

Chapter 1

The sound was ungodly – and it was coming from the soprano section, as usual. *Patricia is definitely on the edge tonight*, thought Francesca Bibbo. *Sounds like she’s calling the cows home*. The stream of tortured notes continued until the choir director, Randall Ivy, a tall man in his late forties and impeccably dressed in a pristine white shirt and beige slacks, slammed his hand down on top of the organ. The angry sound reverberated throughout St. Rita’s Catholic Church.

St. Rita’s was located in the heart of Decatur, Georgia, a town of about 16,000 people just a cat’s whisker away from Atlanta. Despite its proximity to the big city, Decatur remained a heavily wooded area with somewhat of a small-town atmosphere. Residents weren’t that surprised when raccoons and possums wandered into their backyards looking for handouts, and there were occasional sightings of red-tailed hawks swimming through the sky.

The church, along with a rectory, convent, and school, was situated on five acres near the town square. St. Rita’s had a stunning interior with glossy oak pews and stained-glass windows that glowed like jewels. In the afternoons, the sun radiated through the glass to paint colorful images on the floor. Unlike many newer Catholic churches that had banished kneelers and statues, St. Rita’s was more traditional.

Parishioners still got down on their knees to pray and could frame their prayers by gazing on a towering marble statue of Mary in the front left of the church or St. Joseph on the right. But, as was fitting with Church doctrine, the marble crucifix occupied the highest point over the altar. Francesca Bibbo, an uncertain alto, often glanced at the crucifix during choir practice and shaped a silent prayer, especially when things started going awry, as they were now.

“No, for heaven’s sakes, no!” Randall Ivy fumed. His well-tanned face was now a dangerous shade of red, and as he ran his fingers through his blonde hair, Francesca noticed little furry horns appearing on his scalp.

“*Someone* in the soprano section is flat *and* loud, a deadly combination.”

Five of the six sopranos cast uneasy glances at each other, while the sixth one, Patricia Noble, stared at her glossy fingernails, looking unconcerned. All the other choir members seemed to know who the offending party was, despite an unwritten law that the director didn’t use names when correcting the singers, all of whom were volunteers.

The choir consisted of 20 parishioners ranging in age from 25 to 80. The group sat at the back of St. Rita’s near the organ on Sunday mornings, a fortunate arrangement in Francesca’s opinion, since this meant the congregation couldn’t stare at the singers during Mass.

She was somewhat self-conscious about singing in the first place, and she dreaded being the center of attention. Besides, it was just as well that the parishioners couldn’t see Randall, she reflected, because he often looked like he

might explode from rage when choir members hit the wrong notes. During rehearsals, he tried to contain himself, usually issuing a general warning to the entire choir in his efforts to shame the perpetrator.

Patricia, a curvy bleached blonde of 40, was a bit of a special case, however. As he continued berating the soprano section for errors, she went on studying her pointy red nails as if testing them for sharpness. Flawlessly dressed, the five-foot-ten-inch Patricia was reputed to have taken her ex-husband to the cleaners and now devoted her life to shopping.

Francesca shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Thirty-eight and widowed for two years, she admitted to herself that she had ulterior motives for joining the choir. Her voice on the very best of days was only average, but she was tired of living alone in the house that she'd shared with her husband. She was ready to start dating, but dreaded facing the dreary bar scene. And the choir seemed as likely a place as any to meet a man.

Last month she had attended her first meeting of the "Feisty Forties," St. Rita's singles group for parishioners, but it had been woefully disappointing, since ten women and only four men had shown up. One of the men had a terminal case of bad breath, two seemed to be exceptionally heavy drinkers, and the fourth had prefaced too many statements with "as my mother always says."

Still, she didn't want to be cruel. She was aware that her standards were impossibly high, because her husband, Dean, had been both a friend and a sweetheart, a rare combination. Also, as she found herself telling friends now and again, repeating something her aunt had said long ago,

she herself was no “spring chicken,” so who was she to be casting the first stone?

Sitting at home alone wasn't good for her; that was certain. Father John, the pastor, was always urging parishioners to get involved in various ministries, running the gamut from helping at homeless shelters to visiting the sick and homebound, and when he had described singing in the choir as a ministry to the congregation, she had decided to try that.

Maybe the choir would work out. There was the slightly balding, somewhat introverted Gavin Stewart, who was a widower. He sometimes toted a small taciturn son with him to rehearsals, and Francesca, who had no children, at times fantasized that she would become a mother to someone else's child late in life. She would finally have someone call her by that beautiful term “Mom.”

Then there was Thomas White, a short, well-built man whose outstanding feature was turquoise-blue eyes. He was a real music buff who often shared musical scores with Randall. A bachelor, Thomas sometimes showed up at church with a girlfriend, but since he never brought a date to choir parties, Francesca suspected the relationship was probably quite casual.

The choir director himself was somewhat of a mystery. Randall Ivy had sandy-blond hair and an athletic build with skin that turned the color of pale honey in the sun. His yellow-green eyes reminded her of a cat. In her estimation, he was very handsome. He had been the director for about three years, and she knew little of his past. Rumor had it that Randall was gay, but Francesca wasn't so sure.

Usually she could detect the telltale signs immediately, but his sexual identity seemed somewhat murky. Sometimes, when he smiled at her, his catlike eyes lightly flickering over her figure in a distinctly heterosexual fashion, she had the definite impression he was interested. Other times, when he was flailing his arms directing a piece of choral music, he looked foppish, although Francesca imagined it would be impossible for even a linebacker to appear anything but effeminate in similar circumstances.

“Let’s give it another try,” Randall said. “And remember the enunciation. It’s not foreverrr,” he growled, rolling his r’s in a particularly grating fashion. “It’s fah-evah. And it’s not spirrrit, it’s spihdit. Remember, in choral music, r’s are ugly.”

“Spihdit sounds like ‘spit it,’” Rebecca Goodman muttered under her breath to Francesca. A plump, friendly woman who sat to Francesca’s left and described herself as “fortyish,” Rebecca was the lead alto and had a strong, beautiful voice.

Randall returned to the organ and began pounding out the opening notes to “If Ye Love Me.” By the end of the first measure, Patricia’s sour notes had filled the sanctuary faster than smoke from burning incense. And r’s were peppering the air like gnats at a South Georgia picnic. The blood rose in Randall’s face once again. He retracted his fingers from the organ as if the keys were on fire.

“Sopranos, step up to the organ,” he snarled. “Everyone else, take a break.”

Francesca genuflected as she faced the tabernacle on the altar before heading out the back door into the vestibule. She often wondered what God Himself must think as He

surveyed this motley crew, trying their hardest to churn out decent music for the congregation. It was hard to tell if the people in the pews cared one way or the other. Sometimes, when the choir fell flat on its face, someone would stop by the organ to congratulate Randall for a stunning performance. Other times, when the notes flowed as sweetly as maple syrup, no one said a word. As for God, He remained stubbornly silent on the issue.

The men had gathered in the vestibule and were discussing the latest football scores. Francesca yearned to join in, but she kept her distance because she rarely even knew which teams were playing. Usually, if anyone mentioned basketball, football or baseball to her, she had a standard reply. “When it comes to sports, I have an advanced case of attention deficit syndrome.”

Tonight she decided to stick with the other altos, since it was too much of an effort to pretend she found touchdowns fascinating. *Besides*, she thought, *I’m not looking my best*. She had spent the day answering the phone in St. Rita’s rectory, and she’d arrived home late with barely enough time to grab a sandwich and feed Tubs, her 10-year-old arthritic cat, before heading to choir practice.

There’d been no time to scrub off the day’s make-up and reapply a fresh coat, so she felt grubby and unappealing. To make matters worse, she could feel a blemish doing its best to blossom on her chin. *Despite my mature age*, she reflected dismally, *my skin persists in believing I’m still an adolescent*.

“Do you think he’s gay?”

Francesca was shaken from her self-deprecating thoughts by the question Rebecca Goodman had whispered

to Shirley Evans, the youngest choir member. Shirley, 25, had an upturned nose and a round face haloed with auburn curls. She also had been blessed with a curvaceous figure that she showed to best advantage in snug jeans and sweaters. Francesca was often grateful to God that Shirley was married and the mother of a fetching two-year-old girl.

Who needs more competition in the dating department? she thought, edging her way closer to the two women to join their discussion.

In the background Randall could be heard pounding the top of the organ and emoting loudly, “No, ladies, you hold that note for two beats, not one. And I don’t want to hear those r’s! Let’s try it again.”

Shirley giggled and a few of the men looked her way longingly before returning to their discussion of a particularly memorable touchdown.

“I think he probably is,” she said.

“What makes you think so?” Francesca asked.

“Well, just look at the way he plays the organ. Isn’t it obvious?”

“I don’t know,” Rebecca chimed in, “sometimes I get the feeling he’s looking at me – and he’s not always staring into my eyes, if you know what I mean.”

Shirley and Francesca laughed in unison. Just then, the door to the vestibule opened, and Randall rushed out. Was it Francesca’s imagination or was he looking directly at her? And he had the nicest yellow-green eyes.

“OK, everyone, let’s try the whole piece from the top one more time.”

The men and women filed back into the church and took their places.

“And if anyone says ‘spirrrret,’” Randall warned, seating himself at the organ, “I will personally excommunicate them.”

“I didn’t know choir directors had that power,” commented Andy Dull, an older man in the bass section.

“The pope has given me a dispensation.”

This time the singing went well. Evidently Randall had said something to silence the shrill flat notes that were Patricia’s calling card, and all the other sopranos were singing at top lung power in an apparent attempt to drown out any possible errors on her part.

“OK, it’s a wrap,” Randall said finally. “Thank you all for coming tonight. See you on Sunday.”

Francesca picked up her music and her purse and was about to leave the church when she heard Randall call her name.

“Mrs. Bibbo, will you stay after for a moment or two?”

Be still my beating heart, she thought, as Shirley and Rebecca cast her amused looks. “Be sure to give us a full report,” Rebecca whispered, gathering up her music. “See you tomorrow night.”

One by one, the choir members drifted out into the brisk November night. Now it was just Francesca and Randall. As he gathered up his sheet music from the organ bench and headed toward her, she mentally began reciting a familiar litany of self-recriminations.

Why didn’t I take the time to apply a fresh coat of war paint? Why did I wear this baggy sweatshirt? And why did I gain two pounds last week when I was trying to lose five?

Francesca, who was only five foot three, had to diet furiously to keep the extra pounds at bay. As a chubby child

she'd been taunted by her classmates and had developed a mental picture of herself as obese. She knew it wasn't healthy to compare herself to the grinning skeletal figures gracing the front of women's magazines, but she often did it anyway.

She'd inherited her olive complexion and molasses-brown hair and eyes from her parents, who had died when she was in her twenties. Her father's family had originated in Sicily, and her mother's in Naples. She had also inherited a longish, decidedly Italian-style nose, the bane of her existence. Her husband, Dean, had thought her nose was cute, but in her estimation it was too prominent, especially in a culture that seemed to idolize women with smaller models.

Her stream of thoughts suddenly ran dry as Randall sat down next to her. She gave him her best smile, unconsciously running her tongue over her front teeth to give them an extra shine.

"How are you tonight, Mrs. Bibbo?" His catlike eyes swept over her face in a slightly seductive way.

"Oh, please, call me Francesca." She was horrified to feel blood coursing into her cheeks. *I can't believe I'm blushing like a teen-ager*, she groaned inwardly. "I'm a little tired from answering phones at the rectory, but other than that..."

"How long has it been since you left your job at Krenshaw State University?"

"Let's see, it's been two years now." She winced as an image of a gargoyle suddenly darted through her mind. *My ex-boss*, she thought grimly.

“What did you do there?” He sat down beside her and leaned in just a bit with a look of real attention on his face.

“I worked in the publications office for nearly ten years. At first, I really loved it, especially my first boss.” He nodded in an encouraging way, so Francesca went on.

“She was from Alabama and used the most wonderfully picturesque expressions. She’d say, ‘It’s like pushing a rope’ to describe how hard it was to get some people to finish projects on time. And when deadlines were looming, she’d tell us ‘We’re getting our tails in a crack.’”

Here she paused, delighted to see that he was laughing. “I think I know what your boss meant,” he said. “Sometimes I feel like I’m definitely pushing a rope with the sopranos.”

Now he glanced at her hand. *Is he looking for a wedding band?* She wondered.

“So, Francesca, why did you leave that job?”

“Well, my wonderful boss retired, and the one who took her place was...well...let’s say she was impossible. After that, it was easy to leave.”

He smiled again, as if he really understood her. *What a nice smile, she thought, I don’t think I’ve ever seen whiter teeth – and so straight. Which reminds me, I wonder if he’s...*

“And since then, how have you kept busy?”

She reflected on her laundry list of volunteer activities. She and Dean had lived frugally, and he had invested their savings wisely, so now she didn’t have to work, as long as she continued watching her pennies. Of course, she’d be willing to work in that dreary office 24 hours a day if she could only have her darling husband back again.

“Oh, this and that. My husband died, and...” She was surprised at how shaky her voice sounded. He looked at her with compassion in his eyes, and it took her a moment to compose herself.

“I’m very sorry to hear about your husband.”

“Yes, well, it was quite sudden. An accident.” She had to change the subject or she would start crying.

“But to answer your question, I do a little volunteer work at the rectory, lots of reading, some gardening, you know...”

Randall moved closer to her now. “Well, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

She could feel his body heat radiating toward her and caught a whiff of heady and very masculine cologne. He was so close she could see how cleanly he shaved and how carefully starched his shirt was. *Do other women find men’s Adam’s apples sensuous? Not those big bulbous ones, of course, but there’s definitely some appeal in a well-formed apple like his.*

“Yes?” She suddenly felt very shy. At this close distance he was no doubt noticing every single flaw of her complexion, and there were quite a few, the result of a lifelong battle with acne.

“Would you be interested in being my choir assistant?”

“Your what?” The words flew out of her mouth before she had a chance to think. *I must sound like a babbling fool*, she thought. *He probably thinks I don’t know the meaning of the word.*

“I’m looking for someone to buy sheet music, organize it, keep an updated list of phone numbers and e-mail addresses for choir members, print programs for special

concerts, send out e-mails about rehearsals -- a lot of little tasks I'm handling myself now. And you'd be paid, of course."

A little extra money for Christmas certainly couldn't hurt, she thought. And as his assistant I could work closely with him and get to know him better.

"Well, what do you say?"

He has dimples. How strange that I didn't notice them before.

"It sounds interesting – and I could use some extra Christmas money." She felt her cheeks growing warmer as two completely unexpected images suddenly flashed through her mind out of nowhere: the two of them, wrapped in a delicious embrace; the two of them, standing before the altar to take their vows.

She began stuffing her sheet music into her folder to avoid his eyes. "When do I start?"

"I'll give you a call later in the week and we can get together. I have your phone number on the choir list."

Now Randall seemed very officious as he stood up. "Unfortunately, the pay isn't fabulous, but it's dictated by the pastor, as is everything else."

He looked pained, but he didn't really have to go into the details with her. Everyone in the choir was well aware of the long history of misunderstandings that existed between the pastor and the last three choir directors. Father John Riley had been at the helm for seven years, and he was well-loved by the congregation for his upbeat sermons and dry wit. But he had a definite temper, and sometimes the people who worked closely with him felt its sting.

The last choir director, enraged by the pastor's meddling in the day-to-day details of the choir, had stormed out of the church one day during the early morning Mass, never returning. He had gone on to become a world-renowned organist, and there were still days when people in the choir would reminisce about the quality of the musical selections he had chosen.

There had been a mad scramble to replace him, and Randall had been hired. Although she knew most people thought he didn't have the same skill set as his predecessor, he was known for working hard to select traditional music and for keeping the choir motivated. Now history seemed to be repeating itself with the pastor.

"You probably know this beastly thing is on its last legs." Randall straightened up a stack of hymnals while shooting the aged organ a dark look.

"One of these days it's going to die a foul death right during Mass. Of course, I've told Father John innumerable times, but he doesn't want to spend the money to buy a new one, so we have to keep adding patches here and there. I swear I'm tempted to sneak into church late one night and put the thing out of its misery by hacking it to death with an axe."

He gave her another of his disarming smiles, dimples and all.

"Well, enough of my problems. We'd better call it a night. I'll get in touch with you soon."

Picking up her music folder and her purse, Francesca genuflected in the direction of the tabernacle. For just a moment, her eyes glanced lovingly at the serene statue of St. Joseph, her favorite saint. She loved the Blessed Virgin

Mary dearly, but there was something about St. Joseph that intrigued her.

She wished there were a prayer like the “Hail Mary” to honor the man who surely had helped Mary give birth to the Christ Child in that lonely stable in Bethlehem. She had always pictured Joseph as being the first to hold the babe and look into His eyes.

Now, as she opened the back door of the church vestibule to step outside, she saw a dark figure coming up the steps. Although Decatur was relatively safe, there was always the chance of a street person coming up to ask for money, and they made her nervous when she was alone. Startled and suddenly fearful, she pulled her purse toward her and drew back. Then she realized it was the pastor, and greeted him warmly.

“How are you tonight, Father John?”

The priest’s dark hair was in disarray, standing up in tufts around his ears. Once again, she thought of horns.

“Just fine, my dear, and you?”

She smiled in response. *I wonder if he remembers my name.* She’d been a parishioner for six years, but it was a very large congregation and he wasn’t good with names. Now she watched as Father John Riley opened the door to the church, genuflected, and went in. It was then that she realized she had forgotten to light a votive candle for her husband, as she did every week after rehearsal. She quietly returned to the front of the church, lit the candle, and then kneeled down to pray. But as the conversation at the back of the church started heating up, she had trouble concentrating.

“I’m concerned the organ is going to break down during our Christmas Eve performance,” she heard Randall say. “It’s really on its last legs.”

She heard the pastor’s reply. “We have to be good stewards of the congregation’s money. I can’t see spending thousands and thousands on an organ when there are so many other needs.”

She completed her prayers and stood up, hurrying quickly down the aisle and out the back door. The two men were so engrossed in conversation that neither one seemed to notice her.

Randall’s voice was rising. “Father, what do I have to do to make my point about this ungodly piece of junk? Sacrifice myself by committing Hari Kari right here on top of it?”

She was already out of the church, so she didn’t hear Father John’s reply.