

CHAPTER 1

The little girl went racing into Latisha’s Lovelies, a shop laden with lacy lingerie, which Francesca’s grandmother would have dubbed “unmentionables.” Francesca’s two-year-old niece, Mo-Mo, was enchanted by the window display that featured a pile of plush panda bears nestled among the lingerie.

“Bear!” she screamed as she ran.

Francesca Bibbo followed wearily, wondering if she’d done the right thing by agreeing to watch the child during the day while her younger sister went job-hunting. Much to Francesca’s delight, Doris had just moved to town from Tampa with her husband, Dan. Widowed two years ago, Francesca dearly craved the company of family members, but when it came to Mo-Mo—whose real name was Maureen—there were definite challenges.

“It will only be for a few days,” Doris had promised, when Francesca agreed to watch the child. “And she won’t be any trouble at all.”

In just seconds, Mo-Mo grabbed a bear from the display and then snagged a pair of socks and draped them around her ears.

“Socks!” she squealed, doing an impromptu dance in the shop.

“Come on, sweetie, put those back,” Francesca said, but just then, the sound of Dixie started blaring through the intercom. She looked around trying to figure out what the celebration was

all about. There were only a few people in the shop, including a woman who surely tipped the scales at 250 pounds, surreptitiously examining a flimsy nightgown, and a college-aged girl talking loudly on a cell phone, dishing out dieting advice to a friend: “You can eat all the celery you want!”

A saleslady with a microphone came rushing toward Francesca booming “Congratulations! It’s our 25th anniversary—and you’re our 25th customer today!”

The beaming salesgirl—“I’m Lu-Lu, honey”—carefully placed a tiara on Francesca’s head, while another clerk wheeled in a table displaying a massive cake decorated in hot pink and vivid purple, the shop’s signature colors. A small crowd, attracted by the music, began edging into the store.

“We have a wonderful prize for you,” Lu-Lu announced breathlessly as Francesca wished she could become invisible on the spot. In the corner of her eye, she spotted Mo-Mo making a beeline for the cake.

Then, as a cluster of curious customers gathered round, the salesgirl presented Francesca with a dauntingly large red-and-purple bra with sturdy, helmet-like cups encrusted with rhinestones. Some teenage boys who had wandered in from the mall expressed their appreciation for the garment by emitting a string of ear-splitting whistles and hoots.

“It’s a Va-Va-Va Voom in a double D, honey,” Lu-Lu announced proudly, and then in a whispered aside: “We’ll get you *your* size later.”

“No, uh, this will be fine.” The bra was way out of Francesca’s league, size-wise, but she figured she could use it as part of a future Halloween outfit.

Thanking the salesgirl profusely, she then turned to get Mo-Mo just in time to see the child—still rakishly sporting the socks on her ears—wolfing down a hefty slice of cake. Her chubby face was smudged with purple and pink frosting and there were colorful sticky streaks in her golden-brown corkscrew curls. She was clutching the bear and grinning. Francesca groaned inwardly as she recalled Doris’ warning: “Keep her away from sweets. They make her bounce off the walls.”

Three miles away, Father Brent Bunt, pastor of St. Rita’s church in Decatur, Georgia, stared bleakly at the growing pile of bills on his desk. The weekly collections were continuing to dwindle miserably. He knew it was the economy, but that didn’t dilute the fact that he had bills to pay and an archbishop to please.

He ran his fingers through his hair, which had been dark brown when he first became pastor, but was now rapidly turning gray. Was it just his imagination or was St. Rita’s causing him to age at a frighteningly rapid pace? I’m only 46, but sometimes I feel like I’m 90, he thought dolefully.

The door eased open, and in came Dopey, his head bent down almost apologetically. The big odoriferous dog collapsed

with a sigh at Father Bunt's feet and then put a tentative paw on his knee. Father Bunt wasn't a dog person, but if the rectory had to have one, he'd have preferred a robust German Shepherd, a man's kind of dog. Dopey, a stray, had shown up one day at the rectory, and no one had the heart to turn him out. The dog—named by the children at St. Rita's school because he was not exactly Einstein material—was a yellowish-white mix of poodle and retriever. His crooked paws with their wimpy frills of fur reminded Father Bunt unfortunately of a lady's bedroom slippers.

Despite all his initial misgivings, however, the dog seemed to be growing on him. As Father Bunt scratched the dog's ears, the tail thumped appreciatively against the floor, and Dopey went: "W-w-oof!" There had been some nasty goings-on at St. Rita's, which had left Father Bunt with an arm that still ached whenever it rained, the result of a gunshot wound. The crime eventually had been solved, but Dopey had been so traumatized by the gunman that he'd developed a canine version of a stutter.

After a tentative knock on the door, in stepped Eloise Winkerby, a tall fiftyish woman with a heavily made-up face and poufy blonde hair that reminded Father Bunt of cotton candy. Rumor had it she had shelled out a great deal of money for a facelift, but he tried to ignore gossip. What does it matter anyway? She could be 35 or 85, he thought. It's not like I'm looking for a girlfriend.

She sank into a nearby chair and clasped her hands together as if she were going to launch into a prayer. "Father, the Ladies'

Guild has come up with a wonderful idea for a summer party. We think it will really shake things up here at the parish—and bring in some money as well.”

“What do you have in mind?” His voice had a cautious edge to it, as he dreaded rocking the boat too much in a parish that had weathered two shipwrecks in the past two years. First there had been the grisly murder of the choir director, although as Father Bunt reminded himself, that event had not happened on *his* watch—and then the unexpected demise of the liturgist. Both events had put the archbishop on high-alert mode when it came to St. Rita’s.

“Well, we thought it would just be lovely to have a masquerade ball and a dance with a big buffet supper,” Eloise enthused. “We could have a beach theme—you know, tropical table cloths and drinks with little paper umbrellas, some fake palm trees, and for the buffet we were thinking....”

His mind drifted. This would certainly attract parishioners who like partying, and if there was a good supper and some drinks, he thought, we could charge...well what could we charge? Would ten dollars a person be out of line? Say we got four hundred people, that would be...

“So, Father, what do you think?” Eloise’s carefully sculpted eyebrows rose expectantly.

The dollar signs in his head fizzled out as he returned to reality. “Oh, yes, yes indeed, paper umbrellas—and what was the other thing?”

She smiled kindly as if she were dealing with a senile relative. “Well, we can work out all the details later. I just need your go-ahead to start things rolling.”

Twirling a pencil in his hand, Father Bunt stood up, walked over to the window and glanced outside. St. Rita’s was located on five acres near the town square of Decatur. Despite its proximity to the swarming metropolis of Atlanta, Decatur had a slower pace and boasted an abundance of generously sized oak, pine, and dogwood trees. It wasn’t unusual to spy red-tailed hawks swimming through the cloudless blue summer sky, and hummingbirds zooming through the thickets like tiny green jewels with wings attached.

Father Bunt spotted Father William Snortland getting out of his car, a well-worn Honda Civic. Father Bunt was very fond of the pudgy, balding assistant pastor whose round face gave him the look of being much younger than his 30 years. At times the assistant pastor’s sermons ruffled the congregational feathers, but William, recently ordained, refused to kowtow, as he put it, to the whims of secular society.

This past Sunday he had come down hard, once again, on people who “threw money away” on animals. “Don’t get me wrong,” Father William said. “I like dogs as much as the next guy, but Rover doesn’t need gourmet chow. And when he dies, there’s no reason to spend money on cremation. Dig a hole, for the love of everything that’s holy!”

That particular sermon had caused the phones in the rectory to flash like lightning bugs in a summer swamp, but Father Bunt

had defended William's position, explaining gently that, yes indeed, the animals at St. Rita's dined strictly on discount food.

Now he watched as the young man opened the trunk and pulled out two large sacks of what looked like wood chips. Must be litter for Ignatius, his hamster, Father Bunt thought. Talk about a low-maintenance pet.

He returned to his chair. "Well, Eloise, what would you charge for this event?"

"We were thinking twenty dollars a person, and that includes live music and a delicious buffet. And here's the best part—I think we can get the music *and* the food donated."

Father Bunt began eagerly doodling on the financial report, sketching a little tree with dollar bills as leaves. "But with the economy being what it is, do you think people would spend that much?" He added a question mark to the tree trunk.

She leaned forward as if confiding a secret. "Father, in my experience, even in bad times, folks want to enjoy themselves."

"Well, the collections are down, I have to tell you," he admitted, "and this would be a huge help. So go ahead and start the planning, and keep me posted, alright?"

"Of course, Father," she enthused. "This is going to be so much fun. I already know exactly who I'm going to dress up as." She stood up and looked at him expectantly, as if he could read her mind.

He gave her a questioning look and she burst out: "Scarlett O'Hara! I've always wanted to wear one of those gowns with the hoop skirts!"

Once she'd left, he sat at his desk doodling. A masquerade ball will be just the thing, he thought. And, really, what can go wrong?

“Jobs for the jobless, food for the hungry—and a gentle rain to replenish our water supply,” Mrs. Reedley called out eagerly. It was time for the prayers of the faithful at the 5:30 p.m. weekday Mass held in the small day chapel at St. Rita's. Francesca sat in the last pew, inhaling the musky scent of the cloying cologne the woman next to her surely had bathed in. She was trying to stem her fast-moving stream of thoughts, which were running to heavily uncharitable at this point.

Why does Mrs. Reedley keep praying for rain when we're now five inches over for the month? she wondered. True, there had been a drought for the past three years in Decatur, but enough was enough. Forgive me, Lord, for complaining about other people's prayers, she thought. After all, Mrs. Reedley headed up the Golden Glories club, the seniors' group, and gave generously of her time to a long list of ministries. Fat chance I'll ever be that unselfish, Francesca thought.

After Mass, Francesca waited for Rebecca Goodman, her friend from the choir. A fifth-grade teacher at St. Rita's school, Rebecca taught pottery during the summer months. She was a self-proclaimed “fortyish discontented singleton” and the same height as Francesca, 5'3”, but quite a few pounds heavier. Her honey-blond hair and creamy complexion led many well-

meaning people to assure her she had “such a pretty face,” implying the rest of her body needed work.

“Girl, I wish Mrs. Reedley would work on getting me a husband,” Rebecca said, giving Francesca a quick hug. “You know—jobs for the jobless and dates for the hopeless.”

Rebecca dug around in her purse, extracted a mint, and popped it into her mouth before continuing: “It’s probably the only way I’m going to find a guy who isn’t married or weird—or both.”

“What about that on-line dating service you tried?” Francesca asked.

Rebecca grimaced. “Well, one guy said he was a widower, 42, and tall with dark brown hair. So I agreed to have coffee with him—and I’d say he’s pushing 55—and maybe he had brown hair when he was 20, but the few threads remaining are definitely silver. As for tall, he was about five foot six—and he told me that in *his* family, that’s considered tall.”

“I read in the paper that some guys are getting facials and wearing make-up,” Rebecca continued, shaking her head vigorously. “Is someone putting estrogen in our water supply? Do I have to move to Wyoming or something to find a *real* man?”

Francesca was trying to frame a reassuring reply when Rebecca added, “Not that *you* have to worry, what with that gorgeous detective you’re dating.”

Francesca had a quick mental image of the handsome detective she’d met during a homicide investigation at St. Rita’s.

Tony Viscardi was medium-height, like most of the men in her family, with espresso-colored eyes, a strong physique and an endearingly crooked nose, the result of a childhood diving accident. Most amazing of all, he was romantically unattached. He'd left town a few weeks ago, however, to tend to his unmarried sister, who'd been in a car accident and needed someone round the clock to help her.

"Gorgeous, yes, but he's in Miami," Francesca sighed.

"Well, he's not the only show in town. And you know what they say: *carpe diem* before it's too late." Rebecca glanced at her watch, gave Francesca another hug—"Well, I'm off to the kiln"—and headed out the door.

Francesca went to the table where the big book of prayer requests was kept. She looked through the pages, noting the scribbled appeals—"Healing from cancer," "A job for my son," "Healthy pregnancy." As she was jotting down "Tony's safe return," she overheard a woman talking with Father William in the narthex.

"Father, is it a sin if I put Robert in daycare?"

"Well, some children do just fine in daycare," the priest replied.

"Robert's my poodle, Father! He hates being home alone."

Francesca couldn't quite make out the rest of the exchange, but thought she heard Father William mention wasting money. Then, as Francesca was going out the door, she heard the woman exclaim rather heatedly, "But, Father, I put it all on my credit card!"

Driving home, Francesca thought about Rebecca's advice. She knew her friend was right. She shouldn't be dating Tony exclusively if she wasn't ready to settle down with him. But the thought of dating other men made Francesca feel anxious. So did so many things, though, she realized, as she cautiously navigated the streets, ever on the alert for children, bikers, and animals. On Coventry road, a squirrel darted into the street, saw her car, and froze. She slammed on the brakes and hit the horn, which caused the squirrel to skitter backwards and then forwards in an odd, impromptu two-step before scurrying safely to the sidewalk.

Her anxious temperament was surely inherited from her schoolteacher mother, who could string out endless worries even in the most benign circumstances. Francesca was taught never to: get into an elevator containing a solitary man (he might assault her); try on a hat in a store (she might catch lice); or picnic on a deserted beach (there could be a maniac on the prowl). In college, Francesca had spent a year in therapy trying to overcome the fears of childhood, but after marrying Dean, she began accepting herself as she was. When she began spinning out threads of worry (What if we have an accident on the trip? What if a tree crashes on our house?), Dean had quelled her fears with a simple but very convincing, "Everything will be fine."

Unfortunately, his prediction had proven untrue on that fateful day when he'd lost his life in a crash on spaghetti junction, as locals called a tangled series of interstates in Atlanta. After 15 years of marriage, she'd steeled herself to face the future alone, never again loving a man that much. Then she'd

met Tony, and she could feel her resolve wavering, which at times worried her.

Father William Snortland drove carefully down the street that led to the Eternal Sunrise Nursing Home. He didn't want to be late, but he also didn't want to jostle the small carrying cage in the backseat of the car. He was taking his pet hamster, Ignatius, to the nursing home today.

He had started this practice after reading about dogs that were specially trained to cheer up elderly people. He had considered taking Dopey with him, but the poor animal was so clumsy he might accidentally knock down one of the frail seniors. Ignatius, on the other hand, with his light brown fur and two fuzzy tufts sticking out cheerfully on either side of his rump, was a well-behaved and placid animal.

As Father William parked, he recalled how just yesterday some parishioners had offered to buy him a new car. They had implied the associate pastor needed a more elegant ride than the aging Civic, which his parents had given him. But he'd turned them down gently, explaining that to most people in the world, any car was a luxury.

As Father William entered the nursing home, his nostrils were assailed by an acrid mixture of pine oil, potpourri, and some other odors he preferred not to name. He stopped at the front desk, which was the domain of a stout, cheery black

woman named Clarissa. Her close-cropped hair was dyed the color of marigolds, and she had rhinestones attached to her long, blood-red, pointy fingernails, which unfortunately reminded him of an eagle's talons.

“Good morning, Reverend!” Clarissa's blackberry-colored lips parted in a shimmering smile, revealing gold-capped front teeth, while the cross she wore on a chain around her neck rose and fell in time to her breathing. “They's a real nice lady waiting to see you!”

After signing in, he navigated his way through the corridors where some of the patients sat in wheelchairs, staring at the walls. A few smiled when he greeted them, but others gazed at him blankly. Memory loss, he thought sadly, was one of life's biggest crosses. In her room, Mrs. Anastasia Hartwell was sitting in her usual spot, a chair near the window. Her hair was puffed out in a fluffy gray halo around her head, and there were precise circles of rouge on her deeply creased cheeks. Despite her advanced age—she was 96—Mrs. Hartwell reminded him of the dolls his sister had collected when they were both kids in South Georgia.

“Oh, Father William, I'm so glad you're here!” Mrs. Hartwell's voice had the honeyed intonations of someone who had lived all her life in the South.

He placed the hamster carrier in the corner of the room and then pulled up a chair close to hers. After a few moments of small talk about her niece who lived in Unadilla, Georgia, his parents who lived in Valdosta, and the latest goings on at Eternal

Sunrise—“Father, they treat me like a queen here”—they got down to business.

“Would you like Holy Communion today?” he asked gently.

“Oh, yes I would, Father.” She bowed her head and clasped her thin hands in prayer.

He opened his black briefcase and extracted the small gold container in which he carried the consecrated Host. He placed a white linen cloth on an end table, which became an impromptu altar, and lit a votive candle. Then he opened his prayer book and read: “I am the Resurrection and the life: he that believes in me, although he be dead, shall live.”

After they said prayers together, Father William held up the Host and announced, “The Body of Christ,” and she closed her eyes and lifted her face, murmuring “Amen.” He placed the Host on her tongue, then sat quietly and let the old lady pray. His eyes swept quickly over the simple room, which could have been a cell in a monastery. Her world consisted of a single bed with a frayed and faded quilt and a few items of humble furniture. On the nightstand were a pair of well-worn Rosary beads and a framed print of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. There was also, he noted, a deck of playing cards. No doubt for solitaire, he thought.

In a few minutes, she opened her eyes. “Father, how is Ignatius doing?”

“Quite well.” He went over to the carrier and looked inside. The hamster’s ears were perked up and whiskers twitching, both

signs that Ignatius was alert and ready for action. He carefully scooped the hamster out and placed him in her cupped hands.

“Oh, he’s just the cutest thing,” she crooned. “I had one when I was a girl. His name was Bob.”

There he goes, working his hamster charm on her, Father William thought, as he handed Ignatius a peanut to munch on. After a few moments, he returned Ignatius to the carrier, and then started gathering the cloth and candle as he prepared to leave. He gave her St. Rita’s latest bulletin, and she glanced at it quickly.

“Father, I see the church is going to have a masquerade ball! I used to love them when I was a teenager.” Now her smile faded. “Those days are over, though.”

“Oh, before you go!” She picked up a worn, patent-leather purse and rummaged through it, extracting a crumpled envelope. “It’s only ten dollars, for the church. I wish it could be more.”

As he pulled out of the parking lot, Father William had an idea. Why couldn’t the old lady come to the masquerade ball? He sang one of his favorite hymns aloud—*Tantum Ergo*—on the way home, while in the back seat Ignatius slept soundly.

Francesca settled in at her desk at St. Rita’s rectory, where she volunteered a few mornings a week answering phones. Although she was 38, in many ways she considered herself retired. Dean had invested wisely, and after his death, she’d

discovered that if she lived frugally, there would be no reason for her to work.

This meant more time for things she loved like volunteering at church and taking long walks in the hilly, tree-lined neighborhood of Chelsea Heights, where she often spied mockingbirds, raccoons, and the occasional turtle in a nearby creek. The only downside was that when people found out she didn't have a job, they thought of ways to fill her day. Her sister was one of these people, which meant that today Francesca was again babysitting Mo-Mo.

The little girl was sitting on the floor near Francesca's desk, playing quietly with the bear Francesca had ended up buying for her the other day. The saleslady had patiently explained the bear was not for sale—it was just a prop—but after Mo-Mo collapsed in a shrill, soggy heap screaming “my bear!” the woman had relinquished her position.

Francesca noticed an enticing aroma emanating from the kitchen. The former housekeeper at St. Rita's recently had moved with her family to Chattanooga. Her replacement, Mrs. Trudy Greenstone, had arrived just a few days ago. Father Bunt had told Francesca that the woman, who was “sixtyish,” had a long list of references touting her ability to keep things “neat as a pin” and make meals “from scratch.” The woman, however, had been somewhat ruffled when he'd explained that he and Father William were not, in fact, interested in exploring the benefits of a vegetarian diet, even though, as she put it, “Your cholesterol

will go down, and you can sleep at night without worrying about mad-cow disease.”

Father Bunt had told her, ever so gently, that mad-cow disease was not on his list of worries. The woman had relented, agreeing to serve standard fare such as chicken, pork, and beef, although she had looked, according to Father Bunt, somewhat “put off” about it.

As if summoned by Francesca’s thoughts, Mrs. Greenstone—who had made it clear she liked being called by her last name—entered the foyer where Francesca’s desk was stationed. They had met each other briefly the day before. The woman was barely five feet tall and pencil thin with a face heavily etched in wrinkles, and dramatically arched, darkly drawn eyebrows that gave her a look of perpetual surprise.

“My arthur-it-is is bad today,” the cook announced, rubbing her right arm. “My last job, you know, was at St. Jude’s, and it was a much smaller place to keep clean. But”—and here she glanced heavenward—“I’ll just offer up my suffering for the poor souls in purgatory.” She looked somewhat pleased with her self-proclaimed martyrdom.

“My Bertram—that’s my husband, God rest his soul—he always said, ‘Trudy, you give 200 percent when everyone else gives 50.’”

Now she looked darkly down at the child on the floor. “Do you really want her doing that?”

“Mo-Mo, no!” Francesca leaned down and attempted to wrestle her brand-new lipstick from the child’s hands. The bear,

she noted dismally, had generous stripes of Peachy Passion painted all over its face.

“Bear wike wipstick,” Mo-Mo chortled.

“I raised three children myself, all God-fearing Christians,” Mrs. Greenstone offered, “and one thing Bertram and I agreed on is you gotta let them know who’s in charge from day one.”

Francesca figured that was her cue to discipline Mo-Mo, but setting limits on the child was something she had yet to master. But with Mrs. Greenstone staring at her expectantly, she had to act.

“I’m sure he likes lipstick, but I just bought that, you see,” she told Mo-Mo firmly. She tried to gently retrieve the lipstick, but the child’s bottom lip trembled and tears pooled in her brown eyes. These were, Francesca knew, early warning signs of a tantrum.

“Well, I’m off to make lunch,” Mrs. Greenstone said. “I know His Reverence doesn’t like vegetarian, but I’m going to try him on my bean burgers anyway. They taste so good he’ll think they’re the real item.”

A few minutes later, Francesca heard Father Bunt in the kitchen asking about lunch and the cook saying something about burgers. She heard him exclaim, “Oh, I do enjoy a good juicy hamburger!” There was no further comment from the cook.

That evening Francesca had choir practice. She'd heard there was a new director, but knew very little about the woman, except, as Rebecca had put it, she wasn't known to "suffer fools gladly." After selecting an outfit appropriate to the blazing heat of the Georgia summer—a white skirt, turquoise cotton blouse, and flip flops—Francesca pulled her shoulder-length, molasses-brown hair into a pony tail, and outlined her lips with another of the outrageously titled lipsticks—"Triple Ecstasy Red"—she just couldn't resist buying. She'd always been fiercely critical of her appearance, ever since her school days as a chubby, shy child, but Dean had often praised what he called her "lovely Italian" good looks, even the one feature she most disliked, which was her decidedly Roman-shaped nose.

She peered out the window, noting glumly that the thermometer still read 96 degrees and it was nearly 6 p.m. The brutal heat had wilted the muscadine grape vines Dean had planted years ago, and the fig tree was also drooping. She banged against the window to discourage a squirrel that was shamelessly devouring a fig, but he just gazed at her, unconcerned. Nearby a bedraggled robin sipped from the bird bath. "What a beastly summer," she commented to Tubs, her 10-year-old cat. Pure white except for a tail with raccoon stripes and a black patch on his back shaped like Africa, he sat calmly washing his face in the air-conditioned comfort of the living room.

Arriving a few minutes early, Francesca dipped her hand in the holy-water font and crossed herself before stepping into the

church. Some regulars, she noticed, had already arrived—altos Molly Flowers and Rebecca, along with a tenor, Andy Dull, and a few others. This should be interesting, Francesca thought, since someone—probably the well-meaning church secretary—had placed a notice in the bulletin inviting parishioners to join the choir, “even if you’ve never sung before except in the shower.” And there were plenty of new faces, including, much to her surprise, none other than Mrs. Greenstone, chummily leaning against the organ. “My husband, God rest his soul, always said I had a true voice,” she was informing the director, whose smile looked a trifle forced.

After everyone had settled in, the director introduced herself—Charlene Gregory—and handed out the music. The fortyish, quite svelte Charlene had ash-blonde hair worn in a tight chignon, and a heart-shaped face. As the folders were passed around, one of the new altos piped up with, “I hope we’re not going to sing any of those dreadful songs like ‘On Eagle’s Wings.’ Whenever I hear it, I imagine some big vicious bird swooping down and carrying someone away in his claws.”

There were a few appreciative guffaws from the tenors, after which Charlene said calmly, “As you can see, most of the music is from the 19th century, long before anything as egregious as the eagle song was ever written.”

“Well, I rather like it,” Mrs. Greenstone piped up huffily. “Matter of fact, we had that one played at Bertram’s funeral, and it was quite lovely.”

At this Charlene looked a trifle discombobulated. “I’m sure it was,” she said diplomatically, her face flushing a bit. “OK, folks, let’s get down to business.”

She hit an opening note on the nearby piano, asking the various voices to sing the scales together. After one go-around it was clear to Francesca that the church bulletin had indeed attracted some people whose voices were best heard in the confines of their own bathrooms.

The director let out a dramatic sigh, and a few wisps escaped from her chignon. “Well, let’s try the hymn for next Sunday, why don’t we?”

She sat down at the organ and began playing “Lift High the Cross.” After the first line, Francesca was uncomfortably aware that poor Mrs. Greenstone, sitting to her left, was hitting at best one out of five notes.

“*Someone*,” Charlene said, glaring at the alto section, “is way off. Now if you’re not sure, just turn down the volume.”

Francesca didn’t sing at all on the next go-around, just in case, but there was no denying that Mrs. Greenstone—and possibly one of the new tenors—was tone deaf. Worse yet, both the offenders continued singing with great gusto.

Charlene repeated her warning. “*Someone*,” she began—and then Mrs. Greenstone raised her hand.

“I don’t think it’s the altos at all,” she remarked. “I’m pretty sure it’s one of the sopranos.”

There was a titter of giggles emanating from the soprano section, and then Andy Dull chimed in with, “Well, we’re all

here to praise the Lord, aren't we, and he won't care if we're off a little."

"Maybe the Lord doesn't care, but I'll be darned if we're going to sound like—like cows mooing." Charlene's face was flushed and there were now tendrils of hair poking out every which way from her chignon.

By evening's end it seemed painfully clear to Francesca that they still weren't ready for Sunday, but Charlene tried to put a good face on it. "Well, this has been a fine first start," she enthused. "And we'll go over it again on Sunday, so be sure to arrive a half hour before Mass starts. "

As they were leaving, Francesca saw Mrs. Greenstone standing at the organ talking enthusiastically to Charlene: "Well, I think we did just fine. Didn't sound a bit like cows at all. As for me, I'm real glad I joined—and I hope we do the eagle song sometime too."

After practice, Francesca gathered on the church steps with Rebecca and a few of the other women who were members of the Choir Chicks, a social group Francesca had launched when she first began singing at St. Rita's. The group included Molly Flowers, a nurse in labor and delivery at a nearby hospital, and a new member, Mauve Bundle.

"I've heard there's going to be a masquerade ball at St. Rita's in a few weeks!" Rebecca said excitedly. "It's going to have kind of a tropical theme, but that doesn't mean our costumes have to involve bathing suits, thank the Lord!"

“Why don’t we go as characters from our favorite books?” Mauve Bundle smiled shyly. All Francesca knew about the woman, who looked to be in her late thirties, was that she worked as an assistant in a compounding pharmacy. She also was separated from her husband and had a teenage son. Mauve was short and quite pudgy, and tonight had made the unfortunate choice of wearing Bermuda shorts that revealed sunburned calves that brought vividly to mind two Virginia hams.

While the other women made suggestions—Scarlett O’Hara, Bridget Jones, Madame Bovary—Francesca pondered the idea. She dearly loved Southern writer Flannery O’Connor, but had never heard of anyone dressing up as one of her characters, the way people did with, say, Tolkien’s hobbits and elves. Her favorite O’Connor character was a girl named Hulga, a self-proclaimed nihilist with a Ph.D. in philosophy, but Hulga had a wooden leg, and that could present problems in the costume department.

“I could do Heidi,” Rebecca said, “except I might attract some old weird geezer who likes little girls—you know, she lived with her grandfather and all.”

“Little Red Riding Hood could be fun,” Molly mused with a wicked grin. “You might run into the big bad wolf.”

Mauve’s expression was dismal. “I don’t know *what* I would go as.” She blinked nervously. “I guess there’s always Tinker Bell.”

Molly suddenly looked at her watch—“Oops, I have to get to work”—and hurried away. Francesca had a strong suspicion that

Molly, who never worked night shift, was actually trying to avoid laughing at the image of the rotund Mauve dressed as a svelte pixie. She felt a pang of pity as Mauve looked at her for reassurance.

“That sounds perfect,” Francesca assured her.