

## MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

**Dominic Barratt is a priest who has been ordered by his bishop Joseph Connell, to help in secret, other priests who have problems of all kinds: spiritual, moral, fiscal and social. He has been asked to visit an elderly priest, Father James Hodge, whose parishioners say he is no longer fit for the job. The eccentric, irascible old man has a reputation for being blunt.**

Dominic pulled up in the car park of St Anselm's and glanced at his watch. He was a few minutes early. He had met Father Hodge before but did not know him well. He mused that just about everybody on the clerical side in the diocese had heard about the irascible old man whom even Bishop Connell did not wish to upset. Whatever else, he would need to be careful. He stepped out of his car, muttering, "Oh well, here goes."

The housekeeper Liz Wells opened the door to let him in.

"Hello, Father." She moved aside. "He's expecting you."

Dominic returned her greeting and followed her to a door at the end of the corridor. Liz put her head into the room.

"It's Father Barratt."

From inside Father James called, "Come in, Dominic."

Dominic entered as Liz left, closing the door softly behind her. James was seated at a cheap pine desk that was covered with several untidy stacks of papers, with a laden tray in one corner. The pile of papers in the tray was held down by a small ceramic statue of St Francis, lying on its side to fulfil its irreverent purpose as a paper weight. Father Hodge was writing on a pad. He looked up briefly and dipped his head to peer over his spectacles, at the same time pointing with his ballpoint at a chair.

"Sit," he commanded. "Be with you in a minute, I'm just finishing my sermon for next Sunday."

It was a plain wooden chair without any sort of padding. Dominic sat down and discovered that the chair was even more uncomfortable than it looked. It was unstable and it rocked. He stood up and repositioned it, testing it for stability, but it made no difference, it still rocked. He sat down again and moments later James turned to face him.

"Now, young man, I know why you're here, but you are still welcome." He smiled. "For ten minutes, anyway."

Dominic was slightly embarrassed and felt that the old man had sensed this. He cleared his throat.

“As you know, the bishop has been getting letters from one of your parishioners, saying that you should retire.”

“Yes, I know, and I also know that they are being sent by Maria Howett. What of it?”

“The bishop has made it clear that he wishes to leave you to decide for yourself if, and when, you should retire.”

James Hodge smiled, sat up and slapped his hands on his thighs. “Right. No problem, then, because I have no intention of retiring just yet. But I thank you for coming to see me. You are now able to confirm that I am not gaga. So tell the bishop to untwist his knickers.”

Dominic smiled broadly. “I really don’t think I could put it like that.”

“Put it any way you like, but that’s my message to him.”

Dominic saw that James was about to stand up, so he held up a hand. “Father Hodge, I’ve come a long way. I would be grateful if you would please allow me a couple of questions because I am under instruction to ask them.”

James tutted impatiently. “Very well, get on with it.”

“Do you hold conversations with yourself? Aloud?”

“No, of course not, I’m not crazy.”

“It seems that you’ve been seen speaking aloud, as if you’re holding a conversation with someone, when there is nobody there.”

“I’m telling you, when that happens, I am *not* talking to myself, and I do not lie.” He shrugged. “Well, not often. But just because you can’t see someone, it doesn’t mean that there’s nobody there.”

Dominic shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.”

James rolled his eyes, so Dominic added, “I need to explain it to the bishop.”

“I should have thought it obvious. Do I have to spell it out? I talk with Père Michel, he’s a Dominican monk, French, and he’s a spirit.”

“A *spirit*? You talk to a ghost?”

“Yes, a spirit. He lived in the sixteenth century. A monastery near Chartres.”

Dominic’s eyes widened. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“*Of course* I’m serious. I told you, I don’t lie.”

“And you actually see him?”

“Yes, I do, and hear him. But it seems nobody else does, and that’s the problem.”

Dominic looked around incredulously. “Is he here now?”

“No. If he was I would be talking to him. But he isn’t.”

Dominic put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. He exhaled audibly. “Ahh.”

James leaned forward. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

Dominic straightened, spread his hands and took a deep breath. “In truth, I don’t know what to believe. Father Hodge...”

“Call me James.”

“James. It’s hardly surprising that people around you think, er, that there is something amiss. You are, shall we say, getting on a bit. They think you’re a bit eccentric. Can you blame them?”

“No, I don’t blame anyone for what they think. Frankly, I don’t care one way or another, it’s not the point. I don’t judge people and I don’t expect to be judged by others who are ignorant of the circumstances. Blinkered people, closed minds.”

Dominic shifted awkwardly on his seat, then crossed his legs.

Hodge said, “You find the chair uncomfortable?”

“Well, I...”

“Deliberate.” He grinned. “I call it the ten-minute chair. Keeps the interviews to ten minutes, or less.”

Dominic stood up, smiling. He had come to believe that there was almost certainly nothing wrong with the mind of this remarkably rational man.

“You won’t mind, then, if I stand.”

“Please yourself.” James leaned back to look up at Dominic. “But before you leave here, can you do me the courtesy of telling me what you are going to report back to Joseph?”

Dominic shrugged slightly. “Well, for what it’s worth, I don’t believe for a moment that you’re losing your mind.”

“Is that what they are saying?”

“Not in those words, but yes. Personally I’m not comfortable about making any judgement about your, er, supernatural experiences. But maybe there’s something else going on? I’m not medically qualified, so I can’t say.”

James Hodge looked astonished. “Are you saying that I could have a medical problem? In my brain?”

“It’s a reasonable assumption for anyone who thinks you’re hallucinating.”

“Bloody hell! Is that what you really think?”

“No.” Dominic held up a hand. “I’ve already said, I don’t know what to think. And that’s what I’ll tell the bishop.”

“It’s ridiculous.” James snorted. “If I had a medical problem, I’d have headaches, or something. But I haven’t. Why don’t you just accept what I am telling you? Why would I lie, or invent something? Think about this, Dominic: supposing you were in my place and it was happening to you, how would *you* explain it to someone else? Eh? Tell me that.”

**Context: A few weeks later:**

**Father James Hodge has had a fall and broke a bone in his wrist. There has been another phone call from parishioner Mrs. Howett to the bishop, saying that he is not fit for the job.**

Dominic was in Bishop Connell's office, telling him about the call from Mrs Howett. The bishop did not seem convinced.

“Well, what do you think? Is this the latest move in her attempt to get me to put him out to grass?”

“That's certainly possible,” Dominic conceded. “But if it's true that he's got a problem, the sooner he gets medical help, the better.”

“Surely they would have asked him at the hospital how and why he fell?”

Dominic smiled. “Do you really think that they would have got a straight answer?”

“I suppose not. I'm afraid you're going to have to pay him another visit. How are you fixed? Fortunately it's not too far, you should be able to get there and back in a day.”

“I'll go tomorrow, I've nothing on that can't be postponed. But I'll phone first, I don't want to upset him.”

Housekeeper Liz Wells opened the door to Dominic the next morning and greeted him cordially.

“Good morning, Father. Come in, please. He's in his office.”

“How is he?”

“Same as always, but he gets frustrated when he can't do things. You know about his injury, don't you?” She rolled her eyes. “Quite frankly, the sooner he recovers the use of his hand, the better for everybody.”

“Yes, we were told.”

Liz turned towards the corridor, but stopped when Dominic put his hand on her arm.

“Before I see him, may I ask you something, Mrs Wells?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“Why is he so adamant about not retiring?”

“Because he's stubborn. He's made up his mind that he's not going and as far as he is concerned, that's it.” She moved towards the office. “Follow me, please.”

Father James Hodge was seated at his pine table, looking at the screen of his laptop. He did not rise when Dominic entered, but pointed at the wooden chair.

“Come in, Dominic, sit down.”

“As long as you don’t mind if I have to stand up again after ten minutes.” Dominic remembered that Father Hodge had deliberately modified the chair to make it unstable, and called it his ‘ten minute chair’. The intention was to keep his interviews short.

Hodge’s left arm in its plaster cast was in a sling. “Good, you’ve remembered. Be with you in a second.” He closed the laptop down, shut the lid and swivelled to face Dominic.

“So, what is it this time, young man?” Hodge dipped his head and peered over his spectacles. “You going to try to charm me into quitting, is that it?”

“I’m afraid nobody has that much charm, James.”

“Quite right. So, what is it?”

“By all accounts, your injury is not causing you more trouble than you can manage.”

“It’s not a problem. Well, not too much of a problem, I make do as I can.” He patted a document on the table. “My sermon for next Sunday. No preparation, all I did was print it off an old file. This is a homily I used a few months ago.” He grinned wickedly. “I would be amazed if anyone in my congregation notices.”

“So it hasn’t slowed you down?”

“It has, but not much.”

“What caused you to fall, James?” Dominic was looking directly at Father Hodge. “More than once, I gather. We have to know.”

“It’s nothing.” The question seemed to annoy Hodge, who waved his right hand dismissively. “At my age, and considering that I cannot be described as being in the peak of physical fitness, hardly surprising.”

Dominic was about to ask another question, when James spoke again. He was looking beyond Dominic, to one side.

“No, I don’t need to,” he snapped.

“Don’t need to? What do you mean?”

Hodge shook his head and held his hand up. “Sorry, Dominic, I was talking to Père Michel.” He frowned and muttered, “I do wish he’d mind his own bloody business.”

Dominic was momentarily speechless. Suddenly he had an eerie feeling, as if the hairs on his neck had risen. Quietly he asked, “Is he here?”

“Yes, of course he is,” the old man answered sharply. “I’ve told you before, I do not talk to myself.” He pointed. “You can’t see him, but he’s there, beside you, and the bugger has the audacity to laugh.” He turned his head slightly and said, “It’s not funny, Michel.”

Father Hodge’s choice of language shocked Dominic, but he tried not to show it.

“What is it you don’t need to do?”

Looking past Dominic again, Hodge scowled and said, “All right, *all right*, I’ll tell him.” He turned to face the younger man. “He said that I have to tell you the truth. He’s insisting that I do.”

“About your falls?”

“No, that’s not a problem. I’ve had a few but I saw my doctor and I’m on medication now so it’s no longer an issue.”

“What then?”

“The truth about why I won’t retire.”

Dominic sat up, but said nothing. Hodge went on, “It’s my housekeeper, Liz. She’s more than that, she is my companion and has been for over twenty years. She’s loyal, hard-working and totally reliable. My best friend, perhaps my only friend. If it were not for her, my job would be a great deal more difficult.”

“But surely she doesn’t have to go when you retire?”

“You don’t understand.” James Hodge shook his head. “To her, the job is not a career, it is a vocation. She considers it her duty to keep me functioning, and she does.”

“But...”

Hodge raised his unfettered hand. “If you think that she could stay on and help the next priest, that is exactly what I have suggested, but she will not have it. She says that she is not quite old enough to retire and too old, as she puts it, to break in a new priest.”

“I see.”

“She has a brother abroad – New Zealand, I think – but otherwise she has nowhere to go. There you have it. I cannot retire. It would render her homeless and that is something I will not do.”

“A difficult situation,” Dominic said, rising to leave. “I shall speak to the bishop to see if we can do something.”

Father Hodge stood up. “One other thing.” He indicated towards a point behind Dominic. “Père Michel is still here, he has a message for you.”

“A message?”

“Yes. I have no idea what it means, but he says that I am to tell you not to worry, she is the right one for you and that the Church will relax its rule quite soon.”

Dominic felt the blood drain from his face.

