

THE
UNLIKELY YARN
OF THE
DRAGON LADY

A Novel

SHARON J. MONDRAGÓN



The Unlikely Yarn of the Dragon Lady: A Novel

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The quotation of Luke 1:37 on page 45 is from the King James Version.

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CHAPTER 1

ON THE FATEFUL WEDNESDAY MORNING the final battle was engaged, Pete McIlhane, rector of Hope of Glory Community Church, dressed himself with a sense of adventure and derring-do. He donned a black clerical shirt and white collar as though it were any other day. But then he pulled a black T-shirt with the words *Father Knows Best* in white lettering over his head—*like a surplice over chain mail*, he thought.

“Saint George had his dragon,” he encouraged himself as he thrust his arms through the sleeves. “And I have Margaret Benson!”

“Are you sure you want to wear that shirt?” his wife, Linda, asked him over breakfast a few minutes later. “She might take it as a challenge.”

Pete flashed her the boyish, lopsided grin he’d deployed to capture her heart nearly three decades earlier. “Bring it on!” He recklessly slathered an English muffin with far more jam than usual. “These are desperate times, my dear, and I’ve played it safe way too long. I know you think my idea is crazy, but *it’s so crazy it just might work*.” He’d delivered the movie quote with raised eyebrows and an Italian accent. “Besides,” he continued, suddenly serious and determined, “it’s time somebody stood up to Mrs. I-Run-Everything Benson before she runs this church right into oblivion!”



As the self-appointed head of the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry, Margaret Benson arrived fifteen minutes early for the group’s weekly meeting in Hope of Glory’s Prayer Chapel—as usual. The

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blustery November day was cold enough to wear the fur coat Jim had given her for their thirtieth wedding anniversary, and she laid it carefully across a back pew. Then she strode to the front, where a vase with withered flowers sat on the intricately carved table that served as an altar. Sunlight filtered softly through the windows, highlighting the rich colors of the stained-glass depiction of the nativity. It also highlighted the motes floating languidly in the air. She ran her finger across the tabletop, then frowned at the trail it left in the dust. Really, how many times did she have to point out that the janitor was simply not doing his job when it came to the Prayer Chapel?

Margaret pulled a tissue from her pocket and fastidiously wiped the offending dust from her finger. Then, vase in hand, she pushed through the double doors of the chapel and made her way to the kitchen off the parish hall, where she dumped the flowers into the trash can. She scrubbed out the vase in the sink, taking care not to splash water on her new wool suit. Then she placed the vase dry and spotless in the cabinet labeled *Prayer Chapel* and headed for the church office to tackle the problem of the dust in the chapel.



Lucille Brewster, church administrator and general Girl Friday for the rector, sighed as she heard the sharp approach of footsteps crossing the foyer. “Incoming,” she muttered under her breath. She made sure, however, that no trace of chagrin remained on her face by the time Margaret Benson, tall and regal and impeccably dressed in a royal-blue power suit and heels, appeared in the doorway of the church office. Lucille, in her workday slacks and sweater, felt hopelessly dowdy by comparison.

“Hello, Mrs. Benson. How are you this fine morning?” Lucille hoped the answer would be *Fine, thank you*, but she wasn’t counting on it.

“Practically choking on the dust in the chapel. It’s disgraceful the way Bill neglects it. Would you please speak to him—*again?*”

“I’d be happy to.” Lucille resisted the urge to reply through gritted

teeth. She could feel Mrs. Benson's eyes on her as she jotted a brief note—*Please dust Prayer Chapel*—and then tucked it into the janitor's internal mail slot.

"I could do that," Margaret told her. "In fact, I have. Repeatedly, for all the good it's done. He needs to be spoken to. Firmly."

"I'll mention it to Father Pete when he comes in."

"Never mind. *I'll* mention it to him after Prayer Shawl."

Honestly, Lucille thought as Margaret Benson turned on her heel and headed toward the foyer, *Father Pete has more than dust in the Prayer Chapel to deal with these days. If things don't improve soon, there won't be a Hope of Glory anymore, let alone a Prayer Chapel.*

She reflected on the current situation. In January, the bishop had given them a new pastor and a year of grace. If the congregation continued to dwindle, however, the church was slated to close. The deadline loomed not much more than a month away. Lucille permitted herself a rueful smile and shake of the head, glad she wasn't in Father Pete's shoes today. His newest plan to try to resurrect Hope of Glory was bound to send Margaret Benson into a snit of epic proportions.



Margaret reached the foyer just as two of the other three members of the prayer shawl ministry arrived. Rose Harker's cane preceded her, reaching for a firm purchase on the stone floor before Rose herself came into view, white-haired and slightly stooped, her blue eyes bright and her smile wide. Jane Crenshaw, who gave Rose a ride from Fair Meadows Retirement Community every week, emerged from behind the door she'd held open for Rose. That left Fran McMillan, their newest member—late as usual.

"Whew!" Jane said as the door banged behind her. "It sure is November out there. And would my daughters wear hats today? Of course not, because red ears and head colds are all the rage for teenagers these days. I stuffed hats into their backpacks when they weren't looking so they can cover their heads when it's *their* idea." She pulled off her own

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hat, a pale-blue beret, and unzipped her down jacket. Underneath, she wore a thick sweater and jeans.

“When I told my children to wear hats, they wore hats,” Margaret said.

Rose chuckled as she removed her own head covering, a red silk scarf. “And they probably took them off as soon as they were out of your sight. I think I like Jane’s method better.”

“Thank you, Rose. It’s nice to think my girls’ stubborn little ears might not be getting frostbitten as we speak.”

Margaret shook her head and scanned the foyer. “Now, where is Fran? She can never seem to get here on time. And she doesn’t have children at home anymore to slow her down. Or a husband either.”

“Give her some leeway,” Rose said. “It hasn’t been all that long.”

“It’s been long enough,” Margaret retorted. “You won’t catch me still walking around in a fog a year and a half after Jim’s gone.”

At that moment, Fran tumbled through the door like a windblown leaf, a potted amaryllis in her arms and her hair in her face. “I almost forgot this,” she said, panting as she set the plant on a bench and then ran her fingers through brown hair muddied with gray.

“I had to turn around and go back for it,” Fran added as she shrugged out of her coat.

“You really are forgetful,” Margaret said.

“It’s all right, dear.” Rose placed her hand on Fran’s arm. “The important thing is that you remembered it. It will bloom at the right time, from the looks of it.”

“I hope so.” Fran hurried off to the Prayer Chapel with the amaryllis, carelessly leaving the plastic grocery sack that served as her knitting bag on the bench.

Margaret shook her head. If she wasn’t mistaken, Fran had worn the same sweatshirt and faded jeans to the prayer shawl meeting last week. *And* the week before that.

A young man in a paint-spattered ball cap stuck his head around the church door, letting in another gust of wind. “Excuse me, ladies, but could one of you give me a hand and hold the door for me?”

Jane did so while he hauled a ladder up the church steps and across the foyer. Then Fran, returning to retrieve her forgotten knitting, held one of the doors to the nave open for him. With a nod of thanks, he disappeared down the left-hand side aisle whistling a slightly off-key version of “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

The front door had barely banged shut when it opened again, letting in yet another gust—and Father Pete. *It’s a wonder the wind didn’t fling him across the foyer*, Margaret thought as the slender man came toward them. Though well into his forties, his waistline belied his enthusiasm for the dessert table at church suppers.

“Great! You’re all here. I have something exciting to tell you.” He shed his coat, revealing a T-shirt that declared *Father Knows Best*.

Margaret gave a disapproving sniff, then took charge. “Now that *you’re* here, I can talk to you about the Prayer Chapel.”

“That’s exactly what I want to talk to you about. But you go first.”

What now? she thought. But she had to pounce on this while she had the chance. “Bill is still neglecting the chapel. I could write my name in the dust on the altar if I wanted to. You *have* to speak to him. Firmly. In fact, you need to threaten to fire him if he doesn’t shape up.”

The rector folded his coat over his arm and then looked up at her. “I appreciate your concern for the chapel, Margaret. But we’ll have some dust in there for a while yet, all in aid of making it an even more beautiful and inviting place. That’s what—”

The young man in the ball cap walked back into the foyer. “Hi, Father! Mind if I prop these doors open for a few minutes? I have at least two more trips to bring everything in from the truck.”

“Not at all.”

Margaret shivered in the cold blast that swept through the foyer as soon as the young man propped open the outer doors with a couple of paint cans. Paint cans?

“Let’s adjourn to my office, where it’s warm,” Father Pete said.

Rose and Jane took off their coats and left them on the bench with Fran’s knitting bag.

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Soon they were all settled in the rector's book-lined office, their hands wrapped around steaming cups of coffee, compliments of Lucille.

"I hope this won't take long." Margaret glanced pointedly at her watch.

"I'll get right to it, then." Father Pete clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. "Ladies, I have an exciting opportunity for you."

Margaret narrowed her eyes. In her experience, what pastors called opportunities usually involved a great deal of work, primarily for the women of the church. They'd say they *just* needed a luncheon for a diocesan meeting or the bishop's visit, as though the ladies could snap their fingers and a tasty, elegant meal would appear on beautifully set tables in the parish hall. Come to think of it, that was what usually happened when she was in charge.

"The clergy conference last week was truly inspiring," Father Pete went on.

Margaret relaxed a bit. They'd been down this road before. Her pastor had been inspired about a number of projects since his arrival at Hope of Glory last January, but his enthusiasm for each one had fizzled after a few weeks of inertia from the congregation. And his innovations had never even come close to affecting the quiet little group that knit and prayed silently in the Prayer Chapel every week.

Father Pete took a quick sip of his coffee. "The bishop told us the days of waiting for people to find the church on their own are gone. He said that, to reach others for God, we need to take the church out into everyday life. He's right, of course. I see the need right here in our own parish. Fewer of us attend every year, and we rarely see new faces. That's where you come in."

"What do you mean, that's where we come in?" Margaret narrowed her eyes again.

Father Pete smiled. "Don't some of you take your knitting with you when you have to sit and wait somewhere—at the doctor's office, the dentist, the airport?"

The women all nodded.

“Do people talk to you, ask you what you’re making?”

Jane nodded again. “They tell me about their mother, or their grandmother, or their aunt who knitted or crocheted. Seeing someone knitting seems to bring back good memories for people.”

“Since I’m usually working on a prayer shawl,” Rose put in, “I tell them about prayer shawls, why we make them, how they affect people. Most everyone says they think it’s a nice idea.”

“Exactly. People are drawn to knitting and knitters. And what could possibly be cozier than a group of women companionably knitting together?” Father Pete leaned toward them across the desk, his eyes bright and eager. “I want the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry to go out into the world and knit—together. Talk to the people who stop to comment on your knitting. Answer their questions. Tell them about Hope of Glory.”

Margaret’s stomach clenched. “You mean knit together in *public*? You mean talk to *strangers* about church?”

“Yes!”

“No.” Margaret set her coffee cup firmly on top of a folder labeled *Sermon Notes* and stood. Then she drew herself up to her full height, just shy of six feet in heels, and loomed over Father Pete. “Absolutely not. We couldn’t possibly. You don’t understand our ministry at all if you think we should be knitting in a crowd somewhere. This is, after all, a *prayer* ministry, Father.”

Father Pete didn’t quail like people usually did when she towered over them to make a point. He remained seated, gazed up at her with his steady gray eyes, and raised his right eyebrow.

“We need peace and quiet to pray,” Margaret continued, undeterred. “And since we’re making *prayer* shawls, it’s important that we knit them in a peaceful and quiet place, like the *Prayer Chapel*, so we can *pray* while we knit.” She folded her arms across her chest to indicate the discussion was over.

“I agree that the chapel is a lovely, peaceful place,” Father Pete replied. “And I’m sure the prayers of the Heavenly Hugs have enhanced its beauty and serenity. But the world outside these walls is a frenzied

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place, Margaret. It could use some of that peace. It could use a lot of it, truth be told.”

“Then people should come to the church to get it,” she snapped.

“Margaret!”

Rose again. Margaret ignored her rebuke and fixed Father Pete with a challenging stare.

“But that’s the problem.” His voice was disconcertingly steady, just like his eyes. “People *aren’t* coming. They don’t know they can find peace and love and hope here. They want those things, but many of them think there’s mostly judgment and hypocrisy inside church walls. Sadly, in some cases, they’re right. The point is they’re not coming to us. We have to go to them.”

“No. *You* have to go to them. That’s *your* job. Our job is to knit prayer shawls in the chapel.”

Father Pete stood and faced her across the desk. “I’m afraid that’s not possible. That space will be unavailable for at least the next month. You’re not the only one who’s been concerned about the state of the Prayer Chapel.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” Margaret shot back.

“The young man you ladies so kindly held the doors for is here to paint the chapel. In the meantime, we can try out the idea of the prayer shawl ministry meeting in public.”

“We? *We?*” She fumed. “There’s no *we* about it! You’d be here, where we’re supposed to be, and we’d be out there, where you’re supposed to be. And besides, I don’t recall funds being approved to paint the chapel. Jim would have told me, and I would have remembered because I know there’s no money in the budget for it. We spent the rest of this year’s contingency fund on the paint you just *had* to have for the foyer this summer.” Margaret turned to Rose, Fran, and Jane. “We have to put a stop to this.”

She turned her back on Father Pete and swept out of the office, leading the charge across the foyer and into the nave. Arriving at the double doors of the Prayer Chapel, she grasped the handles and heaved them wide open.

Margaret and her fellow knitters all crowded into the doorway to see that transformation was already well underway. Drop cloths covered the altar and pews. Fran's amaryllis sat on the floor at one end of a row of paint cans like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence. The young man in the ball cap looked down at them from the third rung of a ladder set up to the left of the doorway.

"And just what do you think you're doing, young man?" Margaret put her hands on her hips and fixed him with her most challenging, meant-to-intimidate stare. He stopped wielding his putty knife and looked down at her, eyes wide.

"Uh, mudding out this settling crack, ma'am."

Father Pete elbowed his way through the crowd. "I should have made introductions earlier. Ladies, this is Travis. Travis, these are the ladies of the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry."

"We meet here in the chapel on Wednesday mornings," Margaret told him.

"Oh, I see." He laid the putty knife on the top step of the ladder and swept off his ball cap. "I'm truly sorry to inconvenience you ladies. But it'll be worth it. See these settling cracks?" He picked up the putty knife and waved it around to indicate the lines that snaked diagonally from the corners of the windows and the doorway up to the ceiling. "They're nothing to worry about—this building has settled about as much as it's going to. But it would look so much better if they were mudded out and all the walls painted over. I might do the ceiling too." His eyes glowed as though he could already see the chapel in all its newly painted glory.

"Travis is doing this as a gift to the church," Father Pete hastened to add.

"It's the least I can do. I used to come in here on my break when we were painting the foyer this summer." He turned his head to gaze at the window to the left of the one with the nativity, a depiction of the angel appearing to Mary. "I was going through a real rough patch back then. It was so peaceful in here that I could think instead of worry. While I was thinking, I got an idea about what to do, and the idea worked."

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He shook his head as if in wonder. “It *really* worked. I wanted to do something to say thank you. All I know how to do is paint, so I told the reverend here I’d paint the chapel for free as soon as my schedule allowed it. My Wednesday mornings just opened up, and here I am!”

“And we’re glad you are,” Rose told him.

Margaret glared at her, then turned back to Travis. “So you’ll be here only on Wednesdays?” He nodded. “Then we’ll come a different day of the week.” She gave a decisive nod, problem solved.

Travis shifted on the ladder, looking uncomfortable and making it wobble. He glanced at Father Pete as though seeking support. “I, uh, really don’t think that’s a good idea. There’ll be stuff all over, and paint and plaster needing to dry, and—”

“And we’ve been through this before.” Jane turned to look at her. “You know Wednesday is the best day for all of us.”

“We’ll let you get back to work, Travis.” Father Pete left them with no other option but to follow him. Once they were in the foyer, he turned and backed toward his office. “I’ll leave you ladies to decide where you’ll meet while the chapel is being painted. I need to get back to work myself.”

Margaret wasn’t finished with her protest. “But—”

“I’m sure it will be wonderful. And I’m looking forward to hearing about all your adventures.”

“*Father Knows Best* indeed!” Margaret spewed the words before their rector was even out of earshot, but she didn’t care. She was fuming again. “Of all the nerve. Imagine not even telling us about this ahead of time.”

“Imagine getting the Prayer Chapel painted for free.” Rose was *not* helping.

“*Free* is the operative word,” Jane said. “I get an earful every time my husband comes home from a church budget meeting. Things are looking grim. I wonder why Father Pete is letting him do it with the future of the church so . . . up in the air.”

“You don’t *really* think Hope of Glory will close, do you?” Margaret scoffed at the idea. “We’ll be here long after Father Pete gives up trying

to change us and goes back to wherever he came from. This church is so old it's practically a historic monument. And don't forget the Tiffany windows in the Prayer Chapel."

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you. My husband said Father Pete said the bishop said—"

"That's a lot of *said*s. Whatever it is, the bishop hasn't said it to *me*, so I know nothing of the kind."

Jane opened her mouth, but Rose spoke first. "When you think about it, the chapel situation is kind of our fault."

"What do you mean, *our* fault?" Margaret stared at her.

"All the knitting and praying we've done in the chapel these past seven years probably *has* made it a more peaceful place, like Father Pete said. And Travis is painting it now because of that peace."

"No good deed goes unpunished, I suppose," Margaret muttered.

Rose had more to say. "I, for one, like the idea of knitting in public. I enjoy chatting with the people who ask me about my knitting."

"But we're supposed to be praying while we make the shawls. How can we do that if we're talking to people? I think we should meet at my house until the chapel is finished."

Jane shook her head. "I don't think that would be right. Father Pete asked us to knit in public."

"It's bad enough he's kicking us out of the chapel. He shouldn't be able to tell us where to go instead."

"Margaret, I'm as dismayed as you are about this." Jane sighed. "I look forward to the peace and quiet of knitting in the chapel every week. Lord knows I needed it this morning after that ridiculous argument with Anna and Emily over their hats. But Father Pete does have the right to tell us where to meet. The Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry operates under the auspices of this church. As our pastor, Father Pete is supposed to guide and inspire us, and here we are arguing with him when he does it."

"That's because he's wrong. Just like he's been wrong about all the other changes he's tried to make around here. *Sprucing up the foyer* didn't bring in more people the way he thought it would when he

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talked his way into that paint job. I could have told him it wouldn't, but he didn't ask me. We don't need to *expand the children's ministry*. It's not as though we have many children here now anyway. The shepherds will have to double as wise men again this year at the Christmas Eve family service. And we don't want a *contemporary service* or *small groups*, whatever those are supposed to be. We're fine the way we are."

"Maybe, maybe not." Jane raised her arms, palms up. "But I say we try it and see what happens. It's only for a month."

"Hear! Hear!" Rose cheered. Margaret shot her a quelling look.

"What do you think, Fran?" Jane asked.

Fran started. "Me? Um, well, I-I'd rather knit here. I'm a beginner. I'm not ready for people to watch me knit."

"See? Fran agrees with me," Margaret said.

Fran swallowed hard before continuing. "But since we have to, I think the café at the bookstore at Crossroads Mall might work. I see people reading and studying there all the time. If it's quiet enough for that, it should be quiet enough for us too."

"The *mall*?" Margaret shook her head. "I don't think—"

"Sounds good to me," Jane said. "Let's go."

Margaret frowned. "Now? I think we should discuss this. I hardly think—"

"It's ten o'clock," Fran said. "The store just opened. If we hurry, we might still get a table." She grabbed her coat and handed Rose and Jane theirs.

"Oh, all *right*," Margaret grumbled as she put on her coat, which Travis had draped across a bench in the foyer.

The late autumn wind swirled around the knitters when they stepped outside, bracing and alive, pushing them along. Leaves, stirred by the breeze, danced in front of them as they made their way to their cars. Margaret pulled her knit scarf tighter around her neck against the chilly gusts. Jane could say this plan was for just a month all she wanted, but she wouldn't put it past Father Pete to make the change permanent if, by some miracle, this crazy scheme to get people to their church actually succeeded.

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She squared her shoulders and set her jaw. I'll go along with this for now, she thought as the wind threatened to make a mess of her hair. But when that painter finishes in the Prayer Chapel, the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry will be right back knitting where it belongs. I'll make sure of it.



CHAPTER 2

THE WARM AIR OF THE bookstore offered a welcome refuge from the blustery wind in the mall parking lot. Jane looked around as she unbuttoned her coat and loosened her scarf.

Located against the far wall, the café rose above the level of the rest of the store by a short flight of steps. Jane caught sight of a hand waving at them from that direction.

“Look,” Jane said to Rose as she pointed. “Fran beat us here. It looks like she’s already staked out a table.”

Fran stood sentinel by a round table for four tucked off to the side of the café, away from the activity around the register. Most of the tables were already occupied by students with laptops open, books and papers spread out, and headphones like giant earmuffs over their ears. Out of the corner of her eye, Jane saw a man with grizzled hair glance up from his book and coffee as they passed.

“I thought this would be the quietest spot,” Fran said as the three of them settled around the table.

“It will have to do, I suppose,” Margaret, the last to arrive, grumbled. She surveyed the café as she removed her coat and scarf. “I can’t believe the store is already decorated for Christmas. Thanksgiving is next week.”

“It’s a lovely spot, Fran,” Rose said. “So cozy, and the coffee smells wonderful. I wonder . . .” She reached for her purse.

“We’re here to knit, not drink coffee,” Margaret snapped. “Jane, would you lead us in our prayer so we can get started?”

Jane hadn’t anticipated this particular moment when she came out in favor of Father Pete’s experiment. Suddenly self-conscious, she

surveyed the store. Employees bustled around, and a few customers browsed among the shelves. No one would even notice her praying in this corner, she decided. Nevertheless, she kept her voice barely above a whisper.

“Lord Jesus Christ, you who were comforted by swaddling clothes and cherished in grave clothes, we ask that you bless the work of our hands and hearts this day. May these shawls bring comfort and courage for all the challenges of life to those for whom they are made.”

When they’d all said “Amen,” Jane looked up and saw the employees still bustling and the customers still browsing, taking no notice of them. Apparently, like most women of a certain age, they were virtually invisible.

The knitters pulled out their projects and set to work. Jane lost herself in the rhythm of the Trinity pattern—knit three, purl three, ending each row with a knit three. The yarn, in shades of blue that ranged from midnight to royal to sky and back again, was thick and soft. She didn’t know if the peace and comfort she felt as she knitted was exactly praying, but she hoped these feelings would somehow seep into the shawl to help the person who would someday receive it.

A shriek split the air from the children’s section, and Jane looked up to see Margaret stiffen and shake her head, an I-told-you-so look on her face. She did not, however, drop a single stitch of the intricate lace pattern she was working into an ivory-colored shawl.

Jane pressed her lips together. She had far too much shrieking in her life. At fifteen, Anna had perfected the screech-stomp-slam of adolescence—and Emily wasn’t far behind her at thirteen. It was like living with a pair of deranged porcupines, she thought ruefully, the way they sent their barbs flying in every direction at the slightest provocation. Some days all she had to do was say “Good morning” to set one of them off. The endless arguments over grades, curfew, and privileges exhausted her.

Once bosom buddies, the sisters now couldn’t say a civil word to each other, much less share a bathroom without a fight. Apparently, the only thing they could agree on was not wearing a hat in the cold.

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They were a formidable force when they teamed up. If only they would band together in the cause of world peace. Or domestic peace, at the very least. As if there hadn't been enough strife when Kenny lived at home.

Jane yanked her mind away from thoughts of her son, the way people snatched their hand away from a hot stove. She sighed, shook her head as if to clear it, then looked at Fran across the table.

Fran sat bolt upright in her chair, hands clenched around her needles as she wrestled each stitch from one needle to the other with desperate concentration. Her lips moved, not in prayer but in whispered repetition of the knitting rhyme Rose had taught her.

"In through the front door . . ." Fran jabbed her right-hand needle into the next stitch on the left-hand needle from front to back.

"Run around the back . . ." Fran pinched the yarn between her thumb and forefinger and wrapped it around the right-hand needle.

"Out through the window . . ." Tongue between her teeth, Fran eased the tip of the right-hand needle in front of the left one.

"Jump off, Jack!" Fran pulled the stitch off the left-hand needle.

"Whew!" she sighed as the stitch made it safely to the right-hand needle.



"You're doing fine, Fran." Rose earned a sharp look from Margaret for breaking the silence, but she wasn't sorry.

She returned to her almost-finished forest-green shawl and sent up a prayer for Fran. Their friend had been blindsided by widowhood last year. One summer day she'd been planning a cruise to celebrate Ed's recent retirement, and the next day she was planning his funeral. She'd found him facedown among the cucumbers in the vegetable garden he'd put in with such enthusiasm that spring, his heart irrevocably retired. Fran had been groping her way through a fog of grief ever since. Rose, a widow herself, saw signs that the fog was lifting, however, not the least of which was Fran's newfound interest in knitting.

A little while later, a shadow fell across the table, and Rose looked up to see a young woman looking at them quizzically. She was a college student, if the emblem on her sweatshirt was any indication.

“Um, I couldn’t help noticing you. My grandma crochets. Are you making afghans? My grandma makes them.”

“We’re making shawls,” Jane replied. “Prayer shawls, actually.”

“What’s a prayer shawl?”

“They’re for people who are sick, or bereaved, or going through a difficult time,” Rose told her. “We pray while we make them.”

“And that helps them?”

“How do you feel when you wrap up in one of your grandmother’s afghans?” Rose’s heart was already warming to this young woman.

“Cozy.” Her brown eyes glowed. “Loved—like she’s hugging me even though she’s not there. She made me one in my school colors to take to college. I use it all the time.”

“There you have it. When we make prayer shawls, we pray they’ll be like a hug from God, so that the person using it will feel comforted and encouraged. That’s even the name of our group—the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry.”

“Hmm. That sounds kind of churchy. Why are you knitting here? Wouldn’t church be a better place?”

Margaret’s head came up. “You would think so, wouldn’t you? But our pastor kicked us out!”

“Really? For knitting prayer shawls? I didn’t know you could get in trouble for knitting.”

“Trouble?” Margaret bristled. “We are *not* in trouble. Our pastor has some crazy idea that we should knit in public. He’s banned us from the perfectly lovely little chapel where we’ve been knitting for years.”

“Banned? That’s kind of cool.” Margaret shot her a skeptical look. “No, really. You’re radical knitting ladies.”

“Not by *choice*,” Margaret replied.

Rose watched with concern as the young woman quailed a bit under Margaret’s baleful stare. “I, uh, have to get back to studying.” But then she grinned and said, “You go, radical knitters!”

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“You go?” Margaret asked as the girl walked away, brown ponytail swinging. “We go where? We’ve gone quite enough already today.”

“It’s like saying *Way to go!*” Jane told her. “It’s encouragement.”

Margaret shook her head as she went back to her knitting. “I don’t see why they can’t talk properly so everyone can understand them,” she muttered.

“The point is that she talked to us.” Fran had been silent up to this point, and Rose was glad to hear her speak up again. “That’s what Father Pete had in mind when he sent us out.”

“But what’s the point of that? If we’re talking, we’re not praying. Right now, we need to stop talking and get back to praying.”

Silence descended once more around the table. Ten minutes later, however, the college student approached the knitting group again.

“Um, I hope I’m not interrupting. But . . . I was wondering, since you’re praying anyway . . . Would you pray for my anatomy test? I mean, it couldn’t hurt, could it? I need all the help I can get.”

Margaret heaved an annoyed sigh. But Rose, knowing Margaret was likely to tell the young woman she was indeed interrupting, managed to speak first. “We’d be happy to pray about your test. What’s your name, dear?”

“Sarah. Here.” She thrust a brown paper napkin at them. “I wrote it all down for you.”

Rose passed the napkin around the table. *Please pray for me to pass my anatomy test, it read. It’s at 3:00 on Friday. It’s over the nervous system. Sarah L.*

“You can count on us, Sarah.” Rose smiled as she placed the napkin in the middle of the table.

“Thanks! Gotta go cram some more!”

“Cramming.” Margaret shook her head as Sarah hurried back to her table. “Expecting God to pick up her slack, I suppose.”

Rose shot a quelling look in Margaret’s direction. “More praying and less talking.” Margaret’s eyes widened but then turned back to the complicated pattern she was working.

At eleven thirty, Margaret briskly rolled up her shawl-in-progress

and deposited it in her knitting bag, indicating their session was over for the day. “I must say, that screaming child was most distracting.”

“But meeting Sarah was nice.” Rose was determined to counter Margaret’s pessimism. “I do hope she does well on her test.” She stuck the ends of her needles into the skein of forest-green yarn and rolled her work around it. Then she picked up the napkin Sarah gave them and tucked it into her bag along with the nearly finished shawl.

“I’m going to stay and knit a bit longer,” Fran said. “I’m on a roll. I didn’t drop a single stitch today. Can you believe it?” She triumphantly held up her shawl. Out of the corner of her eye, Rose saw the grizzle-haired man look up from his book and smile in their direction.

“We’ll meet here again next week, I suppose,” Margaret said with an exasperated sigh, then arranged her scarf around her neck and settled into her coat. She picked up her knitting bag and strode away without even saying good-bye.

As she and Jane made their way toward the bookstore’s exit, Rose noticed Sarah and the man with the grizzled hair weren’t the only ones taking notice of the Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry on their first day of Father Pete’s experiment. A blonde woman wearing a tailored blazer stood by the information desk, her name tag informing all and sundry who she was—*Barbara Wentworth, Manager*. She seemed to be scrutinizing them with narrowed eyes, as if to make sure they were really leaving.

Rose wondered why a group of knitting ladies merited such scrutiny, as if they were up to no good.



Rose settled into the passenger seat of Jane’s Subaru and shut her eyes.

“Tired?” Jane asked.

“A little. But mostly I’m basking. It’s been an eventful, lovely morning. I want to fix it in my mind so I can enjoy it for the rest of the week.”

“Even the screaming toddler?” Jane asked with a smile.

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“Even the screaming toddler. Oh to be a child again, throwing a fit hoping my mother will take me home, where I really want to be.”

Jane glanced at her. “It’s still hard, isn’t it?”

“Fair Meadows Retirement Community isn’t home yet, if that’s what you mean. I doubt it ever will be. If throwing a fit would get me back in my house, living on my own, I’d do it in a heartbeat. But it’s not that simple when at eighty-five you’ve mowed down your daughter’s mailbox backing out of her driveway.”

They were silent the rest of the way to Fair Meadows. Rose waved good-bye as her friend drove away, then sighed as she entered the lobby. This was a nice place, to be sure, one of the nicest retirement communities in town. The activities director offered plenty to do—canasta, book club, yoga—and that was only the morning schedule for Mondays. The rest of the week was jam-packed with activities as well, should she choose to participate. So far she was a regular at the Sit and Be Fit class at the gym, put in her two cents at one of the book club discussions, and could occasionally be persuaded to make a fourth for bridge. The staff was kind, courteous, and competent. She really had nothing to complain about.

But complain she did—inwardly, at least.

“You’re going to make lots of friends,” her daughter Rosalie had told her during one of the pep talks that led up to the move. “They’ll be your own age, so you’ll have lots in common.”

Rose was tempted to ask Rosalie if she got along with everyone *her* own age, but she knew her point would sail right over her daughter’s head. Rosalie, confident that she knew what was best for everybody, tended to steamroll her way through life and the lives of those she loved. She was a little like Margaret Benson in that regard. Rosalie was absolutely certain that Fair Meadows was the best place for her mother, so that’s where Rose was, whether or not she liked it.

Rose had to admit Rosalie was also willing to put her money where her mouth was. Rose had protested that her finances wouldn’t cover a place like Fair Meadows. Undeterred, Rosalie had rallied her two brothers to go in with her to make it possible. So, between the proceeds

from her beloved house and the help of her beloved children, here she was.

This place wasn't enough, though. Not nearly enough. She missed being around people of all ages. She missed getting out and about on her own. To go anywhere these days, she had to ask her busy children for a ride, or depend on Jane or Fran's kindness, or join a group excursion in the Fair Meadows van.

But by golly, I'm not ready to let go of the full life I've always lived, she fussed to herself as she made her way to the dining room for lunch. As far as she was concerned, the name Fair Meadows was just a euphemism for being put out to pasture.

At least the morning had been invigorating, Rose mused as she reached the entrance to the dining room. Amid the Christmas decorations, the shoppers, and the students in the café, she'd felt like she was part of the mainstream of life again. And Sarah had asked for her prayers as if she still had some influence in this world and wasn't simply stuck off in a corner to be entertained until she croaked. Rose wanted, as Sarah put it, to be radical.

She caught sight of a hand waving to her from across the dining room.

"Sit with us, Rose," Jenny Alderman called out. Her tablemates joined in the chorus.

Rose wasn't overly fond of the trio at that table, but as her eyes ranged over the dining room, she realized no other seats were available. She waved back and headed toward Jenny's table. Like all the others, it was covered with a plaid tablecloth in fall colors, lovely china, sturdy silverware, and matching cloth napkins. In the middle of each table, a small ceramic turkey—painted by members of the Fair Meadows ceramics class—invited diners to think grateful, Thanksgiving thoughts. It was so lovely that Rose felt a momentary stab of guilt for wishing she could have eaten a sandwich at the café instead.

"Where have you been?" Jenny spoke as Rose shed her coat.

"Knitting." She sat down and reached for a roll and a pat of butter.

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Well, she could pretend it was butter. She'd been told it was some concoction guaranteed not to clog her arteries.

"Oh, that's right. You go to your church on Wednesdays to knit."

"Actually, we went to the mall instead."

Jenny grinned. "You skipped out on knitting to go shopping?"

"You played hooky from knitting?" Laura Whitman, a retired high school teacher, tsked in mock horror.

"We didn't go shopping. We knitted."

"At the mall? Who knits at the mall?" Jenny said.

"The Heavenly Hugs Prayer Shawl Ministry does." Rose explained about the Prayer Chapel being painted.

"But why the mall?" Susan Thomas looked at her from across the table. "Couldn't you meet in someone's house or something? All those people and germs. Did you get your flu shot this year?" She passed a bottle of hand sanitizer to Laura for its routine trip around the table. "You got your shots, right?"

"We *all* got our flu shots this year. *And* our pneumonia shots." Rose grimaced, remembering the sharp-needled persistence of the Fair Meadows nursing staff. "There's more to it than finding another place to knit while the chapel's being painted." She told them about Father Pete's plan.

Laura shook her head. "I don't think it will work. Nobody notices women over the age of fifty."

"Speak for yourself." Jenny patted her hair, which was honey-blonde this month, and favored a man at the next table with a smile. He smiled back and added a wink for good measure.

"You know what I mean," Laura told her. "People don't think women our age are doing anything important enough to notice."

"A lot of us aren't." Rose wondered if she'd been too blunt, but she felt a bit fed up with Jenny's flirting, Laura's defeatism, and Susan's obsession with germs. "We attracted attention our very first day, though." She filled them in on the knitters' encounter with Sarah.

"She asked you to pray for her?" Susan looked skeptical. "I didn't know college students believed in that kind of thing anymore."

Laura chuckled. “Believe me. Where there are tests there will always be prayer.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Rose grinned. “I taught preschool. No grades, no tests, just stickers and smiles.”

Jenny, however, had other things on her mind. “Did you meet any good-looking men at the mall?”

“As I said, I was knitting. And praying.” She wanted the conversation to stay on topic. She hated to think what Jenny had been like as a teenager if she was still this man-crazy at the age of seventy-two. At least that’s how old she claimed to be this week. Jenny seemed to shave off a year or two on a regular basis.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t notice what’s going on around you.” Jenny leaned forward. “Come on. Think. Who did you see there?”

With a sigh, Rose gave in. “Um . . . I saw a number of scruffy-looking college boys who needed to shave. And one older man who kept looking our way.”

“And . . .”

“And what?”

“What did he look like? How old was he? Was he wearing a wedding ring?”

“How should I know?” Rose started to say she didn’t really look but then realized she had. “All right, all right. He was about my son’s age. Early to mid-sixties, I’d say. He had short gray hair. Not exactly gray. More like black shot through with a lot of white. You know, salt-and-pepper. He was having coffee and reading a book. Sometimes when I looked up, I’d see him looking our way. Are you satisfied?”

Jenny was not. “Wedding ring?”

“He was all the way across the room, for heaven’s sake. And I stopped looking for wedding rings a long time ago!”

“It’s never too late for love. But he does sound a bit young for you.”

Rose shook her head and turned her attention to her lunch. The winter squash soup was just right for this cold and blustery day, even if it was insufferably healthy.

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Rose extricated herself from her tablemates as soon as she finished eating. After taking the elevator to her apartment on the second floor, she settled her shawl-in-progress around her shoulders and stood in front of the cheval mirror in her bedroom, tugging one end to fall at her hip. About a foot and a half more, she judged, and it would be long enough. She fingered the softness of the yarn and admired the way the shawl draped. Soon it would be ready to comfort and encourage someone, perhaps even to give that person delight.

She glanced at the shopping bag on the chair next to her bed. It held the yarn for her next shawl, a shimmery red worsted she'd bought the last time Fran took her to The Tangled Thread. It reminded her of shiny Christmas tree balls and the cheery red of cardinals against newly fallen snow. It was perfect to keep her in the Christmas spirit throughout December.

Rose laid the almost-finished shawl on the bed and pulled one of the skeins of red yarn out of the bag. She turned it this way and that in the light, then hefted it in her hand and plunged her fingers into the depths of its softness as she considered what pattern to use.

She mentally flipped through her collection of shawl patterns and decided on Feather and Fan. The ripples the stitch pattern created would catch the light, showing off the shimmer of the yarn. The pattern was lacy too. It wouldn't be anywhere near as fancy as Margaret's ivory-colored shawl, but the result would be elegant. She hoped it would help whoever received it to feel not only warm but cherished.

Rose shook off the dreaming that was always part of planning a new shawl and let the skein fall from her fingers back into the shopping bag. She couldn't let the anticipation of working with that beautiful yarn keep her from finishing the green shawl. Someone needed that one too.

She carried her knitting into her sitting area and settled on the couch, then picked up the remote control and clicked on the television. Unlike some of her fellow residents who watched soaps or talk shows

after lunch, Rose turned to a news channel. The outside world, in all its tragedy and pain, flooded into the room.

Rosalie often scolded her about this. “I don’t know how you can stand to watch all that as much as you do, Mom.” She had a knack for dropping by right when Rose was settling in for her daily hour of knitting and news. “It’s always bad news. It’s depressing, and there’s nothing you can do about it anyway. Why upset yourself? Besides, you should be downstairs making friends, not shut away up here.”

Rose picked up her work and began to knit with fierce determination.

What upsets me, she thought, is how those people downstairs think there’s nothing they can do anymore about the state of the world. I may not be able to live alone now or drive a car—safely, anyway—but I can pray. I can pray and knit those prayers into a shawl.

Realizing how tightly she was holding her needles, Rose relaxed her grip and spread the green shawl across her lap, savoring its warmth. As she stroked it, she prayed for the person who would receive the gift of this shawl, a person who was as yet unknown to her but already known to God. Then she turned her attention to the television and prayed about the latest bombing in the Middle East, victims and perpetrators alike.

And she prayed for Kenny. Rose never forgot Jane’s boy when she sat down to pray.