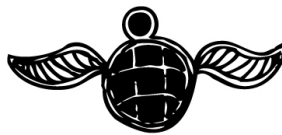


Parting River Jordan

by

ML Barnes



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Prologue

Dee sat in the middle of the strange bed and took several deep breaths, readying herself for prayer. Scratching beneath the metal band encircling her wrist, she tried to cross her legs in a posture of meditation. That wasn't as easy as it used to be; the arthritis in her knees was acting up again. She tried to coil the chain neatly on the bed so the clanking didn't distract her.

"Oh Lord," she prayed aloud. "How could You let me get into this mess? I was only trying to help save the church—Your church, Lord! Now look at me..."

Frustrated, she shoved the chain onto the floor and then listened with her head tilted, barely breathing, and hoping someone had heard the noise.

Nothing. Not one sound.

Dee fell back on the bed. How an intelligent, respectable, church-going woman who was only trying to do the Lord's work could wind up kidnapped, chained and left alone in a strange place—well, it just didn't make sense!

Leaning back on the king-sized pillow propped against the headboard, she reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the remaining half of the Kit Kat bar she'd started to eat earlier. No sense in being hungry on top of everything else.

CHAPTER 1

Deanna Ramsey was NOT nosy, and she was quick to point out that fact. She was just *interested*—in everything. She read three newspapers each day and watched local and national news programs. Twice a week, she'd watch the BBC news so she could keep up with what was going on in the rest of the world.

She was especially interested in the people around her. Her caring and concern had led to her career as a nurse. She got to spend time with people and help them. The attention she paid to everything made her very good at her job. She studied her patients, especially their body language. Deanna believed people said more with their bodies than they did with their words. She could do more to help them heal by watching and listening to them than she could by reading the notes a doctor scribbled on a chart. Now that she was retired, Deanna had her hands—as well as her eyes and ears—full, keeping up with everything going on at the church. She'd been trying for years to get Rev. Alden's family to accept the truth about the beloved pastor. Dee had noticed the minister shaking her head—little "clearing the cobwebs" shakes—and that the Reverend sometimes rubbed the back of her neck and stared at people she had known for years, with absolutely no recognition in her eyes.

Reverend Amanda Alden hadn't officially retired as pastor of River Jordan Full Gospel Church on Chicago's south side, but her sermons had been scaled back to once a month. For more than a year, there had been certain incidents—like the time she turned her back on the congregation and preached her entire sermon to the choir.

In another instance, she asked the congregation to bring home-baked items for a bake sale to raise money for Vacation Bible School. When the sale date arrived, the reverend had forgotten all about it. She had all the baked goods collected and thanked everyone for the lovely gifts. "And it isn't even my birthday! But you know I have to watch my weight; I can't eat all this!"

At the end of the service, she had the ushers distribute the food to members as the congregation filed out of the sanctuary. Everyone understood that the reverend was getting on in years; she was bound to have these little lapses from time to time.

People who got back the same items they had originally donated simply traded them with other members and a new tradition was born. River Jordan held an annual "Food from the Heart" day, with members bringing their best breads, casseroles, and desserts to exchange with others in the congregation.

Reverend Alden's last official act as pastor came after 40 years of devoted duty and just before her 82nd birthday. On that Sunday morning, her prayer of invocation at the beginning of the service stretched from the usual five minutes to nearly half an hour. During the prayer, Reverend Alden made several entreaties to the Lord to "remember the Alamo!" and admonished all present to "trust God and always use bleach."

Each time the organist tried to nudge her along by beginning a hymn, she sang along in her rich contralto voice—though, not necessarily the same song as the musicians and choir.

"Onward Christian soldiers, going to the store!" she trilled, swinging her arms and marching across the dais. "And I know my Je-sus will be at the door!"

When she finally ran out of steam, there was barely enough time for a selection from the choir, passing the collection plate, and opening the doors of the church. The church officers and the Mothers Board convened an emergency meeting that very afternoon. Everyone present agreed that it was time for a new senior minister.

The Reverend Alden was feted with a spectacular retirement dinner during which her favorite songs of praise and worship were played almost constantly. She attempted to join the few speakers at the lectern every time one of them got up to say a few admiring words about her, but the choir kept breaking in with more music and the little Reverend wound up glorifying the Lord in song all evening.

At the end of the celebration, Mother Marva Jessup declared, "Reverend Amanda Alden, we designate you Pastor Emeritus, forever and always. Praise Jesus and amen!"

River Jordan Full Gospel Church had never been without controversy. Its founder, the youthful and unmarried Amanda Mitchell, dared to start her own congregation in the spring of 1958, without the benefit of a strong man to oversee things. Then there were mostly women holding important positions in the church—positions that had traditionally been held by men, even after Amanda found and married a good man, which her detractors thought should have settled her down.

In the beginning, all of the deacons were women, but by the time she had married and become Rev. Amanda Alden, more men had joined the church, gradually reclaiming some of the traditional roles such as deacons and ushers. Men collected the offerings too, though the position of treasurer had always been held by someone on the Mothers Board.

Many of the women who were with her at the dawn of her ministry were still steadfast, active in all facets of church business. These women now formed the most powerful Mothers Board in religious history. Members of the Mothers Board were the matriarchs of prolific family trees whose branches filled River Jordan. They served as a board of directors, bringing their personalities and life experience to bear in all church operations.

Before the ink was dry on Reverend Alden's retirement documents, her associate pastor, Reverend Albert Beem, began a campaign to take over as head of the church. Outraged, the Mothers Board decided to keep close tabs on the situation. There had never been a man in charge of River Jordan and this one was overstepping himself!

Sure, he'd been handpicked by Reverend Alden. He'd been her right hand for years, but—and they could all see it now—Beem had been biding his time and planning to take over all along!

Mother Jessup, a tiny, round bundle of energy with cottony hair, was the most influential member of the Mothers Board. She'd been with the church longer than anyone else. The buildings and grounds once belonged to the Catholic archdiocese and the church had been Our Lady Blessed Virgin. Marva Jessup had been the rectory's cook and housekeeper for more than 30 years. She made no apologies for her proprietary manner regarding the buildings or the members of River Jordan—this was *her* church.

Tall and handsome with full lips and a fine mustache, Reverend Beem was not the darling of the congregation that he imagined himself to be. More than half the members disliked his "puttin' on" as Mother Jessup called it when he sprinkled German phrases throughout his sermons. He believed that his ivy-covered education elevated him high above the common folk and he took time each Sunday to inspire them with his lofty example.

Beem lunched and brunchd with the Mothers, individually and as a group, to test the waters and see how many of them would support him. He also sent letters to the congregation and began making promises.

Deanna often watched the reverend with amazement, thinking, *the man stands flat-footed and open armed, lying through his teeth. He actually believes his own lies!*

“Brother Oscar, having assigned seating at the eleven o’clock service is an excellent idea! I agree that the most prominent members of the church should all be seated in the front rows! If I’m chosen as the senior minister, we can certainly make that happen!”

“Yes, Sister Ogilvie, that voice you keep hearing is surely that of an angel because you’re absolutely right, we’d just be opening the door to Satan if we started a choir that does that “hip-hoppy” gospel music. That would never happen on my watch!”

“Brother Walters, if you think that we could bring more teens to Jesus with a hip-hop ministry, I’m willing to try!”

As part of his campaign, the value of the sick and shut-ins to a church became the topic of Reverend Beem’s sermons three weeks running (the sick and shut-in received tapes of the services, along with requests for donations). His most effective tactic was a series of calls to the single women in the church. Reverend Beem promised to visit each home personally and deliver a special husband-attracting blessing and prayer candle.

Sitting on her sun porch after a Sunday service, Mother Jessup poured her special iced tea (made with alfalfa blossom honey and a whisper of mint) for two of her oldest and dearest friends. Her yard overflowed with color from the last of the summer flowers. A few bumblebees hovered around a trellis covered with purple clematis and the window boxes were filled with bright red geraniums. A multi-storied bird house on a weathered post added an old-fashioned charm.

“My, my, how that snake changes his spots,” observed Mother Jessup, who frequently mangled her metaphors. She settled into a faded wicker rocking chair.

“He had a lot of us fooled at first,” Deacon Henry Thompson reminded her. He and his wife Rita had been with River Jordan almost as long as Mother Jessup had and he was the church’s first male deacon. “Beem changed a lot after that first wife of his ran off and left him with the kids.”

“He got even worse after Reverend Alden’s husband died,” Mother Jessup pointed out. “That’s when he kept trying to push through all those men-only ideas—men-only services, men-only Bible class!” Mother Jessup sucked her teeth in disgust at the very idea.

“Now, Marva,” Rita was one of the few people who even remembered Mother Jessup’s first name. “That Bible class idea wasn’t so bad, but all those private counseling sessions with the single mothers—now that didn’t sit right with a lot of people.”

“They saw it as being disloyal to his wife,” Henry said. “Lots of people thought he should have tried harder to work things out with her.”

“That man has all the loyalty of a goldfish,” Mother Jessup pronounced.

“A goldfish?” asked the deacon, who sometimes lost the thread of Mother Jessup’s meanings.

“A goldfish doesn’t care whose hand is shaking the box, as long as the food is fallin’ in the bowl.” She looked at Deacon Thompson like she didn’t understand why he couldn’t keep up.

As head of the Mothers Board, it fell upon Mother Jessup to call for a congregational meeting to deal with the “Beem problem.” She sighed and announced her decision to do just that. A meeting would be held after the next First Sunday service.

After thinking for a moment, Rita said, “Many of the younger members who didn’t know Reverend Alden in her heyday can’t see what the problem is. The only minister they know is Reverend Beem—he’s been conducting many of the services for years.”

“They don’t know the difference between a real preacher and a worm in a robe,” Mother Jessup said.

“I think we’re headed for a knock-down, drag-out fight,” Henry predicted.

The first Sunday in August rolled around as if it didn’t have a care in the world. A cloudless sky and sparkling sunlight greeted worshipers heading into River Jordan that day, but the mood inside was tense. As people filed in, they unconsciously chose sides—those who supported Reverend Beem

sat on the left behind the Deacon Board. Those opposed filled the pews on the right—behind the Mothers Board. The battle lines had been drawn. Anyone on record as having joined the church was eligible to vote, if they were at least 13 years old.

Apparently, the village drums had been going all week long. There were people there who hadn't seen the inside of the church since they were first old enough to blow their own noses. Such was the power of the Mothers Board. Any relative of any Board member who had ever been sprinkled, sprayed or dunked in water at River Jordan Full Gospel was mandated to show up and vote on the direction of the church.

Dire consequences awaited the child or grandchild who had partied so hard the night before that they couldn't drag themselves out of bed for this momentous occasion. The threats had ranged from loss of much-loved food items—"that chocolate banana cake you like so much? You'll never see another one"—to loss of residence and in some cases, loss of limbs—"Boy, I will break both of your arms!"

The church was overflowing, even before the choir marched in. The balcony was full; ushers and junior ushers hauled folding chairs from the basement dining hall. There was a persistent buzz of voices, as people who hadn't seen each other in years greeted each other, hugged and gushed about how each "hadn't changed a bit!"

Tevon Kelly, his short, chunky body resplendent in the royal blue robe of the choir director, had the choir launch into a jamming, Al Green-tinged rendition of "Onward, Christian Soldiers." After that rousing beginning, things settled into a watchful waiting until Reverend Beem announced the title of his sermon—"Meeting the Witches on the Heath: An Examination of Shakespeare's Work and Its Biblical Parallels."

"As in Biblical times and in Shakespeare's day, witchcraft was always the province of women. Even today, we battle the influences..."

Before he could finish the sentence, a huge black leather shoulder bag flew from above. It hit the floor with a resounding thump, as if filled with several bricks.

"I know you not standing up there calling nobody no witches!" Sister Louisa Carlton had started the morning angry because traffic was so snarled that she'd gotten to church too late to march in with the choir. Nobody got to hear her solo. She couldn't sit with the choir and there were too many people in the building for her to sit on the main floor. She was stuck all the way up in the balcony and her wounded pride couldn't stand another insult!

The bag had landed in the church's wide center aisle, at least two feet away from anyone, but Deacon Uttley jumped up screaming, "Did you see that? She could have killed someone with that thing! These women are crazy! They'll run this church into the ground; you mark my words!" His tall thin frame trembled like a palsied skeleton.

Half of the youngsters watched the accelerating chaos with wide-eyed wonder. The other half watched with gleeful interest. Cory Beem, the Reverend's 13-year-old son, called out, "I got 10 dollars on Sister Carlton!"

Sister Carlton, a woman of some considerable stature, steamed into the sanctuary like a pinstriped schooner, shaking off two junior ushers as if they were droplets of water. She made her way down to the main floor, fully intending to "snatch that fool Uttley bald-headed!"

Reverend Beem, sweat glistening on his face, stopped bellowing for order and settled for repeatedly banging his fist on the lectern instead. The two factions began to yell at each other across the chasm of the center aisle, accusing each other of everything from crimes against the church and God, to grand larceny. Some of the replies suggested committing certain physical acts that defied the laws of both physics and man.

Tevon attempted to attract the attention of the choir and the musicians by frantically waving his arms. He looked like a large blue bird, struggling to take off. They finally got the message and obediently began to sing "*Jesus, Be a Fence All Around Me.*"

Deacon Batt strode from the deacon's pew at the front of the sanctuary. Short and wiry, with a fringe of salt-and-pepper fuzz ringing his otherwise bald head, his very fair complexion never tanned. In summer, he simply freckled. Batt served as the church's financial manager, one of its few salaried positions. The deacon raised both hands, speaking to Sister Carlton in what he considered to be a calming tone.

“Sister, please, I understand that you’re upset, but this is not the time to behave like a child...”

When his hand touched her shoulder, Louisa dropped him with the shin-scraps and instep-stomp that she’d learned in the River Jordan Self-Defense for Women class. Believing that nothing could stop the furious woman, Deacon Uttley (who was very vain about his dyed and permed mane of thick black hair and had no wish to be bald-headed) leaped from his seat and ran up the stairs leading to the choir loft. He fell to the floor, cowering behind the altars.

“Call the police! Somebody call the police!” First Lady Vanessa Beem screamed and a flock of ushers rushed through the large double doors at the back of the sanctuary. They could have been headed for the office phone or they could have been headed out of the front doors of the church. In the uproar, no one could be certain.

Before Sister Carlton could get her hands on the deacon, before the police arrived, even before Reverend Beem could stop sweating, Mother Jessup quietly made her way to the pulpit. She rapped the lectern with her cane.

“Enough now,” she spoke into the microphone and then again, “Enough!”

In the ensuing silence, all that could be heard was Deacon Uttley who, hunkered down on the floor behind a wall of choir members, alternated between nervous chuckling and tough talk, “Heh, heh, heh, she better not bring her big self up here. I don’t want to have to hurt a woman.”

Sister Carlton stood at the altar railing puffing and blowing like a taunted bull. “I’m right here, Uttley! You got to bring some to get some!”

“We came here today to praise the Lord, not just to take the vote, and certainly not to disrespect His house like this.” Mother Jessup continued.

Everyone fell silent then. Louisa defiantly plopped down on the deacons’ pew. Members of the Nurses Guild tended to Deacon Batt as he lay curled like a shrimp in the center aisle.

“All right,” said Mother Jessup, “let’s talk this out. What wisdom has the Lord dropped on our spirits? How would He want us to be stewards of His holy place?”

CHAPTER 2

The congregational meeting dragged on into the night. The younger children were taken downstairs to the dining hall. The adults had taken up a collection for food and Chuck’s Clucks Chicken was brought in. The kids over the age of 13 were now sorry that they weren’t younger. They had to tough it out while the arguments raged.

“It simply makes good sense,” Deacon Batt said through clenched teeth. He held one hand over a bright red carpet burn on his cheek. “Reverend Beem was chosen by our founder. He’s served this church for years!”

“He had someone in charge of him,” Jerome Gray called out. “I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him!” Jerome was one of the younger men who, with his family, had been welcomed by Reverend Beem in a rush of attention, only to be ignored when another family with a greater household income joined the church.

Reverend Beem sat and seethed quietly. It would have been undignified for him to plead his own case, but he planned to remember every single person who said something against him. *I wish David were here*, he thought. *If my boy were sitting with me, none of these fools would dare to speak against me! We’d show them what real men are made of!*

The reverend’s daughter, Georgia, rose to speak. There were two schools of opinion when it came to Georgia Beem. About half of the members thought she was a sweet young woman and a willing worker in the church. The other half found her to be a bossy snob with a razor tongue. But on one thing they all agreed—Georgia Beem could *sing*. When she sang, birds hushed to listen.

“You all know me and you know I love this church.” Georgia’s smile was pained. Some people saying harsh things about her father had no real cause and she wanted to tell them so. Of course, many others were perfectly justified. She was not blind to her father’s faults, but old habits died hard. She had to show him that she was on his side.

“I was raised here and I don’t think anyone can say that my father doesn’t love this church and he *has* been performing senior minister duties for some time now.”

“I don’t think she should have anything to say,” yelled someone from the rear of the sanctuary. “She’s his family.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not a member of this church!” Georgia snapped back. “I have as much right to speak as anybody in here, more than some, since *I* always pay my tithes, unlike some people I could mention!”

She hadn’t meant to say that last part out loud. It was just that she’d lived her whole life ducking blows and doing unto her older brothers before they could do unto her. She’d been conditioned to strike first and hard.

She was Reverend Beem’s only daughter. Early in her teen years, she realized that her father viewed her as a surrogate mother for the boys, best suited to cooking and cleaning for them. Georgia became driven to prove that she was twice the person that her two older brothers were. She excelled in school as both a scholar and an athlete, always striving to make her father proud—to make him see her as more than just “the girl.” She even took boxing lessons at the local park, so she could handle herself when her brothers were “just being boys,” as her father referred to their assaults on each other and on her.

She attended the local university, even though she won a scholarship to a more prestigious school. Her father insisted that she was needed at home. After graduation, Georgia became a chemistry teacher at Chatham View College Prep, an all-boys high school. Her entire life had trained her for it and she loved her work, but Georgia did not suffer fools, or laziness, gladly. She was one of the instructors that students warned each other about. “You better hope you don’t get that evil Miss Beem!”

Georgia’s remarks had fuelled another outburst. People raged at each other across the center aisle. Mother Jessup sucked her teeth and rapped on the lectern with her cane.

“Child, nobody is going to bad mouth your daddy any more. That’s not what we’re here for.” Mother Jessup looked pointedly at Georgia. “And we don’t need to get into any finger pointing either, Georgia Beem. Every member’s voice carries the same weight here.”

Suddenly, Deacon Thompson rose. Although he was in his seventies, he still had an imposing presence. He’d worked on the docks most of his life, in a physically demanding job that had broadened his back and hardened his hands. He resembled Morgan Freeman, with his wise eyes and weathered face. Everyone respected his calm demeanor, common sense and quiet strength.

“I’ve been sitting here listening to this noise long enough. Rita and I can’t see this working out in any other way. We’re just divided into two camps and there’s no way around it. I guess we should take some advice from King Solomon—split this old church down the middle and let each side take half.”

Henry Thompson thought he was making a proposal that was so outrageous, so preposterous that everyone would take a moment and realize how foolish they were all being. He hoped he’d get a response similar to the one in the Bible—that love and common sense would prevail. That wasn’t the case, however. Another near-brawl and more name-calling greeted the proposal.

River Jordan was, by any standards, a very imposing structure. The main building was three stories high with a domed belfry on top. There were several entrances, including one that led to the basement where the dining hall and the very popular Art Ministry classes were located. The two ministers’ offices both shared a sacristy, but the senior pastor had a private entrance. In addition to the huge sanctuary, there were two smaller chapels on each side of the church. The balcony, which wrapped around the sanctuary, was across a wide hallway from several small rooms where the adults held special interest classes and Bible studies.

There were two other structures, formerly the convent and the rectory. The rectory, which had been converted to a home for the senior pastor, was now vacant. Across a massive parking lot on the south side of the building, the convent housed the Children’s Church. A preschool had been established in the basement. Steve Kent, the church custodian, lived in an apartment on the third floor. There were also a four-car garage and a storage shed where landscaping equipment was stored. To the north of the main building, sat a small play lot and a community garden. The property encompassed an entire city block.

Feeling constricted in his brown Sunday suit, Steve now totally ignored the furor, as he tried to envision how dividing the building could actually be done. Let everyone else fuss and fume over the “whys and what ifs.” Steve was a practical man who concerned himself with the “how” of things and he took his role of caretaker very seriously.

A new outcry arose from people shouting out suggestions for dividing the property. Amidst such mumblings as “this is the biggest load of crap I ever stepped in,” and “everybody in here is on his way to hell on a Harley,” several people just walked out. They decided they’d rather find another church than put up with such goings-on.

Finally, when the most feisty and battle-hardened members grew too weary to shake their fists, an obvious solution was proposed and accepted. They would simply build a wall down the middle of the church. Steve assured them that he had an idea that would work. Deacon Thompson was stunned.

There was one more shock to the River Jordan’s collective system. Reverend Alden’s only child, Portia Alden, held power of attorney for her mother. Portia had decided that the family should no longer own the church. She announced that the congregations could rent the church at very low rates until one or the other had enough money to buy it outright.

Vanessa Beem fainted, dropping into her husband’s arms like a sack of wet sand. She’d been so sure that they were moving into the senior minister’s house that she’d already ordered new drapes for the living room!

While Reverend Beem struggled with his wife’s attack of the vapors, Deacon Batt sidled up to him and whispered, “This is perfect, Albert. We’ll just use them to help pay the rent for a while, until we put together some funds. Then we’ll buy this church right out from under them.”

Neither church wanted to remove or deface the beautiful sign that Reverend Alden had commissioned when she first bought the building. The ornate brass and marble sculpture proclaiming River Jordan Full Gospel Church would stand. Reverend Beem’s church took the title of Greater River Jordan, while the Mothers Board decided *their* church would be Blessed River Jordan and the search for their own minister became their highest priority. The battle was over, but it seemed that the war was just beginning!

The streams of people filing out through the church doors knotted occasionally, with clusters stopping to make some comment or continue a discussion about the meeting. No one noticed the man drifting away up the stairs. On the second level, he slipped down the short hallway and into a darkened room. He didn’t need the light; he knew this space like his own face in a mirror.

Though he was very thin with narrow shoulders, he found wedging himself into, and maneuvering in, the crawlspace to be very uncomfortable. His right shoulder was pressed into a corner and both scrawny, lanky arms were stretched past his head. Now that they were planning to change things, he had to collect his belongings and remove his equipment from the sanctuary.

They were the tiniest of holes, not much bigger than the heads of ten-penny nails. On the other side, the openings would be obscured by a ceiling fan. The openings were always hidden by something—a picture frame, a mirror, maybe one of those fake potted trees. Not blocking the holes, but camouflaging them. He’d always made sure it looked good from the other side. No one had ever suspected a thing.

His task was difficult and exacting. Doing the Lord’s work was never easy. He had to be very precise; he had to take his time. He’d made the holes with an old-fashioned hand drill—there’d been no choice. He chuckled to himself. He’d always conducted his business right under their arrogant noses and had taken extra pains to make sure he was never seen.

He began to sweat—a moist film had formed on his upper lip—but there was nothing he could do about it. As narrow as the space was, he couldn’t bring his hand to his face. The Lord had gifted him with long fingers, so useful when carefully securing the miniature cameras into place. He thought of them as “God’s Eyes.”

Finally done, he backed slowly out of the tight space, shrugging his shoulders a few times to work out the kinks. Rivulets of sweat rolled from beneath the cap he wore to protect his hair from cobwebs, dust and spiders. He filled the area around the hole with a combination of plaster of Paris

and tempera paint—his own creation and he was very proud of it—mixed to match the color of the ceiling. Then he replaced all of the equipment in his small tool kit.

It took a few moments to tidy up, peel off his coverall and straighten his tie. He checked his fingernails for paint residue and dust. Now, he was ready. He could go and walk among them, with no one the wiser. None of them had a clue. He saw them as the Lord saw them—in all their sin and shame—and he owned them, he chuckled softly. He owned them all.

CHAPTER 3

Dee Ramsey was baking—and throughout the congregation of Blessed River Jordan Church, arteries figured they should start clogging now and avoid the rush. She pulled pan after pan of her butter-soaked, cloverleaf rolls from the oven in an all-night session guaranteed to earn her the admiration of the Mothers Board. People for miles around were familiar with the joys of Deanna's baked goods, but they also knew the peril: easy weight gain in as little as one week of indulgence. In the interest of public safety, Deanna only made these potent threats to heart health on very special occasions.

This dinner was being held to welcome the new pastor. She knew that she was one of many toiling into the night to produce the greatest meal in River Jordan's history. She wasn't at all surprised when, at half-past eleven, her phone rang.

"I don't think I can chop another onion," her sister, Daisy, sobbed from the speaker phone. "Whose idea was it for me to make both spaghetti and potato salad?"

"Yours," Deanna reminded her, dusting the rolling pin with flour. "You jumped in when it looked like Sister Ogilvie was going to make the spaghetti again. You said hers tasted like cardboard and ketchup. Yep, said it right out loud."

"You're slipping. You know how much I depend on you to keep my foot out of my mouth." Daisy laughed. "At least I had some help for a little while; Keisha and the kids came down for a few, but I sent them home after about an hour. I couldn't take all the whining and tussling the kids were doing. They stomped around up there like a herd of wild horses until just a little while ago. I guess she finally got them all in bed."

Keisha and Kendrick Peak were twins and both had apartments in Daisy's four-flat. When they were toddlers, their teen-aged mother had disappeared shortly after being diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. No one had seen or heard from her since. Their father had always been a mystery. They'd been raised by their maternal grandparents, close friends of Daisy's.

The twins grew in stability and love, until tragedy struck once more. Their grandparents died while on vacation, when a sudden squall caused a boating accident in the Florida Keys. The twins had been safely on shore at a special activities camp run by the hotel where they'd all been staying.

Not yet in their teens, Keisha and Kendrick moved in with Daisy and had been with her ever since. Each of the 25 year-olds had three children—Keisha Peak because she couldn't distinguish lust from love, and Kendrick Peak because his too-young, too-stressed 21 year-old wife had walked out on him shortly after baby Kensha's first birthday.

The twins had grown up with very different temperaments—just naturally at odds about most things. Keisha claimed to be a Democrat, when she bothered to vote at all, just because Kendrick was a staunch Republican, who envisioned himself as a soon-to-be-successful businessman. Kendrick spoke Standard English with deliberate care, while Keisha peppered her speech with down-home slang, just so she could show Kendrick how to "keep it real."

They'd looked more alike when they were small children. Now certain similarities of feature or expression were noticeable, but Kendrick's long-muscled swimmer's body had outpaced his sister's by more than half a foot. He stood a centimeter over six feet tall. Keisha hadn't so much grown up as she had filled out, with a rounded baby face atop a video vixen's body. Both twins were milk-chocolate brown with hair that their Aunt Daisy had dubbed "natural Nigerian knots."

Kendrick was intensely loyal toward any man who had ever shown the slighted interest in him. He practically worshipped Reverend Beem, who had taken some time to cultivate the talented young musician, convincing him that he could "show gratitude for God's blessing" by playing for the church

for free. Kendrick dreamed of owning a music store, and worked as a security guard while taking a couple of college courses at night every semester to earn his business degree.

Keisha had barely made it out of high school, waddling across the stage at graduation, six months pregnant with her second child. She drifted aimlessly on the high seas of professional choice, taking a college course here, picking up a vocational certificate there, and changing her mind and her interests every other day. One day, she wanted to be a teacher, then a beautician, then a dental hygienist. At present, she was an unwed mother receiving public assistance who, in addition to raising her own children, was trying to help her twin raise his three girls, thank you very much.

She had found a mother figure in Daisy, who spent a great deal of time with her, determined to help the young woman give up her sideline as a baby-making machine—"That girl is shooting out kids like a pitching machine," was Daisy's description of Keisha's parenthood planning.

Daisy continued, "Keisha did get some things done; she took care of the celery and green pepper for me and peeled most of the potatoes. She's really pretty handy in the kitchen. I'm trying to talk her into going to school to be a chef."

Daisy Franklin and Deanna Ramsey weren't blood relations, but they had shared most of their 60 years, having first met in Mrs. Cranston's second grade class. On the first day of school, Deanna rushed to the much-smaller Daisy's rescue when Bobby Jackson pushed Daisy off of a swing on the playground at recess. Only after she'd tackled the bigger boy and gotten two scrapped knees did Deanna find out that Daisy had started the trouble by calling Bobby a "doo-doo head" and punching him because she thought he was cute. It was the first of many rescues that Daisy required as a result of her "bypass the brain and shoot from the lip" communication style.

That day, Daisy cemented their relationship by saving Dee, from both suspension and her mother's considerable wrath. When Mrs. Cranston decided to call in parents, Daisy pitched an award-winning fit, dropping to the ground, sobbing and wailing until the poor teacher decided that handshakes and apologies would suffice. Neither girl had brothers or sisters. The Bobby Jackson incident bonded them for life.

Deanna was Dee to her friends and family, while Daisy had never been anything but Daisy to anyone except when she had been Mrs. Franklin to her students. Dee was Daisy's temperamental polar opposite. She was slow to anger and tactful to the point of timidity. She hated confrontations of any kind, but once she decided to act, she jumped in with both feet—damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!

Daisy cursed like a drunken sailor when she was angry. She frequently asked the Lord for forgiveness for her sharp tongue, but reminded Him that it was not her fault that people were so stupid, rude, trifling, evil (depending on her mood and the severity of the offence).

After her parents divorced, Deanna had lived with her father and his mother, Miss Mattie. Miss Mattie could cuss down an oak tree in 10 seconds flat and her verbal blade had reduced many a grown man to a quivering mass.

Far from encouraging like-minded behavior in Dee, Miss Mattie lived by the tenet, "Do as I say, not as I do." Neither did she believe in sparing the rod. There was not a spoiled child within a two-mile radius of Miss Mattie's home. Dee had made a game of finding ways to voice her displeasure without commonplace profanity.

The sisters were opposites in appearance, too. Dee had been a gangly reed as a child while Daisy was almost as round as she was tall. As a kid, Daisy had developed the habit of eating several dinners—one at home and another with whatever friend she visited. She was always at someone's table when dinner time rolled around and she never turned down an offer of a meal. It didn't matter if the family she visited had one child or ten, offering a Thanksgiving-like spread or a one potato-one carrot soup.

As they'd grown, Daisy blossomed with a set of 38 DDs, while the willowy Deanna curved at the bottom. Both developments were very popular with the neighborhood boys. Daisy had cinnamon skin and reddish brown hair. Deanna was biscuit brown with nearly black, shoulder-length hair that she wore in a page boy style.

They'd been through every stage of life with all its adventures and lessons, and their connection transcended blood kinship. They were sisters in every sense of the word and that was how everyone had always referred to them, even their own mothers. Through their lives' adventures—births and

deaths, multiple marriages and divorces—they celebrated, commiserated and got through it all by holding on to each other.

Now with her two children grown and living in other states, Deanna relished her summer role as Grammy to her three grandchildren, but enjoyed her freedom and semi-retirement even more. The last she'd heard of him, husband number five was running from loan sharks in Louisiana, where they had lived for a while.

That divorce was worth every penny she'd paid for it. John was a good looking man, but his gambling addiction was more than Deanna could take. She had always obsessively paid bills two weeks before they were due. The third time John came home with a long story and a short paycheck, she knew it was time to make other plans.

There was one tearful phone call to Daisy, who had never left Chicago. Three days later, while John was away from home, a large moving van pulled up and spirited Deanna and every stick of furniture (plus ice trays, Venetian blinds, crystal door knobs and other items of home décor) back to the Windy City. At that point, the 50-year old Deanna decided that she and marriage were about as compatible as apples and hammers.

Daisy, however, found that she enjoyed being married. She just couldn't make up her mind about the man. Her four marriages meant marrying two different men, two times each, becoming Daisy Franklin James James Franklin. She finally decided that her high school sweetheart and first husband should also be her last and was enjoying growing older with Carl.

Carl was an accident inspector for the post office, so he traveled frequently and was sometimes way from home for many days in a row. Daisy would tease him when he returned, saying she hoped he'd enjoyed his vacation.

There was never any shortage of people in the Franklins' home. They had never had children themselves, but Carl was one of five children. Carl and Daisy made up for their lack of offspring with a steady stream of nieces, nephews and godchildren, not to mention folks who needed foster family and naturally gravitated toward them over the years— people like the twins.

Both women had thrived in their careers. Daisy had taught home economics at Moncrief High School. After 27 years, she jumped at the chance to take a well-cushioned early retirement when the city had to reduce its staff.

Deanna had gone from being a nurse to a nursing home administrator. She never wanted to give up what to her had been a calling, caring for the elderly. As more and more of the nursing home's patients had become young and dangerous—mentally ill casualties of drugs and street violence—she had cut back her hours until she was only working two days a week.

The church had become their social center. They were members of the Quilting Guild and the Mission Ministry. In addition to Sunday services, they also went to Wednesday morning Bible study. Deanna was a member of the Hospitality Guild and Daisy was a volunteer tutor in the church's Saturday School enrichment program for children and teens.

They had attended the church almost since its inception when they were still in grammar school. They remembered how the founder, Reverend Amanda Mitchell Alden (though she was still Amanda Mitchell at that time) had to fight to become accepted by the powerful old boys' network of the Full Gospel Christian council. The sisters were always there for the church and it had always been there for them.

Deanna could tell that Daisy's was done with the onions; what had sounded like sobbing was now just an occasional snuffle. "I'll meet you at the church first thing in the morning, so we can drop everything off. I don't know about you, but all the heat in this kitchen has done some ugly things to my hair. I need a touch-up like yesterday. How about you?"

"We can both go to Mr. Bernard's and pester him into taking us without appointments," Daisy laughed, blowing at a lock of hair that had fallen over one eye. "With all the steam I've got going in here, my 'do is just about done!"

CHAPTER 4

Reverend Amanda Mitchell knew opportunity when it knocked. She had watched closely as the Roman Catholic parish of Our Lady Blessed Virgin Church transitioned from a working-class white neighborhood to a working-class black neighborhood. The Archdiocese sold the property and River Jordan Full Gospel had a home.

Barely five feet tall with flawless dark skin and glistening Dorothy Dandridge-like hair, Amanda Mitchell looked like a doll, but she moved through her life like King Kong. She swatted down the objections and interference of both her family and the male members of her chosen profession as if they were tiny buzzing airplanes, mere irritations. Thanks to the grace of God and Amanda's drive and charisma, the mortgage payments were always made on time and the church always had lights and heat.

"Your father sent you to that college to find a good husband," her mother cried, brandishing a photograph of Amanda's father as if reminding her of what he looked like. "No man wants a woman who has to be in charge."

"Mama, don't worry," Amanda would soothe, time and again. "The Lord will send me the right man, or help me to be happy with no man."

She did eventually find her perfect mate, Charles Alden, founder of the Chuck's Clucks Chicken Shacks franchise. One year after her marriage to Charles, the congregation had a mortgage burning ceremony. The church was his gift to his bride. When he died after 28 joyful years of marriage, Charles left Amanda, now the Reverend Alden, quite financially secure. Her life proved her beliefs, and those beliefs had been a cornerstone in building her congregation and her stature as an influential minister.

Reverend Alden's River Jordan Full Gospel Church encouraged women to empower themselves and use the gifts God had given them; to "wait on the Lord" for the right man; and to see holiness in everyone. The little reverend also believed in the power of hard work. She did not allow "bench members"—members who filled the pews on Sunday mornings, but didn't participate in church activities and did nothing to keep the Good News alive.

"Everybody has something to contribute," she'd say. "If you're too young to testify, you can sing. If you're too old to sing, you can still pray. If you can use your arms or legs, your hands or feet—even if you can only think—you owe something to God!"

Early the next morning after handing off several aluminum pans full of food to other members of the Hospitality Guild, Dee and Daisy swept through the double golden doors of Chez Beautique and presented themselves to Mr. Bernard. Their long-time friend was the proprietor and chief stylist of the south side's landmark salon and day-spa. In his other life, Bernard was La Saundra, a star of the long-running female impersonator review, *Broadway Ladies*.

The sisters had met him in his salad days, when he was just developing his alter ego at the "sissy shows" in taverns in the tiny suburbs south of Chicago. His stage presence made him a popular attraction and bartenders welcomed the extra muscle when drunken patrons got out of hand. His lean muscled body was not the product of a dance studio, but of long hours spent at the steel mill where he had sweated for more than 15 years.

At a time when being gay could have gotten him fired or worse, Bernard lived his double life with courage and bravado. He had a ready wit and an even more ready right cross. Several would-be gay bashers at the mills quickly learned to overlook his difference, and when the mills shut their doors, he was prepared. Mr. Bernard had become a sought-after hair stylist and beautician, having perfected his craft on his fellow impersonators at the various clubs around the city.

Today he wore his work uniform: perfectly creased jeans and a blue chambray shirt, cuffs rolled precisely twice. A striking silver bracelet with an amber stone was his only ornamentation. He had a smooth chestnut complexion and shoulder-length hair that all of his clients envied.

He adjusted his trendy, frameless glasses and looked incredulously down his nose at the sisters. He had a long way to look from a towering six and a half feet. “Both of you? Now? Without appointments?”

“We *are* your best customers,” Daisy began, gearing up for a fight.

“And you love us,” Dee reminded him, as he flipped through his appointment book, shaking his head.

“Everyone knows you’re the only one we let touch our hair. The new pastor’s welcome dinner is tonight and you *do not* want me running around looking like this!” Daisy delivered the *coup de grace* by whipping off her scarf. She looked like Don King on bad hair day.

Mr. Bernard gave a strangled squeak. Thirty minutes later, they were having their dripping hair set by a pair of Bernard’s assistants.

Still tickled by Bernard’s reaction, Dee whispered, “How did you get your hair to do that porcupine thing?”

“Almost a whole can of hairspray,” Daisy giggled.

“I still can’t get used to the idea of a new minister,” Dee said, a while later.

“I know. It seems like just a minute ago when we were going to Sunday school and Reverend Amanda was teaching the class because there weren’t enough teachers,” said Daisy, thinking of how Reverend Alden had lovingly and skillfully ministered to River Jordan for so many years before succumbing to a cruel caprice of age.

“Oh, before I forget again, Miss Mama called me this morning,” Daisy said casually.

“Miss Mama” was what Daisy had always called Birdie Lee Streeter, Deanna’s mother. Shortly after divorcing Dee’s father, Birdie Lee had bought a large house on the banks of the St. Joseph River in Three Rivers, Michigan. She’d been living there for nearly 50 years.

Even as a child, Dee realized there was something very wrong with her mother. Now she had a technical term—Birdie Lee was a highly functional paranoiac. She hid it so well in public that few people ever realized that Birdie Lee was “crazy as a gnat on crack” in Daisy’s words.

Dee’s eyes bulged. “She called you? I talked to her three times yesterday. What did she want with you?”

“She wanted me to tell you to call her. She said she hadn’t heard from you in more than a week.”

“A week?” Dee sighed. “Lord, she’s her own special kind of crazy. You know I call her every other day. When I was calling every day, she complained that I was trying to boss her around.”

“I know she’s special, but you’ve got to be glad you still have her,” Daisy reminded her. “And it’s good that she’s still able to take care of herself.”

“I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to leave her in that big house. It’s really too much for her, but she fires everyone I get to come help her. Says they’re all trying to steal from her. Or date her,” Dee finished by laughing.

Daisy cracked up. “Date her? That one’s new.”

Daisy and Deanna had been hustled under dryers and were settling down with magazines when Bernard swept by and grabbed Dee’s hand.

“What *have* you been doing, shoeing horses?” He shook her hand in the air while calling for reinforcements. “Someone, please set up over here and do something with these nails. And you,” he pointed at Daisy, “you could put my entire wardrobe in those bags under your eyes.”

He rounded again on his staff. “Somebody get over here and beat these faces before I see them again!” And after another deep sigh and one more eye-roll, he stalked from the room.

“He should always wear a long cape to fling around,” Daisy said loudly to be heard over the whine of the dryers. “Who do you think he’s being today?”

“That was Nora Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard*,” Dee giggled. She batted her eyes and quoted dramatically, “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. De Mille.”

There was no more time for relaxing or chatting. The great and powerful Mr. Bernard had spoken. The sisters were surrounded with people applying facial masks and giving manicures. There was nothing they could do but sit still and think. They both worried that the congregation’s bold move could wind up destroying everything.

