

Chapter II

Chris Brown stood in the great shadow cast by the Cathedral of St. Augustine, the magnificent brownstone church in the heart of Deer Crossing. He held a manila envelop under one arm. His instructions were simply to deliver the package to the rectory. Since it was the pastor's night off, Chris only had to make certain that he left the package inside the screen door.

The tall, stocky young teenager could already feel the new Air Jordan basketball shoes on his feet. One hundred dollars to do a silly little drop-off. But Chris was used to having people ask him to do silly little things for a few dollars. He pirouetted. Now with the package in the grips of both his hands high above his head. He ran and slammed the envelope through an imaginary hoop.

But this wasn't a basketball court, he thought, and stopped for a moment there on the sidewalk between the church and the rectory following the outline of the large building up its spire into the evening sky. The little cross at the tip of the spire disappeared into that dusky light, his favorite time of day that welcomed a brilliant full moon.

The great church always left him with a feeling of awe.

Chris turned to the west, remembering the last rays of a red and yellow sunset. Here was the promise of another golden late spring day. One day gone, another about to begin.

It seemed to him that just moments ago he had to shade his eyes from the sun's glare. And then, the sun was gone. It had always amazed him that the sun could be there one minute and gone the next.

His thoughts slid back to the new athletic shoes he was going to buy with the money from this drop.

It was a drop off, all right, but not a usual one. He was the premiere basketball player in the state. His thoughts lingered on the word, premiere. People he hardly knew were letting him drive their cars and paying him exorbitant money for washing them. No drugs here. He told the guys that he wouldn't do drugs. There was too much to lose since he was looking forward to college and a new life.

Aunt Agnes assured him college was in his future. She constantly reminded him that scholarships were pouring in. His coach piled them on the desk in his office at school. There was a mountain of them. But he needed reassurance. It was scary, a lot for him to handle, and he worried about failing, failing his God, failing his family, failing his coaches, failing his aunt who worked unceasingly on his behalf, and failing himself.

Aunt Agnes had arranged for a tutor. Chris was working on his SATs.

There was still time, according to his coach, before they actually had to sit down and write a letter of commitment. "The decision will be a family one," coach said. "Your aunt, your parents, anyone else you want."

Chris told him that he wanted Nelson Johnson.

Coach said he'd see if Mr. Johnson was available when the time came. It was at that moment Chris made up his mind. Asking for Nelson Johnson to be a part of his

biggest decision would be one way to thank the man that had helped turn around his life. He didn't care if coach didn't like Mr. Johnson.

Now that all this good stuff was happening, Chris didn't want to jeopardize his future with any drug dealings, so he ran errands for different people, and they slipped him a few bucks here and a few bucks there.

Now he was one hundred bucks richer. He could get used to this kind of work.

One hundred bucks was going to feel very good on his feet. He ran his hand over the package. What could be so important that someone would spend one hundred dollars on it? He was dying to know. He stepped off the sidewalk into a nook along side one of the flying buttresses supporting the old brownstone walls of the old cathedral.

Buttresses. He learned about the architecture of the church on a field trip in the fifth grade. He wasn't surprised when the name came back to him. At least not anymore. Chris knew he had a good brain, and he couldn't wait until college to use it. He ran his hand along the old rough stones. They still held a hint of sunlight from a warm, 80 degree day, but, the night was turning cold. He pulled his jacket closed.

In college, Chris was going to transcend himself. Transcendence was something he knew about. He was one of the lucky ones. He grew up in a project, and he was going to transcend his environment by going to college.

He rifled through the papers. From what he could tell they consisted of typed pages and more typed pages. The darkness prevented him from reading anything, but he did spy some building plans. He did see that the diocesan seal was on the first page.

People will pay money for silly things, he thought, as he pushed the papers back into the envelope and started back up the sidewalk to the rectory door.

A woman appeared down the end of the walk. Tall and thin, hair dyed red, short skirt. As she approached, he watched for her big dark eyes, but all he saw was her full mouth and something inside of him paid attention.

“You going to catch cold dressed like that,” he said.

“Not if you keep me warm,” she said. She looked him boldly in the face.

“Uh huh,” he answered.

“Fi' dollar.”

“I ain't got no money.”

“No money, I can't help.”

“You, a fine looking woman,” he said.

“You, a fine looking young man. You better go home to your momma.”

He watched her saunter by.

“Umm. Ummm,” he said.

She turned back.

“I do you right here,” she said.

“You do me right here by the church.”

“Church ain't got no eyes,” she said.

“Jesus have eyes.”

“Amen,” she said. “Jesus a loving man.”

“What you do ain't loving.”

“What I do for you is.”

“You don't know me from Adam,” he said.

“I know you a good thing, and I know you ain't never had any.”

“You don't know me.”

He was starting to sweat.

“I got to drop this off.”

“I be waiting,” she said and pointed to the corner of the church. “You come find me.”

Chris felt the blood rushing through his veins and his heart pounding. She was right, he had never been with a woman. If he didn't have the package to hide behind, he didn't know what he would have done to get away.

Talking trash was one thing, but getting down with a ho was another. So he prayed, what would the Lord Jesus have done?

Chris knew his scriptures. Jesus hung out with the low life, the beggars, the deformed, the prostitutes. Aside from Satan, Jesus must have had his tempters. How about that Mary Magdalene? If Mary Magdalene didn't come on to Jesus, nobody did.

Closest man to Jesus that Chris knew was Nelson Johnson. Johnson went into the project and made people face up to life there. Chris saw this in his own life. The man was a preacher and a brother.

The only other preacher Chris knew had betrayed him, like a Judas. That was the young priest Lemay. The man went and left the priesthood, and nobody ever saw him again. When that man spoke, Chris heard and believed the good news. That man made Chris want to follow Jesus. Then he was gone. Johnson tried to help Chris understand. When the time was right, he kept saying, Lemay would be back. He just needed time to get his life in order. Then, there would come a day for rejoicing.

Coach Prygocki, Chris' teacher and basketball coach, said it was a blessing for Chris that Lemay had gone. Now, Chris could go live his life, like a normal warm blooded young American male.

``Prygocki," Chris said and laughed. He was funny man. Chris had heard him talk to four different people in the space of five minutes and tell them all different stories to make himself look good. Anybody could see right through him, except for Aunt Agnes, who actually dated him a few times after his wife split. His aunt never married, and she always got close to his coaches. She was friends with Prygocki, and she said when she went out with him it was just as friends. Besides, he was a deacon in the Catholic church and he would not marry again.

Chris dropped the package between the screen and back door, as instructed, and began the walk back up between the rectory and church building.

The church had eyes, he thought. God sees everything.

Chris broke into a trot. Maybe he could talk to the woman. Maybe the spirit would speak through him and save her. Maybe it would speak through him the way it spoke through Lemay, the way it spoke through Johnson.

When he heard the door of the rectory slam, Chris stopped and turned around to see who it was. He was breathing a little heavy and straining to see as he heard a sharp high-pitched pop. At first he thought, how could a sound take his breath away? Then, the pain exploded in his chest.

``Sweet Jesus," he murmured as he dropped to the ground.

dfort001@yahoo.com