

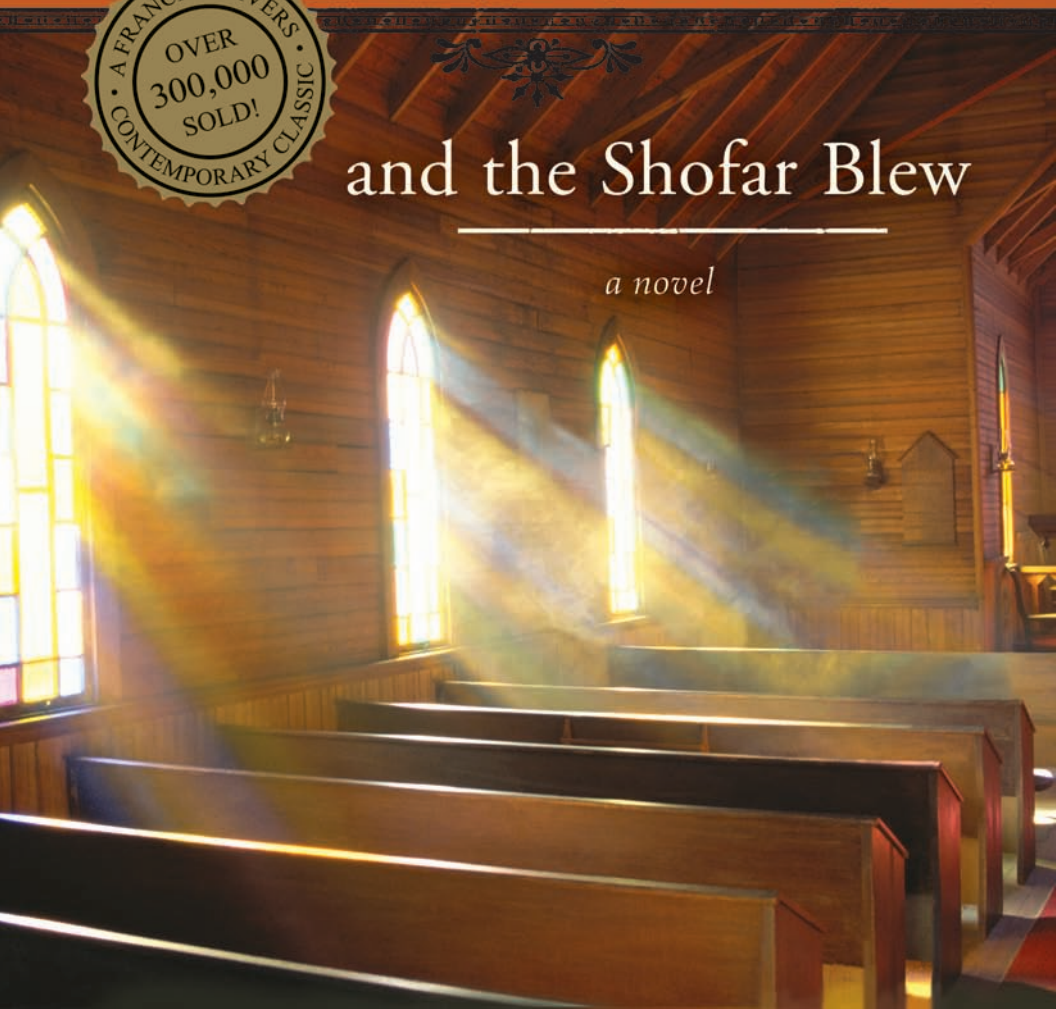
FRANCINE RIVERS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



and the Shofar Blew

a novel



and the
Shofar Blew



FRANCINE
RIVERS



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And the Shofar Blew

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PART I

THE CALL



CHAPTER I



1987

Samuel Mason sat parked in his white DeSoto across the street from Centerville Christian Church. The old place was like him; it had seen better days. Half a dozen shingles were still missing from the steeple, blown off in a windstorm three years ago. The paint was chipped, revealing aging gray clapboards. One of the high, arched windows was cracked. The lawn was dying, the roses overgrown, and the birch tree in the courtyard between the church, fellowship hall, and small parsonage had some kind of beetle killing it.

If a decision wasn't made soon, Samuel was afraid he would live long enough to see a For Sale sign posted on the church property and a Realtor's lockbox on the front door. Reaching over, he picked up the worn black leather Bible lying on the passenger seat. *I'm trying to keep the faith, Lord. I'm trying to trust.*

"Samuel!" Hollis Sawyer limped along the sidewalk of First Street. They met at the front steps. Hollis gripped the rusted iron railing with his left hand, planted his cane, and hitched his hip, lifting his prosthetic leg to the second step. "Otis called. He said he'd be late."

“Trouble?”

“Didn’t say, but I heard Mabel talking at him in the background. He sounded pretty frustrated.”

Samuel unlocked the front door of the church and looked in at the once-mauve, now sun-bleached gray carpet in the narthex. Hollis winced as he limped across the threshold. Samuel left the door ajar for Otis.

Nothing had changed inside the foyer in years. Faded tracts remained stacked in perfect piles. The frayed edge of the carpet was still pulled back from the door to the small ministerial office. The dusty leaves of the silk ficus tree in the corner continued to host a spider. Another web was in the corner of a high window; someone would have to get the ladder out and swipe it down. But who would be willing to climb a ladder when a fall might land their old bones in a convalescent hospital? And calling in a professional to clean was out of the question. There was no money.

Hollis hobbled down the aisle. “It’s as cold in here as a Minnesota winter.”

The sanctuary smelled as musty as a house closed up all season. “I can turn on the heat.”

“Don’t bother. By the time the place warms up, our meeting will be over.” Hollis stepped into the second pew, and hung his cane on the back of the one in front of him, as he eased himself down. “So who’s preaching this Sunday?”

Samuel took the pew across from him and set his Bible beside him. “Sunday is the least of our problems, Hollis.” Resting his wrists on the back of the front pew, he clasped his hands and looked up. At least the brass cross and two candlesticks on the altar were polished. They seemed the only things to have received any attention. The carpet needed to be cleaned, the pulpit painted, the pipe organ repaired. Unfortunately, the workers were fewer each year, and the financial gifts dwindled despite the generous spirits of the parishioners, all of whom were living on fixed incomes, some only on Social Security.

Lord . . . Samuel’s mind went blank as he fought tears. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he looked at the empty choir loft. He remembered a time when it had been full of singers, all robed in red and gold. Now there was only his wife, Abby, who sang every few Sundays, accompanied by Susanna Porter on the piano. As much as he loved the old gal, Samuel had to admit Abby’s voice just wasn’t what it used to be.

One by one, the programs of the church had dried up and blown away like dust. Children grew up and moved away. The middle-aged became elderly, and the elderly died. The pastor's voice echoed with no live bodies to absorb his sage words.

Oh, Lord, don't let me live long enough to see the doors of this church locked on Sunday morning.

For nearly forty years, he and Abby had been part of this church. Their children had gone through Sunday school and been baptized here. Pastor Hank had performed their daughter Alice's wedding ceremony, then conducted the memorial service when the body of their son, Donny, had been brought home from Vietnam. He couldn't remember the last baptism, but memorial services were coming all too often. For all he knew, the baptismal had dried up.

Samuel felt dried up, too. Old, dry bones. He was tired, depressed, defeated. And now, a new tragedy had befallen them. He didn't know what they were going to do to keep the church functioning. If they couldn't find a way, what would happen to the small body of believers who still came every Sunday to worship together? Most were too old to drive, and others too shy to travel the twenty miles down the road to worship with strangers.

Are we all going to be relegated to watching TV evangelists who spend three-quarters of their time asking for money? God, help us.

The front door of the church banged shut, and the floorboards creaked under approaching footsteps. "Sorry I'm late!" Otis Harrison came down the aisle and sat in a front pew.

Samuel unclenched his hands and rose to greet him. "How's Mabel feeling?"

"Poorly. Doctor put her back on oxygen. She gets downright crabby dragging that tank around the house. You'd think she could sit a while. But no. I have to keep a sharp eye on her. Caught her yesterday in the kitchen. We had a shouting match. I told her one of these days she's going to turn on that gas burner, light a match, and blow us both to kingdom come. She said she couldn't stand eating any more frozen dinners."

"Why don't you call Meals on Wheels?" Hollis said.

"I did. That's why I'm late."

"They didn't show up?"

"Came right on time, or you'd still be waiting for me. Problem is,

I have to be there to open the door because Mabel flatly refuses to do it.” The front pew creaked as Otis settled his weight.

Over the years, Samuel and Abby had spent numerous pleasant evenings at the Harrison house. Mabel had always prepared a feast: stuffed game hens, homemade angel food cakes, and roasted or steamed vegetables from Mabel’s backyard garden. Otis’s wife loved to cook. It wasn’t a hobby; it was a calling. Mabel and Otis had welcomed new families to the church with a dinner invitation. Italian, German, French, even Chinese cuisine—she was game to try anything, to the delight of everyone who sat at their table. People used to stampede to whatever casserole or pie Mabel set on the long, vinyl-covered potluck tables. She’d sent cookies to Donny when he was stationed in Hue, Vietnam. Otis used to complain that he never knew what to expect for dinner, but no one ever felt sorry for him.

“She’s still watching those cooking shows and writing out recipes. Drives herself crazy with frustration! Drives me crazy right along with her. I suggested she take up needlepoint. Or toile painting. Or crossword puzzles. Something. *Anything!* I won’t repeat what she said.”

“What about an electric stove?” Hollis said. “Or a microwave?”

“Mabel will have nothing to do with an electric stove. And as for a microwave, our son gave us one a couple of Christmases ago. Neither one of us can figure out how it works, except to set it for one minute and warm coffee.” Otis shook his head. “I miss the good old days when I never knew what she’d have on the table when I came home from work. She can’t stand long enough to make salad these days. I’ve tried to do the cooking, but that’s been a complete disaster.” Grimacing, he waved his hand impatiently. “But enough of my troubles. We’ve got other things to talk about, I hear. What’s the news on Hank?”

“Not good,” Samuel said. “Abby and I were at the hospital last night with Susanna. She wants Hank to retire.”

Hollis stretched out his bad leg. “We should wait and see what Hank says.”

Samuel knew they didn’t want to face facts. “He’s had a heart attack, Hollis. He can’t say anything with a tube down his throat.” Did they really think Henry Porter could go on forever? Poor Hank was way past pretending to be the Energizer Bunny.

Otis frowned. “That bad?”

“He was doing visitation at the hospital yesterday afternoon, and he collapsed in the corridor just down the hall from the emergency room. Otherwise, we’d be sitting here planning his memorial service.”

“God was looking out for him,” Hollis said. “Always has.”

“It’s time *we* looked out for his best interests, too.”

Otis stiffened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Samuel’s just had a long night.” Hollis sounded hopeful.

“That’s part of it,” Samuel conceded. A long night, indeed, of facing the future. “The truth is, this is just one more crisis in a long series of crises we’ve faced. And I don’t want to see this one put us under. We have to make some decisions.”

Hollis shifted uneasily. “What time did you and Abby get to the hospital?”

Anytime the discussion turned toward unpleasant things, Hollis leapfrogged to another subject. “Half an hour after Susanna called us. Hank hasn’t been feeling well for a long time.”

Otis frowned. “He’s never said anything.”

“His hair has gone completely white in the last two years. Didn’t you notice?”

“So’s mine,” Hollis said.

“And he’s lost weight.”

“Wish I could,” Otis said with a chuckle.

Samuel strove for patience. If he weren’t careful, this meeting would turn into another gab session on the miserable state of the world and the country. “About a week ago, Hank told me about a friend from his college days who’s dean at a Christian university in the Midwest. He spoke very highly of him and of the school.” Samuel looked between his two oldest friends. “I think he was trying to tell me where we should start looking for his successor.”

“Now, wait a minute!” Hollis said. “This isn’t the time to retire him, Samuel. What kind of blow would that be for a man flat on his back?” He snorted. “How would you like it if someone came into your hospital room, stood over you, and said, ‘Sorry you had a heart attack, old friend, but your useful days are over?’”

Otis’s face was red and tight. “Hank’s been the driving force of this church for the past thirty-odd years. He’s been the steadying hand at the helm. We can’t do without him.”

Samuel had known it wouldn't be easy. There was a time to be gentle, and a time to be direct. "I'm telling you, Hank isn't coming back. And if we want this church to survive, we'd better do something about finding someone else to stand at the helm. We're about to drift onto the rocks."

Hollis waved his hand. "Hank was in the hospital five years ago having bypass surgery. He came back. We'll just invite some guest speakers until Hank's back on his feet. Like we did the last time. The Gideons, Salvation Army, someone from that soup kitchen on the other side of town. Ask them to come and talk about their ministries. They'll fill the pulpit for a few Sundays." He gave a nervous laugh. "If push comes to shove, we can always have Otis show his Holy Land slides again."

Samuel's heel came off the floor, moving up and down silently as it always did when he was tense. What would it take to get through to his old friends? Did the Lord Himself have to blast the ram's horn in order to get them to move on? "Susanna said their oldest granddaughter is expecting a baby this spring. She said it would be nice to see Hank with a great-grandchild on his knee. They'd like to be part of their children's lives again, to sit together in the same church, in the same pew. Which one of you wants to tell Hank he hasn't earned the right to do those things? Which one of you wants to tell him we expect him to stand in that pulpit until he drops dead?" His voice broke.

Hollis frowned and then looked away, but not before Samuel saw the moisture in his eyes.

Samuel leaned his arm on the pew. "Hank needs to know we understand. He needs our thanks for all his years of faithful service to this congregation. He needs our blessing. And he needs the pension fund we set up years ago so he and Susanna have something more to live on than a monthly check from the government and the charity of their children!" He could barely see their faces through the blur of tears.

Otis stood and paced the aisle, one hand shoved in his pocket, while he scratched his brow with the other. "The market's been down, Samuel. That fund is worth about half what it was a year ago."

"Half is better than nothing."

"Maybe if I'd pulled out of tech stock earlier . . . As it is, he's going to receive about two hundred and fifty a month for forty years of service."

Samuel shut his eyes. "At least we've been able to keep up their long-term health-care policy."

“Good thing he applied in his midthirties, or we wouldn’t have enough for premiums.” Otis sank heavily onto the end of a pew. He looked straight at Samuel, who nodded, knowing he and Abby would have to come up with the money, as they had whenever there wasn’t enough in the offering plate to meet expenses.

Hollis sighed. “Five years ago, we had six elders. First we lost Frank Bunker to prostate cancer, and then Jim Popoff goes to sleep in his recliner and doesn’t wake up. Last year, Ed Frost has a stroke. His children arrive, rent a U-Haul, stick a For Sale sign in their front lawn, and move them to some residential-care facility down south. And now Hank . . .” Hollis’s voice hitched. He shifted his hip again.

“So,” Otis drawled. “What do we do without a pastor?”

“Give up!” Hollis said.

“Or start over.”

Both men stared at Samuel. Otis snorted. “You’re a dreamer, Samuel. You’ve always been a dreamer. This church has been dying for the past ten years. When Hank heads north, it’ll be dead.”

“Do you really want to close the doors, lock them, and walk away?”

“It’s not what we want! It’s what has to be!”

“I don’t agree,” Samuel said, determined. “Why don’t we pray about it?”

Otis looked dismal. “What good is praying going to do at this point?”

Hollis stood. “My leg’s seizing up on me. Got to move.” He took his cane from the back of the pew and limped to the front of the church. “I don’t know what’s happening in our country these days.” He pounded his cane on the floor. “I brought up all four of my children to be Christians, and not one of them attends church anymore. Only time they ever go is on Christmas and Easter.”

“Probably commuting to work all week,” Otis said. “It takes two people working to pay for a house these days, and then they have to replace the car every few years because they’re driving so much. My son puts 140 miles on his car every day, five days a week, and his wife about half that. And then they have to pay for child care. Plus insurance, and . . .”

Yada, yada, yada. Samuel had heard it all before. The world stinks. The new generation has no respect for the older. The environmentalists are all hippies from the sixties, and the politicians are all crooks, adulterers, and worse. “We know the problems. Let’s work on solutions.”

“Solutions!” Otis shook his head. “What solutions? Look, Samuel. It’s over. We have a congregation of what?”

“Fifty-nine,” Hollis said dismally. “On the membership roster. Thirty-three made it to church last Sunday.”

Otis looked at Samuel. “There. You see how it is. We haven’t got the money to pay the bills. We haven’t got a pastor to preach. The only child we have in the congregation is Brady and Frieda’s grandson, and he’s only visiting. Unless you want to take over, Samuel, I say we walk away gracefully.”

“*Gracefully?* How do you shut down a church *gracefully?*”

Otis reddened. “It’s finished. When are you going to get it through your thick head, my friend? The party was fun while it lasted, but it’s over. It’s time to go home.”

Samuel felt the heat well up from deep inside him as though someone were blowing softly over the dying embers in his heart. “What happened to the fire we all felt when we came to Christ?”

“We got old,” Hollis said.

“We got tired,” Otis said. “It’s always the same people working while the rest sit in the pews and expect everything to run smoothly.”

Samuel stood. “Abraham was a hundred when he fathered Isaac! Moses was eighty when God called him out of the desert! Caleb was eighty-five when he took the hill country surrounding Hebron!”

Otis harrumphed. “Eighty must’ve been a whole lot younger back in Bible times than it is now.”

“We came together in this place because we believe in Jesus Christ, didn’t we?” Samuel clung stubbornly to his faith. “Has that changed?”

“Not one iota,” Hollis said.

“We’re talking about closing down the church, not giving up our faith,” Otis said hotly.

Samuel looked at him. “Can you do one without the other?”

Otis puffed up his cheeks and scratched his brow. His face was getting red again. Always a bad sign.

“We’re still here,” Samuel said. “This church isn’t dead yet.” He wasn’t backing down, no matter how much Otis huffed and puffed.

“There was \$102.65 in the offering plate this past week.” Otis scowled. “Not even enough to pay the utility bill. It’s past due, by the way.”

“The Lord will provide,” Samuel said.

“The Lord, my foot. We’re the ones paying all the time. Are you going to pay the property taxes again, Samuel?” Otis said. “How long can this go on? There’s no way we can keep this church going now, especially without a pastor!”

“Precisely.”

“And where are you going to get one?” Otis glowered. “Last I heard, they didn’t grow on trees.”

“Even with a new pastor, we haven’t got the money to pay the bills. We’d need more people.” Hollis sat down and stretched out his leg, kneading his thigh with arthritic fingers. “I can’t drive a bus anymore, and I’m not up to going door-to-door like we did in the old days.”

Otis skewered him with a look. “We haven’t got a bus, Hollis. And now that we haven’t got a pastor, we haven’t got a service to invite them to.” He waved his arm. “All we’ve got now is this building. And an earthquake would probably bring it down on our heads.”

Hollis laughed bleakly. “At least then we’d have insurance money to send Hank off in style.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Otis’s tone dripped sarcasm. “Why don’t we turn this old place into a haunted house on Halloween? Charge ten bucks a head. We could pay off all our bills and have enough to give Hank a love offering.”

“Very funny,” Samuel said dryly.

Otis scowled. “I’m only half-kidding.”

Samuel looked back and forth between the two men solemnly. “We still have thirty-three people who need fellowship.”

Hollis’s shoulders dropped. “All of us with one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel.”

Samuel stood his ground. “I vote we call that dean.”

“Okay.” Otis raised his hands. “*Okay!* If that’s what you’re after, you’ve got my vote. Call that dean. See what he can do for us. Nothing, I’m betting. Call whomever you want. Call God, if He’s bothering to listen anymore. Call the president of the United States for all I care. I’m going home and make sure my wife hasn’t set the kitchen or herself on fire.” Shoulders slumped, Otis walked up the aisle.

For all Otis’s bluster and protestations, Samuel knew his old friend didn’t want to give up any more than he did. “Thanks, Otis.”

“Just don’t go getting some hotshot who’ll bring drums and an electric guitar!” Otis called over his shoulder.

Samuel laughed. “That might be just what we need, old buddy.”

“Over my dead body!” The front door of the church banged shut.

Hollis hauled himself to his feet, took his cane from the back of the pew, and sighed deeply. He looked around for a long moment. “You know . . .” His eyes went shiny. His mouth worked. Pressing his trembling lips together, he shook his head. Raising his cane in a faint salute, he limped up the aisle.

“Keep the faith, brother.”

“Night,” Hollis said hoarsely. The door opened again and closed firmly.

Silence filled the church.

Samuel put his hand on his Bible, but didn’t pick it up. He prayed, tears running down his cheeks.



Samuel drove up the narrow driveway, passed under the carport, and pulled into his garage. The back door of his small American bungalow opened, and Abby stood in the light waiting for him. She kissed him as he crossed the threshold. “How did the meeting go?”

He touched her cheek tenderly. “I’m going to call Hank’s friend tomorrow.”

“Thank God.” She crossed the kitchen. “Sit down, honey. I’ll have your supper warmed up in a few minutes.”

Samuel put his Bible on the white Formica table, pulled back a chrome chair, and sat on the red vinyl seat. “We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“At least they’ll listen to you.”

“Only because they’re getting too tired to argue anymore.”

Abby smiled over her shoulder. “Don’t get cynical this late in the game. Something like this can make us feel young again.” She punched in numbers on the microwave.

“Otis says I’m a dreamer.” He watched Abby put silverware and a napkin on the table in front of him. She was as beautiful to him now at seventy-four as she had been at eighteen, when he married her. He took her hand. “I still love you, you know.”

“You’d better. You’re stuck with me.” The microwave pinged. “Your supper’s ready.”

“Otis was fit to be tied when he got to the church. Mabel is having a hard time of it again. Back on oxygen.”

“So I heard.” She set the plate before him. Meat loaf, mashed potatoes, green beans. “I called her this evening. We had a long chat.” She took the chair opposite him.

He picked up his fork. “Was she behaving herself?”

Abby laughed. “I could hear someone talking about layered salads in the background; then Mabel turned the television down.”

“Poor old soul.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense. Half her fun is frustrating Otis. She knows exactly which buttons to push to make him jump.”

“She doesn’t miss cooking?”

“Not as much as he wishes she did.”

“Women. You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.”

She left her chair and opened the old refrigerator. She poured a tall glass of milk, set it down in front of him, and sat again. She could never sit for long. It was against her nature. She tented her fingers and watched him. Despite his lack of appetite, he ate, slowly, so she wouldn’t worry.

“Susanna will be relieved, Samuel. She’s wanted Hank to retire since he had bypass surgery.”

“They won’t have much to live on. It’s not as though they have a place to sell.”

“I think Susanna will miss that old parsonage. She told me they have about ten thousand in savings. Thank God we have a retirement fund to give them. Otherwise, they’d be depending on their children to help support them.”

Samuel told her the bad news. Abby bowed her head, saying nothing. He set his fork down and waited, knowing she was sending up one of her desperate prayers again. When she raised her head, her face was pale, her eyes moist. He shared her shame. “I wish I’d been born rich instead of handsome.” The old joke fell flat. Abby reached over and put her hand on his. He shook his head, unable to speak.

“I wonder what the Lord is doing this time,” she said wistfully.

“You’re not the only one.”



Paul Hudson could hear the racket the moment he opened the front door of his rental house. He shrugged off his jacket and hung it in the hall closet. He laughed when he saw his three-year-old son, Timothy, on the kitchen floor, banging on the bottom of a pot with a wooden spoon while Eunice sang, “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers . . .”

Grinning, Paul leaned against the doorjamb and watched them. Timothy spotted him. “Daddy!” He dropped the spoon and jumped up. Paul scooped him up, kissed him, and swung him around and up onto his shoulder.

Smiling, Eunice put a handful of wet silverware into the drain rack and reached for a towel. “How was your day?”

“Great! The class went well. Lots of questions. Good discussion. I love seeing how on fire people can get.” He came over and kissed her. “Hmmm. Mommy smells good.”

“We made cookies today.”

“Can I have a horseback ride, Daddy?”

“If you go easy on your old man.” Paul got down on all fours. Timmy swung on and clamped his skinny legs against Paul’s rib cage. Paul reared up and made a whinnying sound. Timmy held on, shrieking with laughter. He kicked his heels twice into Paul’s ribs. “Easy, cowboy!” Paul glanced up at Eunice laughing at them, his heart swelling. How could any man be so blessed? “Good thing he doesn’t have spurs!” He allowed Timmy to ride him around the living room three times before he rolled over, spilling Timmy onto the rug. The child clambered quickly onto Paul’s stomach, bouncing none too gently. “Uh! Uh!” Paul grunted.

“There’s a call from Dean Whittier on the answering machine,” Eunice said.

“I haven’t talked with him in a while. What time is it?”

“Four thirty.”

“Airplane ride, Daddy. Please!”

Paul took him by one arm and one leg and swung him around while Timmy made roaring sounds. “He never leaves the office before six.” He landed his son gently on the sofa. “Let’s play soccer, Timmy.” He kissed Eunice before heading into the backyard. “Give me a whistle at five thirty, okay? I don’t want to leave the dean hanging.”

Outside, Timmy kicked the ball to him and he nudged it back. When Timmy tired of the game, Paul pushed him on the swing. When Eunice came to the door, he swung Timmy up on his shoulders and came back inside. She took him. "Time to wash up for supper, munchkin."

Paul headed for the telephone. He pushed the button on the answering machine. "This is Dean Whittier. I've had a call and I think it concerns you."

The cryptic message left Paul uneasy. He punched in the dean's number. Dean Whittier had encouraged him through his college years. Paul had tried to keep in touch, but it had been six months since he last talked with him. He was grateful for the dean's support at Midwest Christian College, especially when he had felt the pressure of everyone's expectations. Because he was the son of a well-known pastor, some people thought he must have inherited a special kind of anointing. It would've surprised everyone to know he'd never been privy to the workings of his father's church, other than understanding his dad held the reins. Paul had listened and watched parishioners stand in awe of David Hudson and jump to do his bidding.

Paul had worked hard to earn top standing in his classes. It hadn't been easy, but he hadn't dared do less from the time he was old enough to enter school. Anything less than excellence had earned his father's contempt. His father expected perfection. "Anything less than your best dishonors God." Paul had struggled to measure up, and had often fallen short of his father's expectations.

Dean Whittier had recommended Paul for the position of associate pastor at Mountain High Church, one of the biggest churches in the country. Sometimes Paul felt lost in the masses on Sunday mornings, but as soon as he entered a classroom, he felt at home. He loved to teach, especially small groups, where people could open up and talk about their lives and be encouraged in faith.

"Dean Whittier's office. This is Mrs. MacPherson. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Evelyn. How're you doing?"

"Paul! How are you? How's Eunice?"

"She's as gorgeous as ever." He winked at Eunice.

"And Timmy?"

He laughed. “He was just playing drums in the kitchen. Future music minister.”

Evelyn chuckled. “Well, that’s no surprise, considering Eunice’s talents. The dean has someone in his office, but I know he wants to talk with you. Can you hold? I’ll slip him a note and let him know you’re on the line.”

“Sure. No problem.” He flipped through the mail while he waited. Eunice had already opened the bills. Ouch. The gas bill had gone up. So had the telephone and utilities bills. He set them aside, sifted through the junk mail from various charities pleading for money, and then flipped through the CBD pastors’ catalog.

“Paul,” Dean Whittier said, “sorry to keep you waiting.” They exchanged greetings and pleasantries. “I talked to Pastor Riley the other day. He gave me a glowing report on your progress. He said your classes are always full and have waiting lists.”

Paul felt uncomfortable beneath the praise. “There are a lot of people hungry for the Word.”

“And areas that are dying for lack of good teaching. Which brings me to the reason for my call. An elder from a small church in Centerville, California, called me this morning. Their pastor’s an old friend of mine. He had a heart attack and isn’t up to coming back. The elder said the church will fold without someone in the pulpit. The congregation is down to about fifty members, most over sixty-five. They have some assets. They own a hundred-year-old sanctuary, a fellowship hall built in the sixties, and a small parsonage, where the pastor can live rent-free. The Lord immediately put you on my mind.”

Paul didn’t know what to say.

“The town is somewhere in the Central Valley between Sacramento and Bakersfield. You’d be closer to your parents.”

The Central Valley. Paul was familiar with the area. He’d been reared in Southern California. Every summer, his mother had driven him north to visit his aunt and uncle in Modesto. Some of his best memories from childhood involved those weeks with his cousins. His father had never come along, always claiming work at the church that demanded his attention. When Paul had gotten up the courage to ask him why he avoided his aunt and uncle, his father had said, “They’re nice people,

Paul, if all you want to do is play. But I don't have time for people who have no interest in building up the Kingdom."

The summer after that, Paul's mother had headed north without him, and Paul had gone to a Christian camp on Catalina Island instead.

Sometimes Paul wondered about those cousins who had long since grown up and moved away. They were the few relatives he had on his mother's side. His father was an only child. Grandma Hudson had died long before Paul was born, and Paul could remember very little about Grandpa Ezra, who had spent his last years in a convalescent hospital. The old man died when Paul was eight. Paul remembered feeling relieved that he would never have to go back to that foul-smelling place, or see the tears running down his mother's face every time they walked out of the depressing facility.

Odd how the mention of an area of the country could bring such a flood of memories washing over him in the space of a few seconds. He could almost smell the hot sand, vineyards, and orchards and hear the laughter of his cousins as they plotted another prank.

"You'd be a staff of one," Dean Whittier said. "And you'd be stepping into the shoes of a pastor who shepherded that church for nearly forty years."

"Forty years is a long time." Paul knew a loss like that could cause a firestorm in a church, enough of one to incinerate the congregation before he even got there. Or incinerate him if he did feel called to head west.

"I know; I know. Losing a long-standing pastor can kill a church quicker than anything else. But I think you may be the man God is calling there. You have all the qualifications."

"I'll have to pray about it, Dean Whittier. They may be looking for someone much older and far more experienced than I am."

"Age didn't come into the conversation. And this is no time to be fainthearted. The elder wasn't looking for anything in particular. He called for advice more than anything. But it struck me after ten minutes of talking to this gentleman that he wants to do more than keep the doors open."

Paul wanted to say yes on the spot, but he held back. "You know I've dreamed of pastoring a church, Dean Whittier, but I'd better do some serious praying first. I don't want to run ahead of what the Lord wants me to do." He knew emotions could be deceiving.

“Take all the time you need. But let Samuel Mason know you’re thinking about it. Here’s the number so you can talk things over with him.” He rattled the numbers off quickly, but Paul was ready with paper and pencil. “Talk it over with Pastor Riley and Eunice and anyone else you trust.”

“I will.”

“And let me know what happens.”

“I’ll call you for a lunch date when it’s all settled, sir.”

“Do that. God bless you, Paul. And say hello to that pretty wife of yours.” He hung up.

Euny came into the kitchen with Timmy.

“Dean Whittier says hello.”

“You look excited about something.”

“You could say that.” He took Timmy and settled him into his booster seat while Eunice took the casserole out of the oven. “He got a call from the elder of a small church in California. They need a pastor.”

She straightened, eyes bright. “And you’re being called!”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Let’s not run ahead of the Lord, Euny. We need to pray about it.”

“We pray every morning and evening that the Lord will lead us where He wants us to go, Paul.”

“I know. I don’t think Dean Whittier’s call is a coincidence. Nothing happens by coincidence. I’d love to jump in and say yes, Euny. You know how much I’ve dreamed of having my own church. But I’m in the middle of teaching two classes. I can’t just quit and walk away.”

“If this is the Lord’s will, it will be very clear.”

“Dean Whittier gave me the name of the elder who called from Centerville Christian. Samuel Mason.”

“Maybe you should call him. The term is ending in less than a month.”

“A month might be too long. Their pastor had a heart attack. They need someone as soon as possible.”

“Do they have an interim pastor?”

“I don’t know. Their pastor has served their congregation for almost forty years, Euny.” That was as long as his father had pastored his Southern California church. “It would be hard to step into that pastor’s shoes.”

“It would be hard.”

“Dean Whittier suggested I call Mr. Mason. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. I can go over my background and experience, and explain my responsibilities here. If Mr. Mason says they can’t wait, that will be the answer from the Lord. No go.”

“When do you think you’ll make the call?”

“Not for a few days. I want to fast and pray about it first.”



Samuel was dozing in his chair when the telephone rang. Abby set aside her crossword puzzle and answered it. Samuel still dozed. The drone of television always served to put him to sleep. He would start out on ESPN, fall asleep, and wake up to Turner Classic Movies, the remote firmly in Abby’s possession.

“Just a minute, please. Samuel. *Pssst. Samuel!*”

Samuel raised his head.

“Paul Hudson is calling for you,” Abby said.

“Who’s Paul Hudson?”

“A pastor from Mountain High Church in Illinois. He’s calling in regard to your conversation with Dean Whittier.”

Samuel came fully awake. “I’ll take it in the kitchen.” He slammed his recliner down and pushed himself up, giving a cursory glance at the television. He gave her a mock scowl. “Pulled another fast one, did you? Since the Dodgers game would be over by now, you can finish watching *The Sound of Music* with my blessing.”

She gave him a smirk as she lifted the telephone. “My husband will be with you in just a moment, Pastor Hudson.”

Samuel picked up the telephone in the kitchen. “I’ve got it, Abigail.” His wife hung up. “This is Samuel Mason speaking.”

“My name is Paul Hudson, sir. Dean Whittier called me last week and said you’re looking for a pastor. He thought I should give you a call.”

Samuel rubbed his chin. How did one go about this? “What do you think we should know about you?”

“What are you looking for?”

“Someone like Jesus.”

“Well . . . I can tell you straight up that I’m a long way from that, sir.”

Paul Hudson sounded young. Samuel took a pad and pen. “Why don’t we start with your qualifications?”

“I graduated from Midwest Christian College.” He hesitated. “It might be best if you spoke with Dean Whittier about my work there. Since graduating, I’ve been on staff at Mountain High Church.”

“Youth?”

“New Christians. All ages.”

Sounds good. “How long have you been there?”

“Five years. I just completed my master’s in family counseling.”

A jack-of-all-trades. “Are you married?”

“Yes, sir.” Samuel could hear the smile in Hudson’s voice. “My wife’s name is Eunice. I met her in college and married her two weeks after I graduated. She was a music major. She plays piano and she sings. I don’t mean to brag, but Eunice is very gifted.”

Two ministers for the price of one. “Any children?”

“Yes, sir. We have a very active three-year-old son named Timothy.”

“Children are a blessing from the Lord.” Samuel was about to launch into stories about his daughter and son, but he pulled himself up short as the pain of Donny’s loss struck him again. He cleared his throat. “Tell me about your relationship with the Lord.”

He leaned back against the kitchen counter as Paul dove enthusiastically into his personal testimony. Born into a Christian family. Father, a pastor of a church in Southern California. *Hudson?* The name was ringing bells in Samuel’s head, but he wasn’t certain if they were fire alarms or chimes.

Paul went on talking. He accepted Christ at the age of ten, active in youth groups, counselor at church camps, worked summers for Habitat for Humanity. Between college classes, he volunteered at a senior-citizens center near the college. He worked with disadvantaged youth and tutored students in reading at an inner-city high school.

Paul Hudson sounded like a gift from heaven.

There was a long pause.

“Mr. Mason?”

“I’m still here.” *Just flabbergasted at the energy of the young.*

“Should I e-mail my résumé?” Paul sounded embarrassed.

Samuel was drawn to his youthful zeal. “We haven’t got a computer.”

“Fax machine?”

“Nope.” Samuel rubbed his chin again. “Tell you what. Send your résumé to me FedEx.” Since there wasn’t anyone on staff at the church, Samuel gave Paul his home address. “What’s your situation? I’m assuming you have responsibilities at Mountain High Church.”

“I work in a number of areas, but my primary responsibility right now is teaching two foundational classes.”

“How long is the course?”

“Both classes will finish in three weeks. We have a covenant ceremony the week after for those who have made a decision for Christ.”

“So you wouldn’t be available for four to five weeks.”

“That’s right, sir. And if I was called, I’d need time to pack and move and settle my family.”

“That would be no problem. But we don’t want to move too fast. I’ll notify the other elders. We all need to pray about this. Considering all your qualifications, this may not be the best place for you. We’re a small church, Paul. Fewer than sixty people.”

“It could grow.”

It would have to grow or they couldn’t afford to pay a new pastor. “Send your résumé. I’ll talk with Dean Whittier again.” Samuel wanted to make sure Paul Hudson was the young man the dean meant. “I’ll get back to you in a week or so. How does that sound to you?”

“Wise, sir.”

“I’d hire you right now, Paul, but we’d better slow down and see if this is where the Lord wants you.”

“I can tend to run on overdrive, Mr. Mason. I’ve been praying that the Lord would call me to pastor a church.”

Samuel liked the sound of his voice. “Nothing you’ve said to me will work against you.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries and Samuel hung up. He went back into the living room.

“Do, a deer, a female deer,” Julie Andrews sang from the screen.

“You know this movie by heart, Abby,” Samuel said. “How many times have you seen it?”

“About as many times as you’ve fallen asleep to *Monday Night Football*.” She picked up the remote and turned the volume down, then put it back on her side table.

He sat in his recliner, tipped it back, and waited. He knew it wouldn't be long.

"So . . . ?"

"Give me the remote and I'll tell you."

"You know I'll get it back again when you fall asleep." She gave up the remote.

"He's twenty-eight, happily married, and has a three-year-old son."

"That's all you learned about him in thirty minutes?"

"Master's degree. Zealous."

"That's wonderful." She waited while he considered. "Isn't it?"

"Depends." Fire from on high could raise a church from the ashes. Misplaced zeal could burn it down.

"You could mentor him."

He looked at her over the rim of his glasses.

"Well, who else would you suggest? Otis? Hollis?"

Samuel pushed his recliner back. "We might see if we can find someone older, more experienced."

"You aren't that fainthearted, Samuel."

"I'm not exactly a mover and shaker anymore, my dear."

"You know what they say: 'Youth and skill are no match for old age and treachery.'"

"A bowl of Rocky Road would taste good right about now."

She sighed and got up. Samuel caught her hand as she came near his chair. "Give me a kiss, old woman."

"You don't deserve a kiss."

He smiled up at her. "But you'll give me one anyway."

She leaned down and planted a kiss on his mouth. "You're an old codger." Her eyes twinkled.

"You can have the remote when you get back."

He began praying over Paul Hudson the moment Abby left the room. He prayed while he ate the ice cream. He prayed while his wife watched *The Sound of Music*. When they went to bed, he prayed with her, then lay awake praying long after she went to sleep. He prayed the next day while mowing the lawn and oiling the garage door hinges and springs. He was still praying while he added motor oil to his DeSoto, rubbed a few bugs off the car's grille, and went out to trim the hedge.

Abby came out to the garage with a FedEx envelope. Paul Hudson's

résumé. No moss would grow on this kid. Samuel opened the packet, read the résumé, took it inside, and put it on the table. “See what you think.” He headed for the door.

“What about lunch?”

He took a banana from the bowl on the nook table and went back outside to talk some more with the Lord. He didn’t come in until she called that lunch was ready. The résumé was on the table. “Well?”

Abby let out a soft whistle.

“Precisely.”

He called Dean Whittier that afternoon. “He had to work to prove himself when he came here.”

Samuel frowned. “Why would he have to do that?”

“His father is David Hudson. It would be hard for any man to live up to that kind of reputation.”

Before Samuel had an opportunity to ask who David Hudson was, the dean charged on with the various projects Paul had started and finished while in college. The dean’s secretary spoke in the background. “I’m sorry, Samuel, but I have another call. Let me just say this: Paul Hudson has the potential of becoming a *great* pastor, maybe even greater than his father. You’d better grab him while you can.”

Samuel went looking for his wife. “Ever heard of David Hudson?”

“He’s pastor of one of those megachurches down south. His sermons are televised. Pat Sawyer loves him.” Her eyes lit up. “Oh, my goodness! You don’t mean to tell me Paul Hudson is related to him, do you?”

“You could say that. He’s David Hudson’s son.”

“Oh, this is more than we ever dreamed . . .”

“Don’t start doing cartwheels yet, Abby.” He headed for the door.

“Where are you going now, Samuel?”

“Out for a walk.” He needed time alone to think and pray before he called the other two elders.