

Chapter 1

The sunlight shone through the window on to Father Tades Kopicky's prone form. Much as he enjoyed the dawning of each new day, he was not as appreciative of the light streaming in today. For much of the night, he had been up praying. When he had finally felt exhausted from the emotional exertion, and his knees had ached from the strain, he had dropped his body down on to his bed and had immediately fallen asleep. He had not even slipped under the covers.

Dreams had troubled him. Visions shifted sufficiently from memories not factual but close enough to awaken a forgotten fear. The concentration camp.

He must have slept through his alarm. More than likely, he had not set it. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to squeeze enough sleep out to focus on the digital display of the clock. Nine something. Three hours or so later than he was accustomed to arising. He had slept for five hours.

He gazed around to prove to his conflicted mind that he was an old man living in Missouri, not a youth held

captive in his native country, what had been Czechoslovakia then. His heart's pace slowed. He breathed more easily.

The bishop would be coming by his parish in around an hour. He wondered if he would have enough time to eat breakfast. He slowly rose from the bed, ignoring the aching of his knees and lower back and set about preparing for the day.

He removed the sweater and khakis he had been wearing the night before and deposited them into the laundry hamper next to his dresser. Shuffling into the bathroom, he sighed as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the sink. He looked older than he felt, if that were possible these days. His concern for the events of the coming day clearly weighed on the wrinkles of his face. He had never been a particularly handsome man, but the sight with which he was currently faced could have won a Mr. Quasimodo contest. Brusquely, he turned from the mirror and started the water in the shower.

He removed his undergarments while the water heated. When the temperature was to his liking--soothingly hot but not scalding--he stepped into the shower and washed himself of the refuse of his thoughts from the night before. He was a man of God, and he had committed to follow God's

will, regardless of material consequences and personal feelings.

The hot spray eased his muscles and consoled his conscience. He marveled at how the combination of heat and water could so comfort him. It was truly a great luxury that most in America took for granted, but he exulted in the feeling from time to time. Having spent some time in other countries where showers with hot water were not available, he had grown to appreciate such a simple pleasure. Simple pleasures reminded him that he had a God to whom he felt eternally grateful.

He stayed in the shower a little too long, so breakfast before the arrival of the bishop was out of the question. Perhaps the bishop would care to join him for a meal. More than likely, the bishop would already have eaten his morning meal.

Tades dressed and finished his morning duties about the parsonage before locking up and walking over to the church's main building, one block over. The journey would take him a few minutes.

The sun shone brightly, but the heat had not yet warmed the morning air. Clouds dotted the sky, and a light wind blew erratically. Temperatures were not predicted to rise into the 40s today. Overnight lows had been in the

lower 20s. Winter would arrive in St. Louis in a few weeks.

Tades could see Bishop Daniel Grayson in his car parked on Odell facing Kingshighway. From there, the bishop would have a view of the western entrance to Tower Grove Park. As Tades emerged from the parsonage, the car stopped idling. Tades assumed the bishop had kept the car running for the heat. He waved to his fellow septuagenarian.

"Bishop," Tades greeted him as they met, "you could have come in."

The bishop shook his head. "I haven't been here that long, and I want to respect your privacy. Shall we go in and pray?"

Tades dangled the key. "Let's see what the Lord wills for us." He ushered the bishop into his church.

Their personal time of prayer lasted for roughly one hour. Tades found himself distracted. He wrestled with the burden the Lord was about to place upon him. He wondered how his parish would respond. The bishop assured him of support, but Tades lacked strength within.

Forgiveness was never so easy as he hoped.

Tades did not take the vow of chastity lightly, especially in the promiscuous United States of America

where sexual mores had loosened to the point where sleeping around was almost a national pastime and the institutions of marriage and of family were being challenged by several special interest political groups. Adhering to that particular vow was never easy, but a commitment to priestly holiness was costly. The cost had to be counted beforehand. A priest had to set aside worldly pursuits to more effectively minister. Even Saint Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, agreed that sexual entanglements expended energy that should be devoted to the Lord.

When a priest broke his vow of chastity, Tades had little sympathy for him. St. Louis had had its share of priests who had indulged in perverse sexual pleasures and had attempted to cover their activities. In the process, young boys and girls had been scarred for life, bullied into submission and only found the courage to stand against their molesters many years after their collective abusive experiences. Tades felt shame for the entire priestly order that would turn a blind eye to such degradation.

Tades and the bishop sat in the church office discussing their situation. Tades thought the bishop appeared as old and worn as he. Apparently the reconciliation they would attempt weighed heavily upon him

also. That comforted Tades as he remembered the adage:
Misery loves company.

"Why does he want to serve here again?" asked Tades.
"I know I've asked this before, but has he told you
anything else?"

"Tades, he loved this parish." The bishop leaned back
against the chair, and his eyebrows rose, which Tades knew
as a sign of imploring. "He loved this part of the city
and the people in it. He wants to make amends."

"He betrayed their trust." Tades loved his parish,
too. "He hurt them very deeply. They do not forget."

The bishop nodded. "I know. But they will forgive.
Our Lord gives us the strength for that. Give this a
chance."

Tades shuddered at being asked to house one of the so-
called reformed priests and to integrate him into his
parish. One week ago, Bishop Daniel Grayson had made the
request. Martin Cromwell had been a priest of Sacred Heart
Catholic Church before Father Tades. More than ten years
ago, Martin had been charged with several counts of sodomy
with minors and had pled guilty. After Martin had served,
another priest--a good man but a weak leader--had found the
parish in disarray and expended himself trying to restore a
semblance of order and trust. Father Tades had been called

in to help with the effort, and when the spent priest resigned a year later, he had taken the reins and led the church to a stable equilibrium. Father Tades had served in Sacred Heart for a bit over eight years and was proud with the growth he had seen in his flock during that time.

Now the disgraced Father Martin wanted to return to his old parish and desired to be welcomed as if nothing had happened. Father Tades snorted quietly at the thought, but he also chided himself for his disdain and lack of forgiveness. After all, he reasoned internally, Jesus showed love to the prostitutes and the tax collectors of his day. Jesus should be his model. He vowed to at least make the attempt. If Martin was sincere, and if the parish had healed enough, and if it was the Lord's will--primarily this last if--then he would submit.

Tades voiced his main concern. "Is he truly reformed?" He watched the bishop's eyes carefully. "Is he repentant? Can you say with no doubt that he will not do the same again? The parish already struggles."

The bishop nodded as if for reassurance. "I believe he has learned from his mistakes and is truly repentant." He did not blink, but Tades was still skeptical. "He was a very skilled minister of the Word. You will find him to be

a great help." The bishop did not need to express that Tades could use the help.

Realistically though, Tades knew he would have to disavow Martin of any expectation that the parish would welcome him with open arms. Certainly, many of the families whom he had directly hurt were no longer with the church--possibly no longer with the faith, either--though Tades hoped for the best. Though many years had passed, Tades personally knew many in the church who had lived through those difficult times and would struggle with even being in Martin's presence. The damage Martin had wrought was extensive, and the recent newspaper accounts of similar malfeasances had reopened old wounds. Martin, who had been released only a few weeks ago, would not find integration to be a smooth transition.

But Bishop Daniel Grayson held out hope. He felt the parish would come around in time. "Father" Cromwell had worked amazing wonders with the congregation, and the church had doted on him. Of course, that had made the betrayal more poignant. Bishop Grayson believed the parishioners would acknowledge the changes in Martin, over time, and would accept him into their community, although never again as their priest. Father Tades needed some assistance, and so the bishop had encouraged Tades to take

Martin under his wing and instruct him. Martin was no longer young but was roughly thirty years Tades's junior. Bishop Grayson determined that Martin would be an apt scholar under Tades's tutelage. Tades could support him through this new passage.

"I will not have him speaking from the pulpit." Tades would not waver on that point.

"No, I understand. I did not mean to imply that." The bishop glared at Tades. "Tades, I do not want to invoke ecclesiastical authority in this case."

Tades turned away. "There will be no need for that. I will honor your request and do my best to bring him into our family again, but it will not be easy." He looked back to the bishop. "Do I have your assurance of support, if I need it?"

"Absolutely. You know I'm available to assist you and to provide counsel when needed. I want to see this work. I think it will speak well of the parish and will present a wonderful picture of reconciliation to the city. We could use the positive image." The bishop was keenly aware and concerned of the political influence of the Catholic Church in St. Louis. Tades was less concerned of this and more in tune with the needs of his parish, but he conceded that the bishop had a broader civic duty than he did.

Tades heaved a sigh of resignation. "Is he ready to move?"

Bishop Grayson smiled and placed an empathetic hand on Tades's shoulder. "He was packing what he has, which is not much, when I left. I would imagine he is as prepared as he ever will be. Would you like to go with me to get him?"

"No, you bring him here. Have him drop off his things at the parsonage and meet me here. I left the door unlocked." Tades rose.

The bishop bowed his head as if in deference. "I will have him here shortly." He stood and embraced Tades. "Thank you, my friend. This is a blessed service you are providing. I will keep you both in my prayers. We will see this through."

Tades betook himself to the vestry to pray.

Tades only wished he shared Bishop Grayson's enthusiasm, but then, Tades had not spent any time with Martin since he had returned from prison. The bishop solemnly declared that Martin had reformed, but for now, that was all Tades had with which to make a judgment. Judge not, lest you be judged. Yes, Tades knew that verse from Scripture, but what he really meant was discernment, which was not the same as passing judgment on someone. He

could agree to trust Bishop Grayson's judgment, but he stubbornly desired to draw his own conclusions. Patience. Martin would be there soon.

As if in response to an invocation, Father Tades heard Bishop Grayson call out for him. Tades lifted himself from the floor and went out into the sanctuary to meet his new housemate.

Martin Cromwell no longer looked like the pictures Tades had seen of him. The light brown hair was peppered with gray, the narrow waist had expanded, and the face displayed more wrinkles. He still dressed conservatively, sporting khaki slacks, a white, collared shirt and brown loafers. Tades drew closer to shake his hand, following Daniel's introduction, and he noticed that Martin still had his piercing blue eyes, but the calm serenity that gazed out of the photographs he had seen was now disturbed, as if a storm had raged within him and disrupted his vision. The handshake was firm but tentative. Apparently, Martin shared Tades's misgivings about whether his return would prove to be a wise decision.

"I suggest we take some time to pray together for this church and for your new arrangement." Bishop Grayson's voice was light and the tone positive. "Let us ask the Lord to bless this time ahead."

As if choreographed, they knelt together and presented their petitions to the Lord.

Later, after the bishop had left and Tades had given Martin the tour of the church and the parsonage, they convened in the kitchen to set the ground rules for their living arrangement. The parsonage had several bedrooms so sleeping quarters would not have to be shared, but the rest of the living space was communal. Tades had lived on his own for many, many years, only occasionally inviting traveling speakers to stay with him. Martin was perceptively amenable to Tades's house rules.

"Thank you for agreeing to help me through this transitional period." Martin spoke directly yet humbly. "Daniel tells me you've been a wonderful priest for the church. I appreciate the care and courage with which you've led these people. I really left a mess of things."

Since Martin was so direct, Tades decided to plunge in. "Martin, why do you want to reunite with this parish again? I have to ask because of the mess in which you did leave it. Are your intentions honorable? Have you, in fact, truly repented of your sins?"

Martin's body relaxed like a balloon deflating. "I cannot pretend that I do not still struggle. To do so would be dishonest, and I grew tired of my dishonesty years

ago. I do believe I am forgiven, and that Christ does strengthen me, but the strength He provides helps me work through my...problems. He has not wiped them out. I can say that I know my limits and that I am committed to call on whatever help is necessary to ensure I do not fall again. To promise more than that would be disingenuous."

"So why put yourself in the same position you were in before?" Tades was not yet satisfied with the received answer, although he admired the uninhibited straightforwardness. "Why return to the same location where you failed? To the same people you disappointed and hurt?"

"The location where I live, and the people with whom I interact will make no difference," Martin said, and Tades stood fixed in his unwavering stare. "I will struggle nonetheless. You do realize I am listed on that sex offenders website."

Tades was aware of the website, an amazing truth given his reluctance to--what did the young people call it?--get online and surf the Web. He was not technically savvy, and the modern whirlwind of frequent advancements unnerved him.

"Tades, please believe me when I tell you that I deeply love this parish. I love this city, and I love the people whom I once served." Tades noticed that Martin punctuated his comments with an earnest gaze. "I truly

viewed my priesthood as a privileged service. I felt honored to be allowed to mold and shape the lives of this parish, and I was terribly humiliated by my inability to control my urges. I kept thinking God would deliver me from them, but I ignored any opportunities here that presented themselves to me. My pride kept me from seeking the help then that I needed. I convinced myself, each time, that I was just giving in to circumstances, and as long as I controlled my circumstances--"

Tades interrupted, "Martin, I'm not your confessor. I'm not asking for all your reasons for why you did what you did. I'll be honest with you. I'm not comfortable with your decision to rejoin this parish. My parish now. What makes you think that you'll be accepted back?"

"I don't know that I will," Martin admitted freely.

"Then why?" Tades felt his emotions fray. "Why risk what you've achieved so far? Why put this parish at risk again?"

"Tades, I trust you are familiar with Philippians 4:13."

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Tades knew the verse well, and a part of him resented Martin's reference to it.

"Do you not believe Paul's asseveration?" Martin looked at Tades, displaying grave credibility. "I do."

"Do you even know the difference?" Tades asked, purposefully rude.

"Between what?"

"Your strength and Christ's."

Tades expected Martin to gaze at him with a pained expression, but instead, Martin looked at him with calm assurance. "That I know well. I relied too much on my own strength before. Through my time in court and in prison, I learned to rely on Christ. I had to go through my own trial by fire."

Tades heard the fidelity in Martin's voice but did not yet trust his own discernment. "It will take me time." He exhaled the air he was holding in. "I do want to believe you, but I need...I have my parish to think about. Please allow me--"

Martin held up his hand, forestalling Tades's words. "Take the time you need. Really, I do understand. Just let me know how I may serve the parish without causing a stir, and I will await your...your forbearance." He paused, and Tades felt fixed by his gaze once more. "I do realize it is your parish now."

"Thank you." Tades truly was thankful. "I will seek the Lord's consolation in this matter. I will let you know when--"

"That is enough for me," said Martin, as if sensing Tades's obvious discomfort. "I will go and unpack my things now. Thank you for allowing me to stay here with you. Daniel assures me that you will be a helpful mentor for me. I appreciate your willingness to help."

The phone rang, mercifully dispelling the awkwardness Tades was feeling. Martin removed himself, and Tades picked up the receiver.

"Hello. Father Tades Kopicky is speaking."

"Uncle Tades, how are you?" A female voice purred sweetly and warmly on the line. "It's Vickie."

Victoria Kopicky Chishye was Tades's niece, youngest daughter of his younger brother. He had not seen her in a few years, but he recalled her shining smile and exuberant personality. Her son, Robert, was in his first semester at Washington University, after transferring. Robert and Tades had met together once since his arrival.

"Vickie, how nice to hear your voice." He had always liked this niece and found it easy to lavish praise on her. "I'm doing well. How are things with you? How is Robert doing at college? I suppose he's near finals now."

"I'm doing fine, and Robert is really enjoying Wash U." Tades detected a slight, uncertain quaver in her voice. "Actually, I'm calling concerning Robert."

"Is everything all right?" Tades did not know Robert well. He had only met him a few times, the lunch in August being one of those. Tades's brother had moved his family to Kansas City when Tades was in his forties, and his daughter, Victoria, had transplanted to New Mexico when she was in college. She had married a local Native American from Laguna Pueblo and was raising two sons, Robert and Henry. Robert was the older of the two.

"Robert is fine, but Ken was laid off last week." Tades could hear Vickie's apprehension and concern.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," he replied as expected and at the same time wondered why she called to tell him. "How long had he been employed there?"

"Over ten years," replied Vickie, and her anger was apparent through the connection. "Just like that, they let him go. I know the company is having some financial problems, but I swear it's discrimination. But that's beside the point." The line grew silent. Tades guessed that she was building her courage for some request. "I need...We need to ask you a favor."

"What is it?"

"You see, Robert is doing so well at school there, and he's made so many friends and really wants to keep attending there, but now that Ken is out of work, and who knows for how long, and we were really stretching our budget to finance Robert's education there already, and--"

"Vickie, dear, please slow down a little for me. I can't follow you. Why don't you just tell me what you need?"

No sound came across for a moment, and Tades began to wonder if the line had been disconnected, but Vickie spoke just as he was about to ask if she was still there.

"Can Robert live with you while he attends college there?"