

Chapter 1

Place the blame where it should go: on chocolate. The good stuff. The variety that melts way too fast as you swirl it over your tongue and let it cuddle the inside of your mouth, knowing the sensation is fleeting, which makes it more delicious. Yeah, that's the kind I'm talking about.

I opened the front door of my Vegas condo and instantly tried to slam it. Except, the man I faced handed me a golden, foil-wrapped box with the unmistakable Godiva logo.

He placed it in the palm of his right hand and extended his arm. Then he stepped back. With elegance and skill, he had baited the hook, and I was snagged. Just like that.

I'm fast and grab the box before he could pull away. Or maybe that was his plan all along. If it hadn't been for the lure of delectable dark chocolate, I would have stayed happily ignorant about sex slaves, black-market babies, cheating preachers, and an assortment of lowlifes that suddenly intruded on my cluttered, frazzled life.

If only I'd slammed the door, I would never have been rejected, arrested, and nearly exterminated.

Wait, did you just say, "Back the truck up"? Sorry, writing a memoir is new to me, and I just got overly excited to tell you everything. Instead, I'm taking some deep yoga-style breaths and will give you the whole story, nothing but the truth, just like it happened.

You see, at the stroke of another scorching Las Vegas summer midnight, I found myself feeling the still sizzling breeze swirling around my sleep shorts and tank top—front door open, air conditioning spewing out into the neighborhood. I stood and sniffed the corners of the box, knowing full well the pleasures that were inside. Why was this guy on my doorstep? It was wrong. It was a moment, much later, I wanted to stop time—like you can while watching Netflix.

Instead, I ripped open the box, placed a scrumptious piece of heaven-on-earth into my mouth and eyed up and down what the devil had dumped on my doorstep.

Medical studies have proven it's a bad idea to let a woman with PMS eat a pound of Godiva at one time, or so some new report said. Trust me, however. It's an even worse idea to try to take chocolate away from a woman, PMS or not.

Fortunately, this guy certainly knew women. So he waited. I gobbled three more. In a row. Then handed him back the two-thirds empty box. I'm not greedy, see?

Forget whatever you're thinking. This man was not a hunka, hunka burning love, but seemed to be my pudgy grandfather. Or a doppelgänger dressed collar to cuffs in glitter galore, gold, and some gosh-awful alligator-esque cowboy boots. In blood red.

He squinted in the light of the front steps of my townhouse/condo combo, and his chin dragged low. He grumbled, muttered, and withdrew his left hand from behind his back, producing yet another box with the chocolatier's signature wrapping. I told you he was good. I salivated, snatched it, and stepped out of the way. I'm not addicted to the stuff; I just like it a lot, a whole lot.

Okay, that gives you the abbreviated version of why, five minutes later, my disgruntled relative was huddled on the beige sofa in the sterile Las Vegas condo that came with my current job. It does not explain why I was stomping up and down in front of him, but I'll get to that. You see, I'm usually the one who solves problems; that's my field, being I'm a minister and all.

You heard it right. I might not look like any preacher you've ever met, being that I'm rounded in all the right places, and I prefer a flashier wardrobe than you may have seen on church ladies. Like it or not, that's me, Pastor Jane Angieski. I'm ordained and licensed, overly educated and fully confused a good portion of the time. I've been told, by the governing board of

my denomination, that I should be more professional. It's taken a long time and therapy, but I like me as I am.

You're not the first, you know, to wonder how a flashy gal like me got into the ministry business. Most folks do not come straight out and ask because they're dumbfounded to find out I know the Good News backward, forward, and well done in the middle. My response when they sputter a question or raise both eyebrows to the ceiling? "You see. They have quotas. Recall affirmative action? The denomination needed more females who had curves and padding in their ranks. There were plenty of string bean ones."

Honestly? Hold on to something sturdy:

When I returned to college to finish my master's, I was working part-time in retail at Victoria's Secret, then at a mortuary where I applied makeup to the dearly departed. I also gave out contraceptives and condoms at a free clinic in Watts, and did some hard time asking, "Do you want fries with that?" Along the way, I made enough to avoid incurring huge debt. Psychology was to be my field. I am outrageously curious about people. We humans are so weird, and I love it.

One steamy Los Angeles day, I attended a program on campus because the AC in my apartment was broken. I also knew that with luck there'd be cake and coffee. The program, as I found out, was to recruit grad students into the ministry. It was probably the sugar talking, but I signed on the dotted line and started that summer attending seminary. Graduated with honors, accepted an assistant minister gig straight out of the seminary doors and got kicked out because I volunteered to help the cops in tracking down hoods in the hood where I was the pastor in this ghetto church.

The church council didn't mind that I nabbed the bad guys looking like a lady of the evening who could do it all night. What they didn't like was that I appeared on the front of the L. A. Times in a hot pink leather miniskirt, strappy sandals that wound up to my knees and a blouse leaving little to the imagination of Great Aunt Tillie, or anyone else. The news story hit the floor running, and little old me was seen and talked about on PBS News Hour, CNN, Fox News, and then YouTube, and then it went viral. As if no one had seen a minister before. Go figure.

People magazine beseeched and besought me for an interview, full four pages of me, but better judgment kicked in. I turned it down after a call from a member of my denomination's district council put the brakes on that one. Besides I don't always want to stay and play second fiddle in the church hierarchy. I do have some pride and ambition. I'd like to be known someday as an important voice in ministry, not one of those television evangelists with flapping eyelashes and hair like dear old Marge Simpson. No offense, Marge. It's not a good look for either of us.

The metaphorical knuckle-wrapping, to me, was worth it. It resulted in the dealing, drugging, and pimping partners in crime who went off to a helping place in another area of California, clogging an overstuffed prison system even more. Not my problem there. I got a letter of commendation from LA's mayor and my backside booted to Vegas. I wasn't exactly demoted, but I was no longer a full pastor. These days, if I should burp without saying, "pardonnez-moi," the council hears about it. In detail. Hence, the youth minister I'm filling in for left exact instructions on the requirements of my professional demeanor so that I wouldn't lead any teens down a slope where a flashing sign reads: Beware: She's Crazy and Dangerous.

Back to the man of the midnight hour littering my living room. His grumbling continued. Like waiting out a storm, I sat down next to the huddled mass of manhood whose name isn't Woe Is Me, but Henry J. Angieski, Ph.D.—my grandfather who just happens to have an

alternative personality, one of a classic rocker with the 70s band Slam Dunk. You may have heard of him when he was called Hank A. Yes, that's Gramps. Although you wouldn't recognize him. I didn't.

Gramps is a "let's get coffee" kind, friends with Sir Paul, Bruce, Mick and a lot more you can name, if you like the older stuff. In all of my thirty-five years, I'd never known him to be defeated, never seen him without a sly smile and a plan to take on the world.

Quick familial footnote: He and Gram couldn't have children, and they knew it before they married. Gramps told me like this: "Uncle Sam really needed me and thought a tropical Asian trip might help me understand humanity better."

Translation? It was 1965. He'd dropped out of grad school to find his musical mojo. He was drafted, surprise, surprise, and sent directly to Vietnam where horrible things were happening, like an unpopular and soul-crushing war. Did you wonder how I got into this mix?

Gramps said, "I found the son of my heart there, honey. The kid was always hanging around the barracks. He had red hair like your gorgeous gram and the most intense almond-shaped eyes I'd ever seen. He picked up English like it was nothing, and one day when I handed him a guitar, he started to play chords. He was six or seven, but he didn't know his birthday and had forgotten his father's name, if he'd ever known it. Mom died in childbirth, and the bio family shunned him. The other guys in my unit adopted him like a mascot.

"I was finishing my deployment when I got word that I'd been accepted into the music program at the University of Southern California. Your Uncle Sam thought I deserved to return to California because, with this chunk of shrapnel in my knee, I was pretty useless as a foot soldier, and I told everyone the kid was mine."

That country was in shambles, already invaded by the French, English, and Russians before the US stepped into the mess. So Gramps returned to Gram with a ready-made son whom they adored.

Fast forward ten years. Gram died after a painful battle with cancer, and a couple of months later I came into the world. My father somehow neglected to tell Gramps there was a teenager in his life who was about to birth their baby, and it was a surprise all around when she showed up one day with me in a pink blanket.

Parenthood didn't rock the Richter scale of life for this young couple. Gramps, once more, manned up, and he became the saving grace for me. The story goes that the twosome, my bio parents, piled their macrobiotic rice, pine nut smoothies, ceremonial drums, unfiltered carrot juice, and love beads inside a rusting, hand-painted purple VW bus, dotted with yellow daisies, and went in search of their bliss. I believe they were about ten years past the real hippies, but that didn't seem to deter them. The last I heard, when I was sixteen, was that they were in Sedona, selling therapy rocks to tourists. I was happy for them; I had the best grandfather, the coolest Gramps in my school. However, getting a rock in the mail for one's birthday stunk.

Enough about me. At least for a few minutes—unless it has to do with the reason I wrote this memoir, which is to explain why I ended up a viral sensation on YouTube. Again. Although the in-between stuff scared me silly.

Gramps interrupted my gallop down Memory Lane with a grunt that sounded suspiciously like he was swearing, which I knew he didn't. Or the normal-ish grandfather I previously claimed didn't swear.

“Call me Onesimus,” he growled.

“What-a-muss?”

“Get a clue, you’re a preacher. You know this stuff. Always spouting it off as you do all that Bible-belting.” Then he grumbled about how his granddaughter could easily become a pompous prig.

“I’ve never belted a Bible in my life, I’ll thank you.” And I wondered in a tiny spot in my heart if I should look up the definition of prig before I felt insulted.

“Don’t give me that look, girl. I’m immune. Been looking at myself too long for one of your freeze-frame frowns to frazzle me and make me spill my guts.”

“Are you talking Old Testament or New?”

“Look it up, Pastor.”

He never calls me, Pastor. Never before had he even raised his voice to me. “Who are you and what did you do with my grandfather?” I demanded. My now mostly-retired from sex, gals, and rock and roll, and teaching at the university, grandfather lived in the beachy town of Carlsbad, California. “It’s midnight, and my real grandfather is safely tucked in bed right now, not in Vegas, baby.”

We stared at each other, then a flickering two-watt bulb flipped on. “Are you talking about Onesimus, as in the slave the Apostle Paul wrote about?”

“Bing-a-ding ding, girl. Listen, Janey, I’m having a crisis, one that, well, is personal, as private as it can get for a man.”

From the dancing rhinestones embedded on his denim shirt, past the belt buckle the size of Rhode Island, and the boots which had three-inch heels, the man was either auditioning for a low-budget movie or had lost his marbles. My real grandfather was a rock star, wore a lot of black, dragged a guitar everywhere and didn’t dress like a cowboy. He was dependable, had style, sure, and a heart for the next gal and guy. Always.

Okay, there were some ladies of a certain age, groupies if I'm honest, who would have had their way with him, but Gramps was incredibly discreet about that stuff. Then again, I never had a conversation about the birds and the bees with him.

“Oh, personal and private,” I muttered, regretting my decision to have that second Lean Cuisine Mexican Medley. I did not ever, ever, want to discuss my grandfather's sexual inadequacies or his performance issues, and the souring sensation in my stomach agreed. Big time.

Instead, I blurted, “Men your age are well past that. For Pete's sake, don't tell me you're in Vegas to marry an 18-year-old, half-naked dancer who wears pink feathers that glow in the dark with matching pasties that barely cover her nipples. And that she's just misunderstood and currently employed at a local strip joint because she's putting herself through med school.”

He just took off a boot. There was no denial.

“She's not some chorus babe, Jane. She has to be at least 18 or 19, however. Guess she could be 16 with a fake ID. I never asked.”

