conclusion himself. In his gratitude James began the Aunt Jenny Foundation right there in her house. Cindy was proud and thrilled to have James close to home. After a little renovation, James' friends moved in with him and they began the process of contributing to better the condition of men and women in the Lord's world.

The office was next to the church. Subtly ornate, the kind of office you would expect from a man in Cardinal Michael's position, rich, full curtains, wood panels, and ornate statues. The cardinal was not in a reflective mood though and the textures around him gave him no comfort. He was agitated and frustrated and he was pressing his aid for comfort.

"Why him? What does this dead woman mean to him?" Cardinal Michael asked. "There are too many questions and not enough answers. Something is going to happen, and if we aren't ready it could damage the Church. I need information and I need it now."

"We just don't know." said Brother Francis. "We aren't a spy agency, sir. We don't have the resources to just bring people in and question them. Don't you think your over-reacting on this issue? After all, Mr. Love has never attacked the Church or tried to harm it in any way."

"I know, Brother Francis, I know. But the circumstances of his birth and the power and influence he has over the masses has swayed some of our flock from the true teachings of Christ and the Church. Remember, we are in a fight with the devil for the very souls of our members. Any teachings that contradict our theology would result in catastrophe for our parishioners. Indeed, certain offhand remarks made by Mr. Love have led our own priests to question our Pope's

interpretation of Our Lord's teachings. I have vowed to defend those teachings and the true Bible, and I won't let a young, uneducated whippersnapper destroy 2000 years of theology for his own convenience."

"I understand you thoughts, Monsignor, but don't you feel that Mr. Love's actions do not warrant this intradiction?" asked Francis.

"I have studied and written works upon the true meaning of the Bible and its teachings. The Pope himself has used my counsel to hold back the tide of liberalism that wishes to change the very way we worship our God. In my studies, I have found that the devil is truly in the details. He does not consume by large events, but tries to take one soul at a time. I see this birth, this mockery of our Lord's birth, just one more detail in his effort to undermine our way of life. I feel this man currently is only a seed, but we must nip it in the bud now or we could face a garden of discontent later." The Cardinal's face was grim.

"Yes, Your Eminence. I see he could prove to be a larger problem later. I try to find out more about this black man that he has been seeing," said Francis.

"I understand that this.. uh .. James, has started some foundation to help the needy in his neighborhood. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

"Why don't you make an appointment to see him for the possibility of help from the Church? That might allow you to find out some more information," said Cardinal Michael.

"Would we truly be interested in helping this man's foundation?" asked Brother Francis.

"A good charitable foundation should always be given a hand when needed. If you find this

to be a good foundation, then there is a good probability. I would not ask you to go under false pretenses, Brother Francis." replied the Cardinal.

"Of course not, Your Eminence. I was just wondering about the limits of our offer."

"Whatever we can do, within the realm of the Church and God, as always." Replied the Cardinal.

"As always." Brother Francis nodded.

It was a little much. I really thought I had taught that boy to recognize charlatans better, thought Dex. Imagine, 30 years old, been through every type of "healing" and "talking in tongues" there was. Hell, I even taught him some of the old things we did on the circuit and he still gets taken in by some nigger from Atlanta.

Dex poured himself another drink. And he flies all the way to Jerusalem to get him, he fumed. What was it with that funeral anyhow? He didn't even know that old lady. She sure as hell didn't give their church any money, I checked. Gave it all to that nigger he brought home with him. And he knows damn well he was the only child born that night, especially the only one born within that light. I checked all the hospital records, every record I could find. No one else was born that night, there is no record of this James being born that night, no record of a James even being born. Dex reached for the bottle again and brushed across the latest pledge figures lying on his desk. Well, maybe he does know something, he reconsidered. That little stunt with the old lady increased our take 5% in one week, with a residual increase of 2% over the next three weeks. Maybe a little freebie now and then with the masses wouldn't hurt. I'll have to keep an eye on him and his new

"friend" to see what's happening. My boy ain't gonna cut me out of the take yet."

"What do you think?" asked Ahmed. He and Lu Chan were sitting at the kitchen table with James discussing the phone call they just got from the local Catholic organization.

"It seems pretty nice if they're going to do it. Aunt Jenny's money isn't going to last forever, and we're not adept at raising funds and keeping books. My Father's love will help, but hey, we still gotta help ourselves and pay the bills." James chuckled.

"I don't know." said Lu Chan smiling. "Either your Father is pulling some heavy strings to give you a hand, or they want something. In my country the Catholics only did you a favor if they could get something in return, now or in the future."

"Now you're getting cynical." James grinned. "The Catholic Church has always tried to help others. I've never seen them withhold charity because you believed, looked, or felt differently."

"Neither have I. But there has always been a price \_\_ permission to build a church, teach their ways to your children, or read passages in their Bible to your Emperor. Subtle, but effective. "

"Well, we don't have an offer yet, and it won't hurt to speak to this Brother Francis \_\_ if only to be polite. Be assured, though, we shall do this our way and the way of my Father or we won't do it at all."

"And just what way is that?" said Tommy, coming in from the living room a hammer in one hand, and a grin on his face. "Hate to say, old friend, but you have yet to tell us what's up. Not that I'm complaining; I'd stay in a cave with you till we starved, but curiosity is getting the better of me."

"And me," said Pierre, coming through the back screen door. "It does seem that you are

attempting to establish some roots, my friend. Begin some project. And not just the foundation, wonderful as that is. You would have to admit, it would be quite a change from our previous years together."

"Yes, James. What is up?" asked Katy, followed thru the door by Judy and Mobutu. Judy and Mobutu put down plates of steaming hot food while Katy went to the cupboard to lay out dishes and silverware.

"Looks like dinner to me." said James.

"Ah, you do not get out of the answer that easily," Pierre said. He grabbed James' plate and held it back above his head. "No answer, no dinner."

"Answer? What's the question?" said Cindy, entering the door with another basket of food.

"The question is, Mom," said Katy, knowing calling her this pleased Cindy immensely, "what are James' plans now that he seems to be settling down?"

"You settlin' down James?" Cindy smiled. "You goin' to stay here next to your Momma?"

"Nothin's been decided permanent or anything. See what you started, Katy? She is going to ride me to stay home now." James laughed.

"Well what are your plans? And you better tell me 'fore I get your Daddy and his belt in here to get you to tell me," said Cindy

All hooted at the image of James getting whapped by his daddy, and James had to shout them down just to get them to listen.

"Well, under threat of a sound whuppin' and imminent starvation, I will tell you. You all have spent years with me, showing me and teaching me the ways of men and women in the world.

Whether you knew it or not, your care and friendship through all the time, hard as well as easy, allowed me to see the world as my Father wished me to see it. I have seen the greatest miracles in the smallest acts, compassion out of the most unforgiving men. This is what I was sent to learn. Some call it the indomitable spirit of humans, some call it love. I see it as that which my Father saw it \_ \_ that unique quality, when left to make a free will decision, to make it at one's own expense and for the benefit of another. Man has faith. For me who has needed no faith, this is incredible. To make a sacrifice to better the condition of others on the basis of what is "right", follows no logical pattern and in some circumstances is not even taught by religion. Before my Father was born, men and women had this quality. It is not a quality that can be ascribed to religion. It existed well before organized faiths. My goal is to try to add to this wonderful condition. To give where no reward is expected, but just because it is right. To stand by those who have given of their hearts and assure them their faith was not wasted. I wish to contribute to the goodness of man."

"In this effort I hope to use some of the gift my Father has given me to heal and comfort throughout the world. I wish to send each of my friends into the world to establish a center where they can monitor activities and help me choose those that would qualify for a small hand from My Father or an encouraging word from me. It will be difficult. We could make a lifetime of help in this neighborhood alone, but I wish to spread my gifts and help throughout the world. Therefore time, cost, and energy must be measured between my friends to maximize the benefits of my gifts. This I know you can do, because you love one another as I love you. That is what my plans are and I wish you will help me." With those words, James sat and looked at his friends in the room.

Cindy broke the silence. "An ambitious plan, James. How do you expect to carry it out?"

"That is what we are here for. To figure it out," James said.

"I have been your companion for many years, to leave your company now would be difficult for me," stated Pierre.

"As I," said Tommy.

"Wait," said James holding up a hand to still the protests.      You all know who I am. You all know what I can do. Would you keep this gift for yourself or use it as My Father intended? I know your answers in my heart, for I know you each intimately. Besides, if our work is done well, I shall see each of you throughout the year and all of you together sharing my mother's food at my Father's birthday."

"Then it will be done," said Mobutu

The rest agreed.

"Well, mom, is a year enough warning to give you for our next gathering?" teased James.

"If that's all your gonna give," Cindy replied.

"Well then, Pierre, if you will give me my plate, let's dig in." James laughed. "Because we got a whole lot of work to do tomorrow"

The plans were going along smoothly. Ahmed was a genius at finance and had begun investing Aunt Jenny's money in places that would give a good return and keep the foundation's main house open for some time. Tommy took the reins of procuring donations and selecting sites for additional houses around the world. Lu Chan developed strategic plans for the implementation of Jame's work. Pierre took care of the local calls and secretarial duties. Momma and Katy kept

track of food and clothing, while Mobutu did repairs on the buildings and kept an eye on Judy. Russ had agreed to anchor the foundation at Aunt Jenny's home, so all seemed to be going well.

"James, we gotta talk," said Mobutu one evening.

"Sure, Mo, what about?" asked James.

Mobutu paused, then looked at James and said, "well, your sister."

"She givin' you problems, Mobutu? You want me to talk to her?" James asked.

"No, oh no," said Mobutu hurriedly. "She has been a perfect lady in every way."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Well, I like her. I like her a lot."

"So that's good." James started to smile.

"Well, I'd like to date her. If that's all right with you." Mobutu said.

"I don't think it's my place to pick my sister's dates. Do you? I mean, if she knew we were having this conversation I'm sure she would whup us both to within an inch of our lives. You know Mom. Judy's just like her." James laughed.

"You don't mind, then? It's sometime so hard to know the rules with you."

"I can't know, because I could never be you. But I'm sure sometimes you wonder if the wrath of my Grandfather would descend upon you if you angered me. Be assured Mobutu, my Father put me on this earth as a man. I am His son, but I am a man \_\_ I bleed, I hurt, I laugh and jest. There is no plan for me to come back to earth when I die; that's already been done. I'm here to live, do some good works and die a man. That's all. But, you treat my sister wrong, I'll come hunt you like any good brother would." James laughed.

"Then, I shall most assuredly treat her well."

"Oh, and Mobutu, if it goes any farther, my dad's permission is the one you should ask for."

MoButu laughed and walked out.

"If only all my problems were as easy to solve," whispered James to himself. It had always been like that, he thought. They must surely have questions about his Father, heaven, hell, religion, but they never asked. It seemed as if it was a taboo subject. He had never offered to start the discussions, and probably avoided them because he didn't want to offend anyone. So maybe they respected his silence and didn't ask for fear of offending him. His dad never asked, nor his mom, but they had already met Jesus and were satisfied with their own knowledge. But what about Judy and Russ? It wasn't like they ever held anything back from him. Why after twelve years did it bother him now? Maybe the baptism reminded him of who he truly was. "Whatever it is, it's time to confront it," he said. "I need them with me, not in awe of me. We'll have a discussion about it tomorrow after the meeting with Brother Francis."

James had stayed away from many religious orders during his travels. He knew that people recognized him for who he was quite frequently and their reactions often were hard to take. He did not need the public kneeling or prayers at his feet. Many times he had lifted a body off the ground and bought him or her a cool drink just to avoid further spotlight. He had become quite adept at defusing potentially difficult situations.

James remembered visiting his Father's birthplace and making arrangements to see it at night. It was quite remarkable that the church had been able to find and protect the exact place His

Father had been born for over 2000 years. Even though he went in at night and few people were there, the priest recognized him at once and wished to call the others of his order. It was quick thinking and a little help from Lu Chan that had allowed him to finish his visit and exit without further problems. That brief encounter showed him what great potential for disruption he could have on many people and religions if he was recognized. Therefore, he avoids most churches and priests at all times.

But this was different. His fledgling foundation needed money to complete his task and the help of the Catholic Church would move them forward rapidly. John Love had offered his fortune in the endeavor, but James did not want a single sponsor. It would look like he was endorsing one sect over another. Besides John was doing good work and needed to continue in his way. James had to meet with Brother Francis and hope that he wouldn't be recognized.

Russ answered the door when Brother Francis came calling and showed him to a seat in the front room. It was apparent that Brother Francis had done his homework and knew that James was the leader of this new foundation. Russ avoided any attempts to have Brother Francis deal with him. After seating Brother Francis in a comfortable chair, Russ excused himself and went to get James.

"He knows I'm not in charge, James. I'm sorry, but you'll have to come down and meet him." Said Russ.

"I was afraid of that. Well, here's hoping."

James went downstairs and entered the front room. Brother Francis rose from his chair and fell on his knees before him, head bowed and eyes closed.

"Well, I think he recognized you," said Abdul.

It took awhile to get Brother Francis to his feet again. It was obvious he was a learned man and no amount of easy assurances were going to convince him of his place before James. Finally, with James's hands upon his shoulders, Brother Francis allowed himself to be seated again. A cool glass of water, time and gentle conversation eventually gave Brother Francis back his voice and some composure.

"Hi," said James to Brother Francis.

Brother Francis began to tremble again and the remaining water started to splatter out of the glass he held in his hand. His look remained fixed on James and his face was contorted in wonder.

James, who had been sitting in a wooden kitchen chair opposite Brother Francis, rose and put a hand on the Brother's shoulder once more.

Brother Francis stuttered back, "Huh..., hi."

Then, as if to confirm his reality, he looked at Abdul and Russ and excitedly said, "It's him! I mean, my Lord. Oh dear God! No, I'm sorry. Your Father. My Father. Oh my gosh, it is you!"

James was grinning by this time, but also concerned for Brother Francis's health. Putting a hand on his shoulder once more, James replied, "Why don't you give yourself sometime and slow down or we'll never finish this conversation."

Brother Francis caught James's eyes with his own and started to regain himself again.

"My Lord \_ \_" Francis began.

"James."

"James?" Francis asked. "But I know you to be of our God, how could I address you as

James. Surely Jehovah or Jesus would be better."

"It would if it were my name. But Jesus is the name given to my Father and Jehovah is the name frequently given to His Father. I think to usurp their names would be presumptuous on our part, don't you?" Grinned James.

"Oh, well yes, my Lord, it would." replied Brother Francis.

"Just James, Brother Francis."

"Yes, sir. I mean James."

"Well, now that we got that out of the way, what did you need to know about our foundation? The telephone call placed to Russ here mentioned something about some financing to help us with our work," said James.

"Financing? Yes. Well, Oh yes. We heard about your organ \_ \_ Well, I don't believe that will be a problem. How much do you want? Do you really need money? I mean won't He...?"

"No, He won't. Doesn't have a checking account." James shook his head. "And I don't believe your superiors will allow you to write checks for just any ol' amount."

"Well, ordinarily they wouldn't, but it does seem that you are their superior and if you want the money \_ \_ well it is the churches, raised in Jesus' name. Therefore I guess it's your money and you can do with it what you will. I mean when we go back and show them who you are, how can they refuse?"

"Go back?" asked James. "What do you mean go back?"

"Well I have to tell Cardinal Michael and he's going to tell the Pope. Oh, goodness. Maybe, I should call him now. I mean he should probably come to you not you to him." Brother Francis

looked worried.

"Whoa, slow down, Brother. I don't really want to make any formal announcements. We just met you to see if your organization could help us out by financing some part of our organization. This is not a pretext for a coming out party." James laughed nervously.

"But you must!" protested Brother Francis.

"No, I mustn't." Responded James. "And I will ask you to keep your knowledge of my existence to yourself. I also ask that if you do help support our organization that you be the only one we deal with. Do you understand?" said James sternly.

"No, I do not understand, but if it is your wish then I will do it, so help me God." said Francis. "Oops. I'm sorry"

"Quite all right." Said James. "Now, do you think we might be able to work out a little donation now and then from your Church?"

Brother Francis was still happily confused at the recent meeting with James. They had agreed on a monthly stipend to be forwarded to the Aunt Jenny Foundation, and James had invited him back to dinner and conversation whenever he wanted. But what now to tell Cardinal Michael? Francis thought. It is obvious why John Love went to Jerusalem. But even though I know the reason, I have sworn not to tell anyone of James' existence here on earth. It is quite a dilemma.

Francis emerged from the car he had taken to visit the Aunt Jenny Foundation and looked at the building that housed Cardinal Michael. "I shall have to tell him enough to distract him from

James and have him concentrate on John Love. I shall tell him that Mr. Love flew to the Middle East to meet with someone who could help in his missionary work. That this man requested that he fly James and his group back home as a favor in return for his contribution. Yes, That ought to do it."

"More money, eh? Well that sounds typical of the Love clan. He would fly halfway around the world for a dollar, praise God," said Cardinal Michael.

"Yes, well you've said that raising money is what their best at." Replied Brother Francis.

"Yes, I should have known. But this trip did seem darn peculiar, one would have to admit. And all the people he brought back were just friends of his new benefactor?"

"Yes, as far as I could tell. They seemed quite harmless and just beginning to put together what could be a worthwhile organization. I thought it would be wise to contribute something to their cause. This would allow us to keep a better eye on them and maybe find out a thing or two about Mr. Love's operation also," said Brother Francis.

"A good idea, Brother. It would be nice to be able to know a little more about our dear Mr. Love. Well, keep me informed if you need anything else."

"Most certainly, Sir," said Brother Francis as the Cardinal dismissed him. Brother Francis turned and walked out of the room. With the door closed behind him, he let out a low slow sigh.

## **CHAPTER 14 (II ROMANS)**

"You are Jesus' son. What do you expect?" said Tommy. "You are the embodiment of every argument that there is on earth about the existence of God, Allah, and the Devil. It is quite

comforting and quite disconcerting at the same time."

"He's right, you know," said Abdul. "Every day I pick up the newspaper and man has made a new discovery in science. They are trying to decipher the very code of human existence and the beginning of the universe and here you sit, total evidence that their efforts are fruitless. Man was created by God. Since this is so, why should we not spend our lives in total praise to our Creator? Doesn't your existence make everything else useless?"

"You are a Prince of the Creator. What would you expect?" Asked Katy.

"Is this the reason for your change in attitude for me, Katy?" asked James. It had finally happened. They were all sitting at the dinner table getting ready to go their separate ways and begin the work of the foundation in other countries, when Lu Chan had requested not to go, but to stay at his side. James knew this moment would come, had wondered when they would be able to ask. He had waited twelve years for some of their questions and was not surprised when they began. He was just surprised it had taken so long.

"What attitude change, James?" shot back Katy.

"Well, ever since we arrived here from the Middle East, you have seemed different. Reserved. I had found comfort in your arms. I know you have good feelings for me, but you seem reluctant to spend any time alone with me as you had in the past."

"And is that why you asked me to come? To provide comfort?" Katy asked heatedly. "If that is all you need, I have a fee structure available."

"No, that's not why you were brought here or what I needed. I'm sorry I offended you." James said hurriedly. "But I have noticed your reserve and I miss your close friendship. It seems

that we have this wall built between us ever since the baptism."

"What would you expect of her?" Chimed in Pierre. "She loves a man to find him a God. It would unnerve me. James, it seems in all your travels to learn about men, you still know nothing. Yet your Father created man. How can this be?"

"What do you expect of us, James?" Ahmed asked. "We have followed you because of who you are, but also because you have become a dear friend. We stand confused. You ask us to treat you as a man, but we know you to be the Son of God. Do you even realize your significance?"

"You ask us to treat you as a commoner," Tommy said. "That is like asking us to ignore the fact that Prince Charles is the future king of England and go mucking about in the Thames with him for fish. At some point it just can't be done. At some point, he is the future King."

"I agree," said James. "But the question is, 'What do you want of me?'"

"What do you mean?" asked Mobutu.

"I have heard your whispers for years. And I know you have questions you have wished to ask, but you have never asked them. Do you fear me or the answers? Would it not be easy to answer your own question about what, if anything, I want from you, if I answered the questions you have of me? Do you not truly wish to know why my Father put me here? Would that answer explain your questions? If so, then why not ask it?"

"Because we have been taught never to question the word of God or His ways," said Katy.

"And who taught you that?" asked James.

"The Bible and our religious leaders," said Lu Chan.

"And has man done this? Have you done this?" asked James.

"No," said Katy.

They all turned to look at her.

"No we haven't. Look at us \_\_ we are questioning Him right now," said Katy.

There was a pause as all at the kitchen table considered her response.

"Then what do you expect to happen?" Asked James, looking directly at Katy.

"I... I don't know," she finally said.

"Nothing." Said James. "Nothing will happen. Man questions God every day. In all his work, man questions God. He researches genes, DNA, and the atom. He tries to predict the weather and preaches about what God wants and will permit to be done. Each and every one of those acts from the scientist to the preacher questions God. And nothing happens. Oh, man gains a little more knowledge. He understands a little more about this world God created. But God does nothing to him for asking the question. In fact, on numerous occasions, He gives an answer. So you may obviously question God and question me."

They sat transfixed. They thought they had known James and had even tried to protect him from some of the more despicable characters of his travels, but he had known. He had known and had only been waiting for them to ask the questions, they had been afraid to ask all these years.

"Why are you here, James?" asked Pierre. "I know that you have said it is because your Father loved this world and that He desired a son. But is there more? Are we to be the disciples of a future generation?"

"Is that what you wish, Pierre? To be a disciple teaching the people my Fathers and My teachings? To be remembered for two thousand years as the man who sat next to God?"

"I could think of worse fates. But it is not my desire for immortality that makes me ask, James. It is fear. Fear that I can not live up to the expectations of such a task. Those men were such — —"

"Men, Pierre, men. Those men did their best, as you would if called upon. But it is not your place to worry about such matters. You weren't 'chosen' as they were. If you recall, you found me cold and hungry on a boat dock. You believed in me and took me in. I was born on this planet because my Father and His Father so love this world, and my Father wished to have a son that He could not have when He strode this planet as a man. There is no Second Coming, and I was not sent here to save mankind again. I was sent here out of love, and I was sent here to live as a man."

"Amen," said a soft voice from the kitchen door.

"Mom," said Katy to Cindy. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I just brought over some cookies for ya'll to eat. I don't mean to be interrupting," said Cindy.

"Mom, you've known Jesus and I don't mean to be arguing with James," Katy began, "But is what he says true? Can we humans, with all our faults, be that special to God and Jesus?"

"A wise woman once said, 'Why can we always believe the worst of ourselves and never the best?'" Said Cindy.

"Aunt Jenny said that." Mobutu smiled.

"That's right. And she was right." Cindy said. "I will tell you darlin'. I will tell all of you that James is here because He loves us. Jesus truly loves us and He wanted a Son. There is no other purpose, and I find that idea immensely reassuring."

"You know, mom, that gives me a great amount of satisfaction too," said Pierre.

They were all smiling at one another when Katy giggled out, "Yes, I'd say a big warm fuzzy feeling!"

They all laughed and reached out to grab the still-warm cookies placed on the table. Lu Chan had risen to get some milk from the refrigerator and Katy had gone to the cabinet to gather some glasses.

Lu Chan spoke again. "Then you are nothing more at this point than a man? I mean, you have said you are, I know, but you can't drop us dead with thunderbolts or send your angels to seek your revenge. What happens after you die? Will you die?"

They all looked to James again as he spoke. "At my baptism, I was given limited powers to heal. I have always been able to speak to Jesus as you have, I just hear his reply's better. I am aware of future things to come as my Father lets me know them. Will I die? Yes. What will happen after I die? I don't really know, but I expect to be reunited with all my friends and loved ones, including Aunt Jenny." James' eyes twinkled.

"Is there a heaven, a hell." asked Tommy

"Yes." Said James. "But how do I describe it? My Father attempted with much less learned men than you and the best He could come up with is using anecdotes. He described a palace with many rooms, a New Kingdom. But, these are just pale examples of what awaits us all. They were descriptions that these men and women could relate to. How do you describe a soul, an entity that has no substance, no form? What would he need with a room or palace?"

"What are you saying then? No palace, no streets of gold, no rooms, a vague emptiness?"

interrupted Tommy.

"Palace, rooms, Gods, Lords. These are all human terms, Tommy. Usually used to put a position or rank upon a man. To show his significance above all others. These are not God's terms. Jesus used these terms to describe to an uneducated mass the great and good things that await them when they die, to assure them that their lives on earth were not worthless and that they faced a better future after death. My Father used these terms because they were the common terms used by common men at the time. They were the only words He felt He could use to convey His message. Heaven is so much grander than this, so much greater. But believe me when I tell you that no amount of abstract thinking on men's part could come close to describing the wonder that awaits you."

"Then your saying you won't be able to describe it to us because men and women lack the capability to understand?" asked Tommy.

"Exactly," said James.

"How do you know so much about it, then?" asked Lu Chan. "If it cannot be described, how do you know?"

"Because my Father let me know. I don't know how He did it but He did and probably for the same reason He told those people two thousand years ago about it in the first place." Said James.

"What is hell, then?" asked Mobutu, quietly and somberly. "Are we to be judged in the next life?"

"The best answer I can give is that hell is the absence of Heaven, and your soul can go there. Will you be judged? Yes, but by your own choosing. No hell is permanent unless you wish it."

Said James.

"You seem so cryptic about it. Why?" asked Katy.

"Because I know it also and it makes me grieve heavily for those souls living there. I wish to rescue them all, but the judgement is theirs and I cannot."

"You mention choosing again and again. Why is that so important?" asked Mobutu.

James smiled. "Because that is God's greatest gift to man. Free will, the ability to choose. That is what makes man and women so interesting, so loved. It is what brings out the Godliness in humankind."

"You mean we have a choice to believe or not believe, to change our minds, do as we wish. It is not destiny or fate that guides us. It is a culmination of all of our choices over time?" asked Pierre.

"Yes, and one of the reasons I expect to see you all in heaven when we die our natural deaths. You have chosen to believe in heaven and me and my Father. You will not judge yourselves out of His Love."

"If it is so wonderful in Heaven, why do we not choose to go there now? Commit suicide, join our Father?" Asked Ahmed.

"Once again, it is free choice. As long as they feel alive, humans wish to remain alive. Haven't you heard about how depressed suicide or suicide attempts are? Their choice is to die because they have no free will to live. The perfect remedy for a person with that affliction is to give them anything, any small thing to hope for, and they will choose to live. You don't die because you choose to live. Your soul will not allow you to die as long as it chooses to live."

"Even for the benefits of Heaven?" asked Ahmed.

"Even for the benefits of Heaven." replied James. "Remember, Ahmed, life is not a contest, and Heaven is not a prize or a reward. Your soul knows this even if your conscious does not. Your soul is happy to be here as it will be to be in Heaven and it and you choose to be here, so you will."

"Then is religion necessary? Do we need to praise God on a weekly or daily basis? Is there a true church?" Asked Tommy.

"A true church? Hmmm. Religion? I would say that any religion that honors God, no matter what they call Him, would be in your terms a true Church. Is religion necessary? Considering the benefits of churches, they would be missed. But praising the Lord? Why would you not? It isn't that God needs your praise, but wouldn't you wish to honor your creator, your Father? You honor football heroes every Sunday by watching them on the TV and buying products they endorse. Why wouldn't you wish to honor Him?"

"Can you have children?" asked Katy.

The men in the room smirked.

"He said we could ask," said Katy defensively. "Answer the question James."

James looked at his mother and saw tears well up in her eyes. "No, Katy, I cannot have children at this time. That is one of the unique drawbacks to being related to Jesus. Could you imagine having two, three, or four little James' around all related to God? Even I can see the problems with that."

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to," said Katy, rushing to Cindy's side.

"That's all right dear. I still got two other children to give me grandbabies. It is enough that

I bore James," said Cindy.

"Is that the wall that is between us, Katy?" James asked. "Were you worried to love me as a man when you found out I was related to God? Did you think you would be responsible for the raising of more Gods?"

"That, and other doubts. I mean, your mother had Jesus' child. I will forever honor her for that. What a burden she bore. And your Dad. To be the two humans charged with the raising of Jesus' Son. How could I hope to measure up to those standards? These are truly amazing people and yet she sits here with us night after night. She brings us cookies and wonderful dinners. She serves us when we should be serving her. And your Dad takes us wherever we wish to go, never asking for a penny for his services. He wouldn't even let me take in the groceries from the car, groceries that your mother cooked and served to us. James, they're too human to be great, but too great to be human. I know they are not Gods, but that you will be. And James, just considering my past, I just don't feel worthy to be here, in her presence, being served by her." Katy was fairly sobbing now.

Cindy rose and went to the corner of the kitchen Katy had retreated to and put her arm around her. "I know of your past, chile." Cindy said quietly.

Katy looked up horrified, into the quiet eyes of Cindy. "No, chile, it does not bother me," Cindy said. "And I have learned that God does not give us burdens that we cannot bear. I know you to be of a good heart and I know you were there to rescue James when he faltered. Better yet, even Jesus and God know that. And chile, you did that without even knowing who he was, you did that because you cared for him. As for being worthy, well Aunt Jenny knew more about that than we

ever will know. I just know James wants you here, I and Dad want you here, and so do the boys. Judy especially wants you. In my book that makes you good enough and worthy enough. So sit down and have another drink of milk and some more cookies. You are welcome here."

Katy looked at Cindy, then James as she sat down. "Is that true, James? Do you want me here? I mean, I know you asked me to come. But \_ \_"

"I want you here, Katy. I shall be on this earth for many years, if God will have it so. And as every man has found out in his labors here on earth, the best part of life is sharing it with someone you care for deeply. I care deeply for you, and I want you here to share my life with me."

"You know," said Katy, reaching across the table and taking James' hand, "with any other man I would call that a proposal of marriage."

"And so it is with me." James grinned.

Cindy gasped and the boys hooted. Katy squealed.

"What's your answer?" James said, suddenly a little panicked since there was no response.

"Yes," said Katy. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

It was Cindy who then fell down in a chair and drank a glass of milk.

"A marriage. Really? I'm sure this has never happened before," said Maggie excitedly. "I mean, I don't remember Jesus ever marrying that woman. And we're invited." She turned to John. "You actually get to do the ceremony? Does Jesus know? Of course He knows. Well, a crock-pot is definitely out. What will I wear?"

John suddenly realized he was really not part of Maggie's conversation. She was on a roll.

Katy had become a fast friend ever since their meeting in Jerusalem, and this wedding was going to be special for both of them. Suddenly the phone rang. Maggie picked it up, said hello, then squealed.

"Yes, he told me. No... When? And she didn't mind? What?" another squeal. "Yes. Yes. Yes, I'll see you shortly." she hung up. "Isn't that great, John? She called me first and asked me to be the maid of honor. Of course I said yes. I've got to go. We're meeting at the mall; she's giving me all the details." With that, Maggie left the room. John stood by the door, wondering what had just happened.

## CHAPTER 15

"That's it. I've just about had it with this whole nonsense," Dex growled. "Lori, do you know what your boy has went and done now? Another \$50,000.00 sent to that nigger and his organization. It isn't enough I have to endure that friendship of his with that black boy \_\_ hell, he's even going to marry them, but I have to endure his giving out our hard earned money to support this twerp. Just when is that boy going to grow a brain? Why can't he see that that coon is just another con artist taking him for all he is worth?"

"Now Dex, that is a lot of money, but John can afford it. Besides, it isn't right you referring to his friend as a nigger. You've never even met the man. He might be very nice," replied Lori.

"Don't be takin' his side. I know a con man when I see one."

"I suppose you should." said Lori. "You been associating with them for years."

"Now don't get smart. My dealings have kept you pretty comfortable for years. I don't see you complaining on your monthly shopping sprees to New York."

"But what is wrong with John giving some of his money to friends?" Lori asked. "Con men or not, it makes him happy."

"Because I don't like people stealing from me or my family!" shouted Dex. "This gets out and every con artist in the country will make us a target. I'm not going to be taken for a sap. You know the old saying, 'You can't con a con man.' Well, I'm going to prove it. I'll nail that poor bastard publicly where even John will have to acknowledge his fraud."

They had decided to wait until the anniversary of James' baptism to have the wedding. It would allow Katy to make arrangements with her friends and invite her mother. Maggie was already complaining that it wasn't nearly enough time, and it was still six months away. John was delighted and more than eager to officiate at the ceremony. Cindy and Judy were on cloud nine, calling friends, neighbors and acquaintances. Russ and Dad were beaming. But James had one more to which he had to make the announcement, and the following evening James took Katy to his small hill out back and introduced her to his Father.

"What will He say? Do I look all right? Do I kneel? Are you sure He is OK with this?"

Asked Katy, eyes wide, steps hesitant.

"I don't know what He will say. You look fine. He will accept you kneeling or standing. We'll both find out if He is OK with this." "But what if He isn't OK? I mean, it's not like we can elope or anything. Oh, James, I'm scared."

"If He's not OK with it, we'll send in Mom." James grinned. "I mean He is Jesus, but He also was a man."

"And what does that mean?" shot back Katy, eyes flashing.

"Too late... we're here." said James ducking the question.

"We're where?" said Katy, looking out over the slight hill into the star lit sky. "Oh, gosh. You mean we're here."

James dropped his arms to his side, closed his eyes, tilted his head towards the Heavens and spoke. "Father, I am here. I wish to speak with you." The light came, the same light Katy witnessed at the baptism, but somehow brighter and softer, warm but comforting. Then she saw them.

"Grandmother, Father!," James exclaimed with joy. "It is so good to see you again."

Turning to Jesus James said. "Father, I come to ask your blessing and yours too, grandmother. I have met someone I wish to marry. Her name is Katy."

James reached for Katy's hand and pulled her near. Extending his arm as if it was any common introduction, he said, "Katy, this is my Father and my Grandmother Mary."

Katy nodded, barely remembering her manners. "I am so pleased to meet you."

James continued speaking to his Father while Mary moved over and placed Katy's hand in

hers. "It would honor me greatly, Father, if you approve of this marriage," he said.

Gazing upon His Son, His Mother, and Katy, Jesus smiled and said, "Son, with all my heart, I bless this union and I think I speak for your grandmother too." With that, Mary and Jesus slowly disappeared and the light became night again.

Katy just stared, dumbfounded, then erupted. "Pleased to meet you! I just said pleased to meet you to Jesus and Mary! Where was my tongue?"

"And you were no help!" she said, turning to James. "Why didn't you tell me your grandmother would be there? And me in these rags." Katy punched James in the ribs and headed off.

"But Katy," James yelled, "they liked you. They blessed our wedding."

I should have definitely spent more time studying women, thought James as he ran after his fiancé.

Thomas met James outside the door. Katy had entered a minute before and was in animated conversation with both Judy and Cindy. "Son, I wouldn't go in there if I were you," he said.

"But Dad, I gotta find out what's wrong. Katy just punched me and headed straight for mom after Grandmother and Father both blessed our wedding."

"Son, there is no woman in there on your side right now, and there is no man in there that wishes to keep his hide. It is very important in a relationship to know when to keep your mouth shut and just accept the fact you are wrong. Don't matter what about, you're just wrong." Thomas smiled.

"Come on, son. Let's go handle something we can whip, like global warming or world wide pollution." He led James next door to the Foundation house.

"How'd it go?" said Russ to James as he walked in.

"Yeah how did it go?" said Mobutu. He and the rest of His friends were drinking soda pops in the front room. "Katy came running in the back door cryin'. Judy jumped up and ran into the kitchen, yelled something like 'Men' at the top of her voice. When your Dad headed for the door, so did I."

"Well I thought it went all right," said James. "Mary and Jesus blessed the union."

"Great!" said Russ, and the room erupted with backslapping and congratulations.

"Don't worry, son," said Thomas "You'll find out what was wrong soon enough. Let your mother handle it now. Meanwhile, congratulations."

"Thanks, dad." Said James. "I'll do that."

"Hey, James," said Abdul. "We got a call from John Love. He wanted you to call him back tonight if you could."

"Sure, why not. Where's the phone?"

"James?" said John, answering the phone. "How'd it go?... Yeah? That's great. Well I was worried; Maggie is on the other phone talking to Katy now. I left the room as soon as I had the chance. Yeah, well, Cindy will handle it. Hey, do you think we can arrange a meeting between you and my dad soon? Yeah, he requested it. No, don't know why. Sure. Thanks, I appreciate it. Hey, be careful when you talk to him. He's an old time con man, could get you into trouble without knowing it. And friend, stay low, at least until Katy's storm blows over. See you later." John hung up.

"When it rains, it pours," said John, hearing but not listening to his wife comforting and commiserating with Katy over the phone.

What is dad up to? Thought John. He's been angry about this whole situation with James. I probably shouldn't have gone blathering on about him when I got home from the baptism.

Brother Francis was thrilled. After his initial conversation with James he had gone about his work with a renewed vigor. He told himself that he had always believed, but knowing and believing in your work, especially in these doubtful times, was a world of difference. Then Russ called to explain the news. Brother Francis had known he was working well with the Foundation and considered it an honor to be so close to James. But to be invited to His wedding? It was just too much to expect in one lifetime.

Brother Francis rushed to call Sister Genevieve, or Jenny as she was often called. Francis was so pleased he had introduced her to him. It had made things so much easier to have someone to talk to about these things. She was also quite adept at taking those calls when he was not around. Of course she had recognized James right off. Francis new she would; a more saintly woman he had never known. She had wept for hours after meeting him, thanking Brother Francis profusely for his confidence. Together they had worked diligently for James.

She squealed a spontaneous blessing of delight, then they both knelt and prayed to the Lord, thanking them for their blessings. Brother Francis assured her they were invited guests and she squealed and prayed some more. "A crock pot is definitely out on this one." She smiled to Brother

Francis as he nodded quickly.

James set the meeting for the following week with John's father. Wedding plans, the startup of the foundation worldwide, and finding Katy's missing mother were more than enough for one week. "She never even told me her mother was alive," said James.

Now it was his turn to be nervous. He hadn't banked on a mother-in-law. Thomas was no help, saying how Cindy's mom not talking to her was one of his blessings. He had told Katy he was sorry that night. He still wasn't quite sure for what, but he was sure sorry. The apology worked, especially after he promised not to do whatever it was again.

A week had passed and James was waiting in Dex Love's offices for Mr. Love to show. John was very nervous about the meeting and had arranged it so, as few people as possible were around when he showed up. John didn't want to take too many chances on someone recognizing James for who he was and causing a scene. It would be difficult enough if his father recognized him, although somehow John didn't fear that happening.

The door opened and a slim man in a light blue suit looked out at James. "James? I'm sorry, I don't know your last name." The man extended a hand to him.

"James is just fine, sir. And would you be Mr. Love, John's father?" James asked.

"That I would, son. Thank you for coming to see me. I have heard precious little else from my son and daughter-in-law lately but your name, so I thought it might be nice to meet you and find out a little more." Dex motioned to a chair in front of the desk, while he took the seat behind it.

James was relieved. Mr. Love obviously did not recognize him as a Son of Jesus, and they

could carry on the conversation as two men. "There really isn't much to tell, Mr. Love. I was born here in Georgia, traveled the world a bit, and came home to start an organization to help people of the world."

"Call me Dex, son. After all, anyone that has over \$150,000.00 of this organization's money should be on a first-name basis with the president," said Dex coldly.

"Is that what you called me here for, to talk about John's donations? I believed it was his money to donate," said James.

"His money is the church's money," said Dex. "And any money you may have received from him is of concern to my church."

"Well then, sir," James said coldly, "I suggest you speak with John about these matters. It seems a family disagreement that I have no part in." He rose to leave.

"Wait a minute, young man. I'm not through yet. I'm here to tell you to let my son out of this scam of yours or I'll expose you for what you are."

"And what might that be?" said James turning to face his accuser.

"A two bit-nigger con man." said Dex, standing and glaring at James.

"Jesus, forgive him," James said, and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"I will kill him!" said John, inflamed.

"No you won't," said James, quietly.

John had never been so furious with his father. James had refused to discuss his conversation with John's father, and only discreetly placed inquiries had revealed the truth to John.

"He has no right, no authority to question my gifts to you. I'll not stand for it." John said angrily. "To call you a fraud, a con, a nigger... I'll never speak to the man again. I'll never work with him again."

"He was only trying to protect you, John. What would you expect? Consider his position and where he is coming from. In his background, men were constantly pulling scams and cons to receive a few more donations from the crowd. Speaking in tongues, healing, small miracles and promises \_ \_ they were all garnered to milk a few more dollars. Then you walk in with a black man from Jerusalem. He knows nothing about him except that he has received \$150,000.00 in cash from his son and is starting what appears to be a church. What would you think?"

"I would hope to give him the courtesy of a good name," said John cooling down somewhat.

"It would seem you could show your father that the money is not going for some scam. Give him an accounting. Our books are open. Let him know others are involved; it may not be too late to turn him around."

"You, sir, are much more tolerant than I." John sighed.

"I don't need to audit his books." Dex said. "I've audited the man. Hell any fool could fake a good set of books. You know better than this, John. Why are you so taken in by him? Why don't you see that he's heard of your quest and just supplied a response? The man will be swimming in cadillacs inside a year and you will have lost all your money and self-respect."

"You stubborn old fool. It is true that a person can believe anything about another that they know they themselves are capable. Good Lord, you've been scamming people for so long you can't

see the real thing when it happens in front of your eyes." yelled John. The outer offices had cleared as soon as the shouting began.

"Don't you speak to me that way. I made you and you will respect me. If it weren't for my guidance you would have never reached the position you are in now. You will do as I say, damn it. You will stop seeing and sending this person any more of our money."

"Father, GO..TO.. HELL!" Shouted John. "If you so much as raise one hand against him, once voice, one word, one finger, I will leave this congregation and take my believers with me. You cannot keep this church without me and I am not your puppet to be ordered around. You may think you have made me, but I sure as hell can live without you. Could you say the same about me?"

Dex was livid. He started to raise his hand, then realized what he was doing and controlled it. Between clenched teeth he said, "Don't you ever threaten me, son. Do what you will and God damns you for doing it. I've had enough. Leave."

John, stood took his papers and walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

"Then the old bastard tried to cut off my weekly salary, can you believe that?" Sighed John to James. "Well, I went to the church board and told them no money, no preaching. My dad was furious when his friends voted unanimously to reinstate my salary and give me a raise. I thought about asking for his removal from the board and operations of the church, but he is doing well there except for the disagreement with me."

"I'm sorry all this has happened. Would it help if I distanced myself and this foundation from you?" asked James.

"It would help, but I don't want it to happen and I know Katy and Maggie would be mad at the both of us. I wouldn't want to face them. You think my father is bad." John grinned.

James patted John on the shoulder. "Never again do I want to face that." They both laughed.

There was no record of James' birth, just as John had said. The only explanations Dex could figure out was he was born at home, had his records destroyed, or wasn't really from Atlanta at all. He called Thomas' place of work.

"Trouble in paradise, eh?" said Cardinal Michael. "Well, maybe our boy is finally slipping. I knew no true church could last. What is the latest, Brother Francis?"

"Well it seems there was a very big fight over some of John's contributions to charities. His father apparently did not approve. His father then tried to control John's finances by revoking his salary. A meeting of the church board of governors restored John's salary under threat of John. Then gave him a raise. John's father is very upset over all of this."

"Do you know what charity they were arguing about?" asked the Cardinal.

"Aunt Jenny Foundation," answered Brother Francis.

"Isn't that the one we agreed to finance?" asked the Cardinal.

"Yes, sir. We have been sending them a small stipend each month. They have responded with detailed information on their expenses and seem to actually be doing some good."

"That's good. It will keep the church from any hidden scandal. Still, it does give us the tie-in

we may need to explore this rift further. Keep an eye on them, Brother Francis. Let me know if anything further develops and be prepared to pull out if there is any problem with that charity. Dex Love may be a con, but he's smart. He usually knows when to leave a bad situation."

## **CHAPTER 16**

Judy and Katy left for Sweden in early July. Judy was just plain excited to be going on an adventure in the world, and helping Katy find her mother was an added bonus. Tommy had left earlier to set up a foundation house, as had the others. By agreement, they had chosen to set up their houses in their native countries. Tommy's was to be the first one James was to visit. Judy, Katy, and James were to meet up in Paris at Pierre's Foundation House in August. Russ was holding down the fort at home, while Cindy and Maggie tried to prepare for the wedding in December.

Brother Francis and Sister Jenny had asked James to keep in touch and he promised to call occasionally on his travels. John was continuing his ministry and trying to keep an eye on his father. James told him not to worry about Dex, figuring his absence would cool Dex's fire.

John, James and the other members of the Aunt Jenny Foundation had discussed extensively how they were going to try to implement James' plan to help those people of the world that seemed deserving of additional divine intervention. James had riled often at the God-like powers he was

able to use because of the choices he would have to make. All agreed the final decision to help or heal any individual would have to remain with James.

It was also decided that instead of just lining up customers or those in need of assistance that the foundation house would attempt to help others in need. Mental health programs or crisis intervention programs would be established at each house in order to serve as many as possible. Besides, James thought that this would give them easier access to those people in hospitals and social programs that could use some divine intervention.

James knew it would be hard to choose. He was aware that with God's gift of free will, numerous individuals were suffering needless pain or facing death that God didn't wish to have happen. He also knew that some cases were just results of lifestyles or his Father's will and that he should not interfere. Meeting these people and giving or denying them help was a decision James knew would be difficult. But not using his gift to help anyone would be even more painful.

Tommy had arranged for him to meet two newborns in serious condition on the first night of his visit at a local hospital. Both were on respirators; one had Downs syndrome and the other did not. Neither had really been able to express their free will nor knew what it meant. Both were premature births and both would die without some intervention. The babe without Downs syndrome, however, had decided to be called back to James, Father. He did not know why, he just knew. But the babe with the mental disorder was still free to make a life. James realized the difficulties the child would expose the families to, but realized if he did nothing, the child could probably die through no fault of His own. The parents, James also knew, had mixed feelings about the child, worried he would die and worried he would live. It seemed unfair to James to correct the

problem in the child with mental problems and not be able to answer the prayers of the parents of the child without problems.

Just as he was turning to go without offering any help, however, a nurse, slight, maybe 25 years old, came in and checked on the babes. She reached in and stroked both of their heads through the incubation bassinets. Both children smiled and James knew that the life, no matter how small, deserved to live and make choices. He also realized that a life's value must be considered on its own merits not the merits of those around it. James stayed and prayed placing his hand on the downs child. The baby smiled as a warm glow engulfed his body. James then placed a blessing on the other child for a painless blessed passing.

James realized that after that experience, more thought and time should be spent in developing criteria as how he should offer his services. Each experience was unique, though, and winging it became his preferred method. James especially liked those simple ones \_\_ the repaired leg, the cured cold, and the soothed thoughts over the life and death requests. He was able at one time to be at an accident before the medics arrived and stopped the bleeding of a young woman with child before each was in serious danger. Working with the passerby who extracted the passengers and lent a hand, with no fear for their own possible loss, invigorated James. These, to him, were the true miracles of men and to be included in them was a great thrill.

James had decided to stay no longer than a month at each house. This would enable him to leave before too much attention could be drawn to him and allow him to visit each house twice a year if he so chose. It seemed proper timing, as stories of small acts of healing in the little house started to spread throughout the community.

James was pleased with his first month's work and was looking forward to getting to Paris anyhow. He hadn't heard from Katy or Judy yet because of his schedule, but knew they were well from conversations with his mother. Cindy said it has been more difficult than Katy had thought, but would have news by the time they both reached Pierre in Paris.

John had called James while he was in London. His father had apparently taken John up on his offer to look at the foundation's books. John didn't like it, but promised he would ask James if he would mind. James agreed, hoping that Dex would find nothing wrong and try a conciliatory make up with John. John tried to impress upon James that this was unlikely, but James wanted to try. After the conversation James headed to Paris.

Pierre was ecstatic to see James. He had rarely been out of James sight for thirteen years and was overjoyed to be with him again. Pierre had set up his foundation house in his home village close to Paris, and not too far from his family. James was just as thrilled to see Pierre, but equally as pleased to see Pierre's family. James had stayed with these people on numerous occasions and they treated him as one of their own.

"Mama will have dinner for you in a little while," Pierre said. "She has been on the phone already for a month with your mother. They have become fast friends and she has taken a new vigor in being in charge of your welfare during your stay here. Papa and Uncle had been working as mad dogs preparing the house for our foundation. All is well and ready to go." They sat outside, sipping wine in the soft air.

"Well, I must thank them. Where are they?" asked James.

"They will be along shortly. How were things in England? How is Tommy?"

"I thought things went pretty good. There was a large learning experience I did not anticipate, but our successes did give me great joy and seemed to help a number of people. I did leave Tommy in a bit of a lurch. Apparently we were not as discreet as we hoped and a number of people were trying for miracle cures as I left. Thankfully no one recognized me as the healer and Tommy was able to deflect the attention."

"It must be difficult, making those decisions," said Pierre solemnly.

"The decisions are still the property of the individual," said James. "I just help those that have decided to continue living or who are recovering from their problems. The ones that need an additional hand to meet their goals."

"I know you have spoken before about this. But, it still must be difficult not to help every one that is sick or injured," replied Pierre.

"Yes, it is. But each injury or sickness is different and the person themselves may have decided to be sick. Free will is still a gift from my Fathers and must be respected. That is why it is usually much easier to handle a problem brought upon by an accident than illness brought upon by the person."

"Aren't all illnesses and injury and accident? Asked Pierre.

"More than you know and less than you would believe," replied James.

Pierre looked down the street and began to grin. "Well, enough shop talk now, my friend. It is time to meet the family."

Pierre stood and looked down the small street, lifting James up with him. They both began to here strains of joyous music grow louder and louder. James suddenly realized it was a procession

filled with flowers \_ \_ Pierre's family, and the friends he had met during their previous visits to Pierre's hometown. Pierre's moma was in the lead, arm in arm with his papa. Just as James was getting ready to run to hug them both, they separated and Katy was standing behind them grinning a halo of flowers braided in her hair. Judy was laughing and smiling right behind her.

James rushed into Katy's arms, laughing and crying at the seeming explosion of music, lights and flowers all around him. Suddenly it was a party, right there in the middle of the street. Food came from nowhere. The dancing had already started as James began hugging and kissing mama and papa, Judy and the whole group. Katy finally grabbed James and held him still. "You still love a party, don't you, big boy?" She laughed.

"Most definitely." James said, holding her hands as tight as she would allow.

"Well, I got someone I want you to meet." Katy said.

"Who?" asked James.

"Well, who do you think I went all the way to Europe to find?"

"James, you are so stupid sometimes." Judy piped in, bringing a small woman by the hand up to meet Him.

"You found her?" James said breathlessly.

"Yes. Now straighten up, cause I want you to meet my mother." Said Katy, pulling gently on the hand of the lady Judy had brought forward.

"Momma. This is James. James, Ingrid, my mother." Said Katy. All within earshot began to cry.

James drew himself up and with great joy and as much dignity as he could muster. "It is a

great honor to meet you."

Ingrid took his hand in hers, looked into his eyes, took a small gasp and collapsed.

"James, what did you do?" yelled Judy.

"Nothing." stuttered James. The music stopped and they all gathered around Ingrid. James held her hand as Pierre took her to a chair. In a few minutes Ingrid awoke.

"You're Him." Said Ingrid, wide-eyed.

James turned to Katy, a look of relief on his face. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

"Well, James, it is a little hard. I just met her for the first time in twenty-two years. What was I supposed to do. Yell, 'Hi Mom, I just met God. He and I are getting married'? She would have thought I was nuts."

"Or going to a convent," giggled Judy.

The music and dancing began again as James, Judy and Katy sat down beside Ingrid. "You are Him, aren't you?" asked Ingrid.

"Yes, mother, James is the Son of Jesus." Said Katy.

"Well, blessed be. I had thought I lost you forever. Then you come back to find me to be at your wedding and the bridegroom is the Lord's child Himself. Well, I have a feeling this is going to put a severe cramp in the mother-in-law ability to hassle."

They all laughed. "This is definitely the mother of Katy," said Pierre as they all toasted their health and rejoined the party.

James found out a few more details about Katy by talking with her mother. It turned out her

father had died when she was fourteen from a traffic accident. Money had been tight and mother and daughter fought. When she turned sixteen, Katy had left. Her mother had searched for her, but was never able to find her again. She was overjoyed to see Katy again and recognized her as soon as she had opened the door to the apartment she was in. Ingrid had never remarried and was happy to know her daughter had forgiven her for anything she had done.

Pierre's momma had immediately taken Ingrid into the house after the Party to call James' mother. James had hoped to say hi to Cindy, but after an hour of waiting, realized that once again his mother had made another fast friend, so he went to bed.

James walked into the kitchen and saw Pierre with a helpless look upon his face. It was breakfast, but the kitchen was already humming. Being in a groggy state of mind, James was caught before he new what was coming.

"Don't you think that would be all right James?" asked Katy.

"I say if she wants to, she should go ahead," said Pierre's momma.

"I don't know, Katy; that's awful generous," said Ingrid.

"James, she said I could go if you went with me," said Judy.

Pierre grabbed something to drink and a piece of bread and slunk out the door.

James realized the sinking feeling of being trapped as Momma put a large helping of food in front of him. Katy retrieved a beverage from the counter for him to drink. "What did you say?" he asked Katy.

"Honestly, James. Pay attention. Mom, your mom, asked my mom to the states to help plan

the wedding. Maggie says she'll come and get her, but my mom thinks it's too much to ask. I tried to tell her to go, but she's scared." she glared at her mother.

"I'm not scared, I just don't know any of these people. And it is just a little much," said Ingrid.

"James, I want to go to Africa to see Mobutu next month and mom says I can go if you take Me." interrupted Judy.

"I think she should, James," interrupted Momma. "Mobutu's a good boy. Besides, we would love to show her around France."

James wondered, was I here for these conversations? He stood up, grabbed his cup and a piece of bread and backed up towards the door. "If Momma wants to keep an eye on you while your here, I'll take you to Africa with me, Sis. Why don't you have Maggie bring Mom over to meet your mom, Katy? Then maybe they will fly back together after they know each other. Besides, Mom has never seen France and I know she would love to meet Momma." James slid quickly out the back door.

"I knew he might have an idea," said Momma "Then it's settled." Judy squealed with delight as they all began a new round of discussions.

Within a week, James, Pierre, and Poppa had moved into the Foundation house. It allowed James to continue his work and set up new programs to help the people around the area that could be continued in his absence. It also allowed the women a chance to really get the planning started and get to know each other.

Cindy had arrived with Maggie two days after the discussion in the kitchen. It had looked like old home week at the airport. Cindy recognized Momma right off, and Ingrid had become close friends with both. It astonished James how quickly His mother could make a friend. After a day or two of rest, the six of them had gone to Paris for a sightseeing and shopping expedition. Maggie and Momma showed the rest around the town like proud mother hens. At the end of the week, it was decided that Ingrid would go to Atlanta with Cindy and help prepare the wedding. Katy would return with them to help with a few items and try on a dress or two, while Judy stayed with Momma and James. Katy would return in time to accompany James and Judy to Africa, after which Judy would return with Katy to the states to help prepare for the wedding.

James was ecstatic the plans had been made and heartily endorsed each and every decision. Relieved of distractions, he was able to accelerate his work and meet some of the goals he and Pierre had set.

"What are these reports I keep hearing about in Europe, concerning the Foundation?" Asked Cardinal Michael.

"What reports are those?" asked Brother Francis.

"These articles concerning miracle healings. We aren't endorsing another 'Love' foundation over there, are we?" Asked the Cardinal.

"No, sir." Said Francis "I can assure you of that."

"Well, then why the press coverage? First in England, now in France. I admit it is only small articles, but if the tabloids get hold of them it could be embarrassing for the Church."

"I assure you that there are no shenanigans going on in that foundation," Brother Francis said. "It would have to be just a few locals seeking some sort of public attention. If you wish, I will research it some more to confirm this."

"It would ease my mind," replied the Cardinal.

"I'll get right on it then."

As Brother Francis left, the Cardinal made a note to himself to look into the Brother's relationship with the Aunt Jenny Foundation. It seemed to him that the Brother was way too conciliatory.

Dex couldn't find anything wrong with Foundations books. He had looked it over himself.

"I told you they were clean, dad," said John.

"It's not the Foundation I'm worried about, son. It's that nigger."

"What, in Gods name, is so wrong with James?"

"The way he twists you an everybody else around. It just ain't right. There has got to be something wrong with him."

"The way he twists everybody around? He has asked nothing of anyone they haven't been willing to give. What is wrong with that."

"It's just not right, boy. No black man ought to be able to control people like he does. Ain't normal. There has got to be an angle."

"Are you just angry at him because he's black, or just because he's good."

"Ain't nobody that good. You listen to me, boy. Someday your gonna thank me for looking

into this. That boy's gonna pop right up and stab you in the back. Mark my word," said Dex.

"You're impossible," replied John as he left the room.

Africa had been as big a madhouse as France. Judy had nearly put up a screaming fit when she was to return home with Katy. Mobutu was no help either. It had become fairly obvious to all that Mobutu and Judy really preferred each other's company to the rest of the world.

Brother Francis had called from the States while James was in France. Apparently James' minor miracles were getting some press time and it was bringing unwelcome attention to his works. James and Pierre had agreed to develop some new ways to continue the good works without bringing attention to themselves. They even called John, who had been so good at avoiding reporters, and asked for tips. Apparently it had worked as Sister Genny had called to relate that no new stories had appeared in some time.

After sending Judy back to the States with Katy, Mobutu and James were finally able to get some serious works done. They put into place some of the programs developed in the other countries and were able to initiate some unique ones for Africa.

Ahmed was well prepared by the time James had arrived in Arabia. Having a full three months of preparation and the benefit of constant communication with Tommy, Mobutu, and Pierre, Ahmed had been able to circumvent a lot of the problems the others had encountered. It was here that James was able to make the most progress on his trip. He visited many refugee camps, dispensed water, care and cured various forms of disease. The relative isolation of the foundation house had allowed him to work without fear of being found out and he enjoyed it immensely.

Lu Chan had had some difficulties do to the political climate, but still was far ahead of Tommy and Pierre by the time James arrived. He had also chosen a more isolated home for the foundation house and was able to bring those that needed help to and from James with little interference.

As great as the world tour had been James was looking forward to returning to Atlanta. He was filled with the joy of helping others, but quite tired with the long hours and stress. It was early December before he finally touched down in Atlanta. Lu Chan had accompanied him leaving a small staff in charge of the house.

He saw Katy first.

"James!" she yelled.

James ran to her and swept her up in his arms. "How are you doing, soon-to-be-wife?"  
Asked James.

"All the better for seeing you," she said, kissing him passionately.

Lu Chan coughed.

"Oh, hi Lu Chan," Katy said sheepishly, releasing her grip on James just long enough to give Lu Chan a hug.

"Can you believe that? I get an "Oh, Hi" and you get treated like God's gift to man." Lu Chan teased.

"When you got it, you got it, old man." James teased back.

"Lu Chan, James!" shouted a familiar voice.

"When did you guys get in?" asked Lu Chan, noticing Tommy, Ahmed and Pierre.

"Yesterday," Tommy said. "Sorry, James, but we fairly ran your poor dad to death picking us up and dropping us off from the airport. Told him we'd pick you up today to save him the trouble. Insisted on it, really. I swear that man will never slow down."

"That's all right. Say, where's Mobutu? I thought he was supposed to arrive yesterday also."

"Well, he did." Katy grinned.

"So, is there something I should know?" asked James, eyebrows raised.

"I do believe, old man, that you have been replaced as the object of Mobutu's heart." Tommy laughed.

"Oh, quit teasing." said Katy. "He finally asked Judy and your Dad, James. They both said yes."

James whooped with joy. "I thought he would never choke it out. When's the date? Did they say?"

"Sometime in June. They figured your Mom needed a break before the next wedding." Said Pierre.

"Probably," said James, sweeping Katy into his arms one more time. "How big is the wedding this time, my dear?"

"Now don't start. Let's get your bags. Your mom's waiting and we have lots to talk about."

Brother Francis and Sister Genny were waiting at the Foundation house when James and the

others pulled up. They hurriedly came down the steps to greet James.

"Hello, James!" said Sister Genny. "How are you?"

"Yes, Hello James." Said Brother Francis. He was never quite comfortable with the familiar title that he was permitted to use with Jesus' Son.

"What do I owe the honor of your presence this late afternoon?" said James, genuinely happy to see both of them.

"Well, I don't know if it is good or bad news. I know that you prefer to deal with just us, and well...." Said Brother Francis.

"Cardinal Michael wants to meet you." Said Sister Genny in a rush. She then shrunk back as if she had done something wrong.

James smiled. "And do you know why he needs to see me?"

"No. We don't even know how he found out about you. We have been ever so careful to keep your identity hidden, just as you asked." Brother Francis looked worried.

"I know you have. You are a good friend and things just happen," said James.

"We can try to distract him or something," said Sister Genny.

"No, I will meet with him. We have nothing to hide. It's just that I hate to face the problems associated with discovery."

"Thank you," said Brother Francis. "We'll try to arrange it so as few people are there as possible. Could we make it for day after tomorrow?"

"That'll be fine. Now come in to Mom's house. I know food is on and you are hungry. I won't take no for an answer and neither will Katy. Besides, if you try to leave I'll send Mom out to

get you, and nobody wants to face her."

"Gracious, No. And thank you for the invitation," said sister Genny, grabbing Brother Francis by the arm and following James and the rest into Cindy's house.

"Mom, we got company!" shouted James.

"James!" shouted Russ from the chair in the front room.

"What's this I hear 'bout company? Oh, Its you!" said Cindy, coming from the kitchen. Ingrid was trailing close behind her.

"James, it's good to see you." Said Ingrid.

"Put the bags by the door, boys," Thomas said. "We'll get James settled in after dinner. Brother Francis, Sister Genny, good to see you. You're staying for dinner? Boys, put up the extra table. Mom we got company."

"Hi, Dad," said James, giving Thomas a big hug.

"I see we got company," Cindy said giving James' cheek a pinch. "You don't have to shout. Ingrid, get some of you coffee for the priest and sister. Katy, go next door and tell Mobutu and Judy that James is here. Let your future sister know there is help needed in the kitchen."

With a few short words and a couple of "looks" from Cindy the room was set up for a feast in but little time. Judy came over directly, dragging Mobuto behind her. James teased and congratulated both of them. Then Judy set about to the kitchen to help prepare dinner.

Cold and hot drinks were passed around the table and everyone began sharing their experiences from the last five months. In what seemed no time at all, great smells wafted from the kitchen and began to make everyone's mouths water. Brother Francis and Sister Genny were in awe

with the conversation and company and felt truly blessed to be included. Soup came first, followed by bread, salad, and fruit. Fried chicken was the main course, with all sorts of fixings. Just as everyone felt their stomachs about to pop, Judy stepped through the doors with two large chocolate pies.

"Enough," protested Brother Francis after his second piece of pie. "We truly have to go. James, I will call you tomorrow with the time for the appointment. Sister Genny, are you ready?"

Sister Genny looked up, wiped off the last remnants of her third piece of pie and said, "Yes, Father." She rose to go, begging off a doggie bag of goodies that Cindy was going to prepare for her. "We look forward to hearing from you," said James, and showed them both to the front door.

## **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 as he headed up the stairs, a look of confusion.

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 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 to shake the Cardinal's 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.

## 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 knelt 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. The fact that I could not interfere in his churches proclamation that John was the only one born on Christmas that day and 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 homefield 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 fathers 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," he replied.

"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. Robert said, "It cannot be! It must be some kind of trick." 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.

Dex said, "Where are you going? 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.

## **CHAPTER 19**

Millie was in heaven. She held her grandbabies tight and often. Judy was complaining of swollen cheeks to Katy because they had been pinched so much by her. After their ordeal at the foundation house, Thomas had invited them all over to his home for a meal. Although tension was still in the air, each one was making a best effort to capture some of the family love that they had missed. Robert was stunned. Stripped of many beliefs he had held for decades, he was as a child, easily led.

Cindy was happy. A thorn in her life had been removed and she was once again with a father she loved, so she cooked. "A meal in my home for my father." She giggled.

It was then that Robert regained some of his composure. "Aren't you getting married, James?"

They all laughed until they cried.

He fumbled and he stumbled, fidgeted and twitched. James grinned from the kitchen as he watched Brother Francis come through the door. Always a major production thought James. I wish he could get used to me. Yet he stood tall with my mother when called upon. I'll never forget him for that.

"Come in, Brother," cried James through the doorway.

Brother Francis stopped twitching for an instant and hurried into the kitchen proud and pleased to be in James' presence. "I'm sorry James, but it seems my lot lately to always bring you troubling news."

"The least you could do is sit down and share some of my mothers cookies and milk before you unburden yourself." James offered him a glass and cookies.

"Are those the chocolate chip ones?" Francis asked, pointing to the plate.

"The very ones."

"Oh, joy. Promise you will stop me before I make too big a pig of myself."

"I dare not, for fear of retribution from my mother. She and I thank you for your input at the meeting," said James.

"My privilege and my duty, no more," replied Francis.

"In any event, I'm sure you will have as many chocolate chip cookies as you wish. What else can I do for you? I do not think you came all this way for dessert."

"No," Francis said, trying to swallow a cookie. "I'm sorry, James excuse me. I mean to say that I didn't. Although these treats would be excuse enough."

"What then, friend?"

Brother Francis beamed. "It is the Cardinal, James. He insists that your presence here on earth is a sign from your Father. He wishes to introduce you to the Pope and proclaim you throughout the world. He is in a dither, quite frankly, and knows not what to do next. He constantly asks me and the Sister, if we know of anything that you have said that will give him a clue as to what and when is coming. He has just become a handful. I don't even want to tell you what he wished to give you for your wedding."

"What do you wish of me, then?", asked James.

"Would you talk to him again. Soon. Before the wedding and the gift?" asked Francis.

"Before the wedding?" asked James. "This cannot wait?"

"Believe me, James. Before the wedding would be good," replied Brother Francis grabbing another cookie.

"James, is that Brother Francis that came in?" asked Katy from the front porch.

"Yes, dear." James smiled.

"Oh, good. Cindy wanted him to have these and couldn't come over right now." Katy came into the kitchen and handed Francis a 'to-go' bag of fresh chocolate chip cookies.

"Oh, my. I will have to let out my sash a little more this month, won't I?" Francis said accepting the bag.

"Our friend wishes me to speak with the Cardinal again before our wedding," said James, speaking for Brother Francis.

"Well I don't see why not?" said Katy. "I'm sure we can find the time."

"Oh could you?" said Francis excitedly.

James looked, stunned, into Katy's face. "I thought I was supposed to concentrate on the wedding and avoid business?"

"Well, a small exception for a family friend can be accommodated." Katy turned on her heel and left.

"I will never understand women," said James under his breath. Turning to Brother Francis, James said, "How about here tomorrow about two? Would that be all right? I would go to meet him at his office again, but that is just too difficult for me right now."

"Tomorrow at two. We'll be there. Thank you, James." Brother Francis rose to go, cradling

his cookies.

It was chilly in Atlanta, this close to Christmas, but the Cardinal was still sweating. Why does he wish to see me? Will he strike me dead? The Cardinal thought, and then began praying again as he rode in the chauffeured car to his destination.

The car pulled up to the Foundation house and Cardinal Michael looked out to see James and Francis waiting to greet him on the porch. The Cardinal almost died. "He is coming to greet me at his door. There must be something wrong."

The Cardinal got out of the car and hurried reluctantly to the porch. "Thank you for coming, Cardinal Michael," said James. "I am so pleased you agreed to see me on such short notice and at my offices."

"Not at all, James. I realized you were busy with your wedding and as I said, "Anything to help." They entered the front room.

"Please sit down, Michael. Brother Francis, could you retrieve some of those famous cookies and refreshments for the Cardinal?" Asked James.

Brother Francis hurried into the next room as Cardinal Michael protested, "No need, James. I'm quite all right."

"Oh, but you must, Cardinal. These are such exceptionally fine cookies." Said Brother Francis, returning.

"Well, maybe one." Said Michael, reaching for the plate in front of him. "What did you wish to speak to me about James?"

"It has come to my knowledge that you are well aware of who I am and who my Father is," said James, smiling.

The Cardinal stopped in mid bite, looked menacingly at Francis and then back at James.

"There is no use in denying it. It is apparent that you take way too much interest in this little foundation. I doubt that even the best church-supported function has both a priest and a nun assigned full time as assistants."

"It is true, my Lord." The Cardinal said, lowering his head before James.

"The name is James, Michael. And there is no need to bow or honor me anymore than there is another man." Said James.

"Oh, but there is, sir. You are the Son of our Lord. A true Prince of Earth. Saying you are not does not deny the truth." replied the Cardinal.

"And who gives that title, Michael?" asked James.

"Why, it is God given."

"Do you propose that God or Jesus have need of titles?" asked James.

Michael sat, confused. He did not expect this line of questioning. James couldn't be ignorant of His Fathers teachings and of the word of God written in the Bible. No, I suppose not," said Michael.

"Then if God did not give me this title, who did?" asked James.

"I could only presume it must be man, then," replied Michael quietly. "But that still does not deny your existence as the descendent of the Creator."

"No, it does not. I am the descendent of the Creator. That is what I am, but I claim no

Lordship or title. I was born of humble origins, a man in the world of men. Your bowing and submissiveness is not mine to have because I have not earned it."

"What then, in God's name are you doing on Earth?" asked Cardinal Michael.

"Living as a man. Loving as a man. Learning as a man. And helping, whenever possible, mankind," replied James.

"But with all your powers," Michael blurted out.

"What powers?"

"You speak with the Lord, His Angels. You can heal. There must be more." Replied the Cardinal.

"You speak with the Lord. His angels. And you heal," replied James.

"But He doesn't speak back." said Michael.

"He doesn't? Or you just don't hear Him?" Said James.

"This is a game I'm bound to lose, arguing with our God's Son." said Michael resignedly.

James smiled. "What do you want of me, Michael? Power, position, wealth? These I cannot give. I am no genie to grant wishes."

Michael looked at James and thought slowly to properly phrase his answer. "I wish understanding, James. I have been a servant of God on this earth for many years. I have read the Bible and wrote many treaties on it. I have defended what I thought were his teachings for many years. I wish to understand that I was right. That I knew, that I did what was expected and asked of me."

"You wish for me to judge your life for you?" asked James solemnly.

"Is that not your right?" asked Michael.

James took Michael's hand. "No, Michael it is not. A greater force than I must judge your life \_\_you must judge it yourself."

Michael looked confused.

"God created man and gave him free will. Whether you lived up to the expectations of God you must decide for yourself. It is a requirement of having free will," continued James.

"Then if I choose that I have lived up to the tenants of God, I have done so?" Asked Michael.

"Believe me, Michael, man is much more unforgiving of his sins than my Father. If you feel you have done the best you can then you have."

"Then what of the Bible? What need do we have of its rituals and stories? This seems all too simple, James," said the Cardinal.

"It always has been simple. It is man that makes it complicated, looking for markers by which to judge his progress. Hoping to put chits in the bank against future indiscretions. My father summed it up pretty good by saying, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" Said James.

"Then are you saying the Bible is worthless? Churches are meaningless? That my chosen profession is a waste?" asked Michael.

"Once again, you ask me to judge and it is not my place." said James.

"Then how do I judge?" Asked Michael.

"That is the tricky part. Has the church sought to do good? Have you lifted up your

parishioners? Have you used the Bible as it was meant to be, or have you sought to control, manipulate and condemn? These are not so easy questions to answer. For what if you controlled, manipulated, or condemned for the betterment of those around you? Would that not be good also? And how do you judge what is good for those around you as opposed to what you think is good for them? These are only some of the questions to be asked on a daily basis, before you can make final judgement of yourself."

"Do not rely too heavily on the Bible for answers, Cardinal, for it is only a tool. It is a early history of man's association with God and My Father. It give's guidelines, but they are written in a way to reach the common masses over two millennia ago. Much has happened religiously in the intervening two thousand years that is not being taught. I, God and man have evolved intellectually much further. To teach the literal past could cause one to remain in the past. Use the Bible as the aid it should be and rely on yourself for the beliefs that you must have." James paused.

Cardinal Michael sat quietly, taking it all in. "Then you are not a sign, the world is not coming to an end and we are not to be ready to be judged," the Cardinal said finally with a sly smile.

"No, not by God, nor me. If this world is to end or be judged it must be by man alone."

"Then why are you here, James?" Asked the Cardinal.

"Because, God does so love the world and so does Jesus," interrupted Brother Francis.

James waved deferment to the words of Brother Francis. "That is your answer, Cardinal."

"May we speak further at a better time for you, James? I understand your busy getting married." The Cardinal grinned.

"Yes, oh yes," said James, rising to meet the Cardinal as Michael set himself to leave. "And

please you are welcome to come. I know Francis and Genny will be there."

"Without a doubt, James." Interrupted Francis.

"I should be honored." Replied Michael. "And may I take a few of those cookies with me? They are delicious."

"Just return the plate clean." Said James, handing the cookies to the Cardinal as Michael headed out the door.

"I will. I do just have one more question. Why did you contact John Love when you started your foundation? Why not the Church? It does not seem to me that his evangelistic organization is quite dignified for your Father."

"There you go again, presuming a conflict where there is none. Although I cannot condone taking money from those that need it in order to further one's own pocket, or a churches, John is just following in an ancestor's footsteps. You see, we didn't go to John to start our organization, we went to him for a baptism. Mine. My Father chose him because he is a direct descendant of John the Baptist."

"Then that explains a lot. Thanks for your time, James." said Michael.

"Your welcome, Michael."

"But it is his money, Dad. We raised it in his name. He is not stealing it, we are." Said John.

"How can you say those things, damn it? You can't believe that poor bastard is the Son of Jesus," said Dex.

"How can you not believe it? After all you've seen, all you've been," retorted John.

"It is because of who I am that keeps me from being conned by this nigger." shouted Dex.

"Stop calling him that! He is Jesus' Son and deserves respect, not crude derision." John shot back.

"Jesus' Son. Hah. Hell, the boy isn't even white. And don't go givin' me that crap that Jesus is colorblind. If he was we would all be gray." said Dex.

"And what makes you think Jesus is white?" replied John.

"Don't you look at pictures, boy? Everyone I seen in black and white churches has Jesus painted white. Never have seen a black Jesus yet." Dex was angry.

"I can't believe that you think those pictures are accurate portrayals of a Arabian Jewish man who spent years in the dessert," said John.

"Then where'd they git them pictures?" shot back Dex.

"Geez, dad, even I thought you knew they were European artists representations of what they hoped the Christ looked like. Do you think people in the Middle Ages would follow an Arab? Hell, they were fighting them for control of Palestine."

"Sez you, boy. You don't know if these aren't accurate portraits of Jesus or not. You never seen him. Besides ain't no way our followers are going to worship no nigger. We got good white folk supportin' us and they don't take kindly to any black boy takin' on airs. 'Specially one who claims divinity."

"Don't you understand at all? This is not a choice. Public opinion has no voice, there is no vote. God and Jesus have made a Son and he is black." said John.

"Well, you won't catch me worshipin' no nigger. Nor any of our followers. If this is what God wants, then He can keep it. We'll turn our backs on this Creator. Go ahead and worship him, but don't be lookin' for me in the pew." Said Dex heatedly.

"Sure, it is fine to worship the Lord, so long as He meets your needs," said John. "Turn His religion inside out. Prey upon the weak in His name to feather your pocket. But have him define himself and you figure you can get another creator. There is no choice, Dad. It is James or Hell."

"Then let it be Hell." John slammed the door on his way out.

"It is hard for me to believe he can be so stubborn, so racist, so damned money hungry," said John to Maggie.

"Do you expect him to change overnight, John? He grew up in the Deep South, a time of the Klu Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws. He was poor and poorly educated. He did well. He used the tools he was given and made a great life. A good life for you, so that you never experienced the misfortunes he had."

"The tools he was given, huh? Deceit, con and larceny? Hardly honorable trades or tools." replied John. "Hell, he even used me and my birth to con those poor suckers into giving more money."

"But they were the tools he was given, good or bad. He made use of them," said Maggie.

"I can't believe you are defending him," said John, shocked.

"I'm just pointing out his position. I do not defend him. But you must know the man before you can hope to correct the problem. He is your father. You must make some peace with him. We

must deal with him daily and constantly fighting over James does no one any good. It will not allow him to accept James either. He just defends his position even more, no matter how ridiculous it becomes. It becomes a battle of pride. Withdraw for now, John. Let it go. We'll deal with it later. Besides, we have a wedding to attend." Maggie suddenly smiled and giggled.

"Right," beamed John, "a wedding. A once-in-a-universe wedding and I am the preacher and you are the maid of honor."

Maggie laughed as she pulled John to the bed and smothered him with kisses.

That boy is going to get himself killed. He is going to ruin everything over some nigger, some God wannabe," thought Dex. He poured himself another drink and brooded some more. He had been at his bar almost constantly since the incident at the foundation house. Now he had just had another argument over with his son over increasing their donation to the foundation even more.

"James, a Son of Jesus, my ass!" Shouted Dex, throwing the bottle across the room. Picking another bottle from the bar, Dex stumbled into a chair. "I have to think of some way to end this. I have to stop this fiasco. What could have happened at that meeting? Everything was going so well. Then, all of a sudden Robert is in the arms of James crying his eyes out, asking for forgiveness. How did I lose?

"Well, that just go to show you that you don't trust any nigger. They are so ignorant." Dex sat back and drunkenly fell asleep.

With apologies to the local pastor, James had to move his wedding to the bigger church in

the next neighborhood. There were more people coming than he would have ever guessed. Ingrid had asked if she could bring some of Katy's family. The boys wanted their families to come, and suddenly Atlanta was host to hundreds. It's a good thing angels can fly or there wouldn't be any room for my Father's guests, James thought.

There was no traditional bachelor party for James. It didn't seem right and James, although quite a partier in his earlier time, had outgrown the ritual. The men did gather for a football game and a few beers and at the stadium.

Katy, however, had no problems participating in every event that could be had \_\_ \_\_ bridal showers, shopping, Ann the bachelorette party, complete with dancing and laughter. James laughed at the antics and joined in when he could. He wanted to marry Katy for because she could live life, and wanted no one, including himself, to deny her the privilege.

By now, Cindy knew all of the boys' mothers as if they were each her only best friend. And Ingrid and Millie could not find enough time to talk about all the things they wished to say. The women had quickly run the boys out of the foundation house and made room for themselves, talking and cooking until the wee hours of the morning. Cindy could not have been happier if there were two of her.

Robert and Thomas had grown to like each other in the many hours they spent running errands to the various grocery stores. With so many women and so many faces to feed, they were beginning to be known on a first name basis at the local markets. They did get to split time with the spouses of the women, and made frequent use of Thomas's garage, telling stories, drinking, eating, and yes, singing, particularly with Pierre's father, who quite enjoyed singing and had a good voice to

prove it.

James and the boys were sharing rooms at the various neighbors' houses. Having grown up with James, they were quite pleased to be a part of the party and his wedding. Little if any foundation work was getting done, but no one seemed to mind, and Sister Genny had stayed at the foundation house taking messages, assuring James she would catalog all important calls and contact him in case of any emergency.

The presents started to arrive two days before the wedding, and James had to set two rooms aside in a neighbors' house to hold them all until the wedding. They were big and wrapped beautifully. Katy was thrilled and excited to see them. All James could think of was, "These are definitely not crock pots."

It was magic, it was fun. The wedding gown was beautiful and had a four-foot-long train. Katy had decided on four attendants and ushers besides the best man and maid of honor. James had asked his Dad to be best man, an honor for Thomas and a thrill for his mother. All agreed it was appropriate. Jesus had informed Him that His Grandmother Mary would be in attendance as well as He, and as always, God would join them. All seemed set, and the night before the wedding James even got to see Katy for a few minutes alone.

"Are you ready?" James asked. "Is everything as you want it?"

"Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't complain. I would marry you with a magistrate." Katy smiled softly.

"Justice of the Peace, you mean."

"Whatever. This has been a wonderful time and I know we are going to have a wonderful

marriage." Katy sighed.

"Everything just seems to happen just as we need it to. The weather is even going to be sunny and warm for tomorrow." said James.

"How do you know, James? Have you seen the forecast?" asked Katy.

"No just an early present from some friends." James grinned.

"Then it will be perfect." Smiled Katy. Just then, Cindy called from the door.

"When you get time, chile, I have one more stitch to make on the dress." Said Cindy.

"Gotta go, lover." Katy left him with a kiss in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER 20

The day was perfect, as James had said. "A little gift from Grandmother Mary. Nice to have friends in high places, sometimes," mused James.

The wedding wasn't until 1:00 P.M., so James had plenty of time before the service. He went over to His mother's house for breakfast, but was met at the door by Judy.

"And just what do you think your doing, big Bro?" she asked.

"Breakfast, girl. I'm starving." Said James.

"Then you best get over to the garage with the menfolk and find out what they're doing for food. You cain't come in here an see this girl before the weddin'. Shoo." Judy laughed.

James looked in mocked horror at his little sister and made his way to the garage. There he found Robert, Thomas and all the boys nursing a single pot of coffee as they tried to wake up. "It looks like a fast food morning to me," said James. Everyone nodded in agreement and started heading for the cars.

Thomas slapped James on the back as they piled into the car. "See, you saved another body today and you didn't have to use nuthin' but your noggin." Both men laughed and headed out the driveway.

"Your father is a grown man, John. Don't worry, he'll be all right. We can look for him after the wedding. Now hurry, I'm already late and I have to get there to help Katy dress." Said Maggie.

"As if. Last I counted there were ten women over there fixin' and dressin' that girl, includin' Sister Genny. I don't see how one more is going to make any diff \_ \_"

John stopped short as he looked at her flashing eyes. "Let's go." John said heading for the door at a crisp walk.

"Are you sure? I mean does it look just right?" Asked Brother Francis.

"For the tenth time, yes," said Sister Genny. "Now let's go, Father. I'm late."

"Yes, yes. I mean, it is just so special. Can you imagine? He asked me to give a special blessing at the end of the service. Oh, I think I'm going to faint."

"Not now you don't. Here, let me drive." The Sister grabbed the keys from Brother Francis and pushed him into the passenger side of the car.

"They're here!" Yelled Judy from the front door.

Oh, thank God, thought Katy.

"Sorry I'm late, Katy. I just couldn't get John moving. He was trying to find his father and just kept delaying things," said Maggie.

"Is everything all right? Dex is okay, isn't he?"

"Oh he's fine. Just his grumpy ol' self. He gets that way whenever he feels he's lost. I thought you were going with the other shoes?"

"Well, Ingrid and Mrs. Jamison thought these looked better. What do you think?" asked Katy.

"I think we need to shut the door and let you have just a few moments to yourself, girlfriend." Said Maggie, shutting the door and locking it from inside.

"Oh, that sounds wonderful." Katy collapsed half-dressed on the bed. "Am I doing the right thing?"

"Now's a bad time to ask that question." Said Maggie, removing Katy's shoes and getting a new pair.

"I know, but the Son of Jesus, I mean...."

Maggie grabbed both of Katy's hands and looked her straight in the eye. "Do you love the man, girl?"

"Yes."

"Then his occupation doesn't matter." They both fell down laughing.

There was a slight knock at the door. "May we come in?" Said Cindy softly.

Maggie got up and opened the door, letting Millie and Cindy in, then closing it behind them.

"Just giving Katy a chance to catch her breath." said Maggie.

"I can imagine." said Cindy. "Katy, I told you of Thomas' and my marriage by Jesus. And my love for Jesus and Thomas."

"Yes," said Katy.

"Well, mom couldn't be with me when those things happened. So, well I guess it was stupid, but I kept a blue locket with me during James' birth. That way I could have my whole family around me, even if they couldn't be there. Well we talked and we thought maybe you could keep it and wear it today. You know, something old."

"Something blue," chimed in Millie.

"And something borrowed," said Katy, crying. "I will give it back. I could never keep this from you."

"And something new." said Cindy, pointing at Katy's feet. "Nice shoes, dear." Everyone started laughing.

The limos were parked outside. The church was covered with flowers, inside and outside. There was an air of slight perfume all around the church that emanated from some unknown source. No one seemed to mind, though; it was quite pleasing and soothing.

The church was crowded, with enough people so that the rector was forced to turn on the air conditioner. James stood at the altar and looked around and above him. The church was immaculate, as if scrubbed from top to bottom. James saw plenty of forms in the rafters and knew that Aunt Jenny was among them. Mother Mary and Jesus sat at the altar, visible to James and Katy only. John was resplendent in his robes and Brother Francis was near fainting standing beside John in his vestments. It was perfect.

Then the choir stood to sing and welcome in Katy and the music was glorious. They new they had never sung so well but, James was aware it was probably the help from the angels behind them that gave them an edge. Then Katy came in. She was beautiful.

Mary and Luke, John's children, were the ring bearers, and some of Tommy's relatives scattered rose petals at Katy's feet.

James just smiled and reveled in Katy's beauty. Not a hair was out of place. Every crease on

her dress was just so, and her eyes were exceptionally wide when she saw Mary and Jesus standing at the altar to welcome her.

James took Katy's hand from Robert, who had been given the honor of giving her away. John began the service. He had never given such a marriage and had the voice and stature to go with such circumstances of great pomp. When he led James and Katy to the altar and had them kneel for a blessing, James felt the hand of God Himself comfort the pair. They rose and looked up after the blessing to see Mary and Jesus crying softly. Brother Francis came over after that and gave a final blessing upon the pair in the most perfect voice and calm manner he had ever done.

When Francis had finished, John asked them to rise and asked the members of the congregation to rise also. "I now give you James and Katy, man and wife. What God has joined, let no man tear asunder." The hall erupted in cheers. Rice was thrown over the pair as they walked down the aisle as man and wife.

The wedding party was lined up outside down the front steps. Greeting each and every well wisher when Dex approached. He came from out of a group of cars lined up across the street. He was dirty, he was drunk and he was mad.

"You will not blaspheme my God! You will not take what belongs to me! You will not hurt my family! And you will not.. be.. my.. God!" He fired. He kept firing until every bullet in his gun had discharged. The congregation was stunned. Katy screamed.

John yelled, "My dear lord!"

James fell on the steps, blood pouring out of every hole in his body. Katy reached for James and propped his head on her perfect white dress.

Tommy grabbed the gun from Dex's hand while Sister Genny ran in and called 911. Members of the church, not yet through the line, tried to pour out of the church to see what was happening. Pierre and Mobutu restrained Dex and held him for the police. Cindy ran to her child and cried on his chest, holding her body against his, trying with all her might to keep the blood in. Judy howled at the sight and had to be held by her grandmother, who was equally shocked and saddened. Russ held his brother's hand and Thomas stood over Katy, Cindy, and James, tears running down his cheeks, as if he could protect them from any further harm.

The police came quickly and took Dex from the area as fast as they could. The ambulance came at about the time the heavens opened up and the beautiful day turned black. The clouds were dark and terrible, and the congregation recoiled in horror. James was laid down on the steps with needles placed into both arms that were extended from his body. His feet were crossed at the ankles and his eyes were open towards the sky. A restraint was placed around his forehead in order to stabilize his neck, and it was then that Sister Genny remarked "James' position sort of resembles His Fathers when He died."

Then the rains started, softly almost as if they were tears. The medics worked feverously to stop the bleeding and the men and women were crying. Just then, Luke looked at his mother Maggie and said, "He's getting wet, Momma."

Maggie was startled. "What?"

And Mary, Luke's sister, said, "Momma, James is getting wet." Then she and Luke took Luke's jacket and stood over James' face spreading the jacket the best there little fingers could to keep the rain off James' face. James breathed softly then, and his eyes moved slightly to each of the

children's faces. Smiling slightly James took a last breath.

## **EPILOGUE**

It was Christmas again. Cindy couldn't believe it had been a year since James had died. She often sat in her kitchen now, hoping to hear James come in one last time, searching for somethin' to eat. The funeral had been as glorious as the wedding in its own way. Nobody would go into the James wedding church through the front door anymore and the pastor had locked it closed, preferring, as did his parishioners, to use the side doors for services.

Dexter Love had been tried and locked away as insane. No one in Cindy's family could wish a man dead. But, in its own curious way contributions to his church had increased, as though his parishioners could pay off his sins. John had devoted his life to helping James' Aunt Jenny foundation. Oddly enough, the boys had gained some of James' power and were continuing his work throughout the world. "Disciples, again," Cindy teased when they came by. They did come by and often.

Mobutu and Judy got married a month later than planned, but they did get married. Russ, Sister Genny, and Brother Francis always checked in on her, seeing they were just next door holding

down the foundations headquarters. Still this Christmas was sad.

"You have any milk in there, Cindy?" yelled Katy from the front room.

"Yes, chile." Said Cindy, recovering from her reverie.

Katy came through the door.

"Now Thomas would have got that for you, girl," said Cindy, eyeing the pregnant woman in front of her. "You know the doctor don't want you on your feet too much. This child could be born anytime."

"Oh. Momma. This baby will come when it's good and ready. It's just as stubborn as James was," said Katy

"Yoo Hoo? Anyone home?" Came a voice from the front room.

"Judy, Is that you?" yelled Cindy, getting up from the chair and heading for the door.

Judy popped in the kitchen just before Cindy could walk through the door.

"Chile!" squealed Cindy. "Your pregnant!"

"You bet, Momma. But not as pregnant as that one over there." Judy smiled, teasing Katy.

Judy went to Katy and gave her a hug after getting released from her momma. "You look about ready to pop," Judy told Katy.

"Anytime, Jude. Anytime."

"Is there anything to eat?" asked Mobutu, coming through the kitchen door.

"We told you not to bother Mom, Mobutu," said Tommy as he and Pierre came through behind him. "We'll go see what Mizz Jamison's got and let Cindy rest."

"Mizz Jamison?" Huffed Cindy. "Why I can cook better, quicker and more plentiful than

she can any day of the week. Of course there's something to eat here. The very idea! Goin' to Mizz Jamison's."

"Well, it being Christmas and all, we thought you might need a rest," said Lu Chan, bringing in some groceries.

"You know good and well we always celebrate Christmas here. Did you get my nutmeg?" Asked Cindy, rifling through the bags.

"Yes," said Ahmed, bringing in another load.

"Well then, you boys go set up the living room. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Judy run over and get your Father, Russ, Genny and Francis. Tell them to help the boys and get washed up." Cindy warmed up the oven.

"And you." Cindy said, turning to Katy, who was smiling in the corner. "Thank you. Now get peeling them potatoes."

"Yessum," Katy said grinning as she waddled to the sink.

The house was alive again by suppertime. Judy had even used the foundation house to make two birthday cakes. Maggie and John had been called by Thomas and made their way over for supper along with their children. There was laughing and singing by the time the potatoes hit the table and Cindy was seated next to Thomas when the blessing was about to be said by Brother Francis. Looking around the table at the happy faces, Cindy came to light on Katy's. Katy made a gesture and Cindy noticed that there were now two empty chairs at her table, one right next to Katy.

"You never know," said Katy, and Cindy nodded.

It was fun again. Thomas looked over at Cindy and said, "I know, I know. ...but, it's Christmas!" They both shared a laugh.

Suddenly, a beautiful light entered the room. Everyone stopped and stared because they all knew who there guest would be. Suddenly, Katy shouted, "Mom it's time!"

Cindy knew. James' baby would be born on Christmas, just because He so Loved the world.

**THE END**