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Proposal for
The Yada Yada Prayer Group
A novel
by Neta Jackson

Story Premise

A group of Chicago-area women from totally diverse backgrounds and life experiences get thrown together at a big weekend Women's Conference and decide to form a "prayer group," first by e-mail, then meeting in person when the e-mail conversations get too hot. Like rocks in a rock tumbler, the women keep knocking off each other's rough edges, as Jodi Baxter—middleclass, white, "good girl," long-time Christian, raised in the church—discovers she's just a sinner saved by grace.

Audience: Definitely a "women's book," urban, cross-cultural.

Size: 85,000—100,000 words.

Schedule: I am finishing up a current book manuscript by November. I could launch into this book in November and hopefully be done within six months (April 2003). Note: Dave and I also teach homeschool writing workshops, and we travel 3-7 days per month.

Bio: My husband Dave and I are the authors or co-authors of over 100 books, 40 of which are novels for young readers. Our Trailblazer series of historical fiction (Bethany House) has sold 1.6 million copies. We have lived in the Chicago area since 1973, raising our children in a mixed neighborhood and school system. We have two grown children, a Cambodian foster daughter, three grandchildren, and four foster-grandchildren. Dave and I are members of the Chicago Tabernacle, a daughter church of the well-known Brooklyn Tabernacle. Several years ago I began co-leading a Women's Bible Study with an African-American sister for a mixed group of women—one of the great experiences of my life. While this novel draws on some of those experiences, it is definitely a work of fiction.

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Story Treatment

The Yada Yada Prayer Group

By Neta Jackson

“A saint is just a sinner who fell down . . . and got up.”

Story Premise

A group of Chicago-area women from totally diverse backgrounds and life experiences get thrown together at a big weekend women’s conference and decide to form a “prayer group,” first by e-mail, then meeting in person when the e-mail conversations get too hot. Like rocks in a rock tumbler, the women keep knocking off each other’s rough edges, as Jodi Baxter—middleclass, white, “good girl,” long-time Christian, raised in the church—discovers she’s just a sinner saved by grace.

Prologue: Rogers Park neighborhood, Chicago, 1991

Saturday morning. Jodi Baxter has driven into Chicago from the suburbs to pick up her husband who volunteers for an urban outreach . . . is driving down a narrow residential street in Rogers Park neighborhood (north side) when she is accosted by a wild-eyed woman who runs out, bangs on the hood of her car, makes her stop. The woman wants money for food, says her kids are hungry. Jodi hedges, suspects the woman wants money for drugs. The urban church, Uptown Community, is nearby. Tells the woman she’ll take her there, and they can help her. Woman says she’s already been there, doesn’t want to bother them again. Something funny there. Still, Jodi realizes she has so much, comparatively speaking. What about “if you do it unto the least of these . . .”? Jodi decides, if the woman is hungry, she’ll take her to the grocery store to get groceries. The woman gets in the car. Jodi says she has to run into the church for a minute . . . uses the minute to ask someone at the church if they know this woman. Her suspicions are confirmed: the woman is an addict, familiar in the neighborhood, but not violent. Probably giving her food and diapers rather than money is the way to go.

Feeling a little annoyed at her morning being interrupted, but also somewhat virtuous at responding to the woman, Jodi returns to her car . . . but the woman is gone.

Story Summary: Chicago, 2003

Yada Yada is born: Jodi Baxter—third grade school teacher, mom of two teenagers, moved to Chicago two years ago from the ’burbs—gets talked into attending a big Women’s Conference at a Chicago hotel by Avis Johnson, her African American principal, a woman who also attends Uptown Community Church. It sure is different than anything Jodi has experienced—a ballroom full of enthusiastic women, mostly African

American but also white and Hispanic, shouting praises to God. At the conference, Jodi and Avis get assigned to a small group of strangers—their prayer group for the weekend. One of the women—a street tough white woman on parole—doesn't have anything along except jeans, and refuses to go to the Saturday evening banquet which is off-the-charts dress up. To Jodi's shock, several of the African American women in their "prayer group of strangers" decide to ALL go to the banquet in slacks or jeans in solidarity with this new "sister." During the banquet, one of the women gets an emergency phone call: her fourteen-year-old was shot by gang crossfire in a neighborhood park.

These two events cement the conference prayer group in an unusual way. They decide to continue the group online—by establishing an e-mail loop they call "The Yada Yada Prayer Group." However, it soon becomes apparent that in spite of good intentions, the "faceless" communications of e-mail allow hurt feelings and racial misunderstandings to surface, threatening to blow the e-loop apart. But this is the closest Jodi has ever come to having real friends across racial and cultural lines. How can they save the group?

Yada Yada takes it to another level: Jodi attempts to visit some of the women personally—at their home or at their work—and these interactions make her realize the depth of what these women have to offer her and each other. An idea gets sparked to throw a Five-Year Sobriety Party for one of the women who has beaten her drug addiction. All twelve women—plus some husbands and kids—show up at Jodi's house for the party, which turns into a prayer meeting "free for all." At the party, Jodi realizes for the first time that it was Florida who stopped her car in the rain that Saturday twelve years earlier! *That* woman—that drugged out derelict—has more faith and praise than Jodi has, who supposedly has it all together. Some other walls are broken down and the group decides to actually meet face to face from time to time at each other's homes to read the Bible and pray together—the great spiritual leveler between class and race and age. This will be their bottom line purpose—everything else will flow out of that.

Jodi has never met women so blunt and honest—and yet full of faith. As different women in the group experience different crises in their life, the group is shaped by each one. Florida (AA) celebrates five years of sobriety—but is still trying to get her daughter back from foster care. Yo-Yo (white), single, not a Christian, and still on parole, has taken in her kid brothers. Delores (Hispanic), a nurse at Cook County Hospital, is dealing with major stress following the shooting of her son, who survives but then her husband, Ricardo, a truck driver, loses his job. Adele (AA), a blustery woman who has her own beauty shop ("Adele's Hair and Nails"), takes care of her mother who has Alzheimer's—just to name a few of the challenges they face. Love and respect between this motley crew grows, even amid the false starts and false steps.

Yet Jodi struggles to be totally honest about her own struggles. She and Avis function as the group's "leaders and facilitators." She has an "image" to uphold. Compared to these other women, she's had life on a silver platter. But she's worried about her husband, Denny, whom she thinks "drinks too much," even though he insists it's just a way to join in with the guys when they get together to watch games on TV and have a beer. Denny is in charge of the men's fellowship group at church and has a gift for making friends with guys on their level and bringing them into the church. Another problem: growing up a "good girl Christian," Jodi never really learned how to handle

anger. (After all, good Christians aren't supposed to get angry, right?) She stuffs her frustrations (teenagers, job, husband) . . . until they blow. To own her feelings is too threatening, so she blames others for "making her angry."

Crisis: Jodi and her husband Denny have a huge fight when Denny comes home from a touch football game with the guys smelling like beer. It's the same night as her meeting of The Yada Yada Prayer Group, and his stopping off for a beer makes her late. She storms out of the house, and the thunderclouds that had been threatening all afternoon let loose with torrents. Jodi is mad and drives carelessly, but the rain scares her and she calms down . . . but at an intersection, a kid darts across with a jacket over his head. Jodi slams on the brakes, but skids across the intersection, hits the kid and crashes into an oncoming car.

When Jodi wakes up, Denny and Avis are in the hospital room. Jodi has several serious injuries but not life-threatening. She dares to ask the question: What about the kid? He died on the way to the hospital, 10 years old. Jodi freaks. The women in the Yada Yada prayer group take turns sitting with her in the hospital, but Jodi wants them all to go away. She's not worthy of their love and care. She gets nasty. They persist. Jodi is also afraid—there's going to be a hearing to determine if she should be charged with reckless homicide. Will she end up in jail?

In spite of Jodi's rejection, the women in Yada Yada are stubborn. "God's not going to abandon you, and neither are we." They clean her house; they cook meals while she recovers. She doesn't *deserve* it—why don't they all just leave? In one hot conversation with blunt and five-years-sober Florida, Florida yells: "Suck it up! What does "deserve" have to do with it? What makes you think you deserved God's love *before* this accident? You just don't want to accept that you're *just like me*. I didn't deserve God's love when I was strung out on drugs—and yet look how far he's brought me. You don't deserve it either—but if God can do it for me, he can do it for you" . . . and for the first time Jodi begins to have hope that she will survive this crisis.

The entire Yada Yada Prayer Group goes with Jodi and Denny to the hearing. There are conflicting witnesses. But skid marks and the testimony of the driver of the oncoming car (shook up and bruised but not badly hurt—air bag) prove that Jodi was only going the speed limit, and she and the other car had the green light.

The whole group ends up at the Baxter house—where Florida gets in Denny's face and says, "It could have been you. I know a problem drinker when I see one. You need to get help, brother." Denny breaks down, confessing that he *had* had "too many beers" that day, and it *could* have been him that killed the kid. He's been struggling for weeks from the day of the accident until the hearing, so afraid he was going to lose Jodi—and it was really his fault. He promises to get help. The Yada Yada Prayer Group surround Denny and Jodi—just like they have done for each of the women—and they pray and sing and shout, because they *know*: God's going to turn it around.

We fall down, but we get up.

We fall down, but we get up.

We fall down, but we get up.

For a saint is just a sinner who fell down . . . And got up.

* * * *

Members of the Yada Yada Prayer Group:

Jodi Baxter—white, middle class, teaches 3rd grade at a Chicago public school. In her early 40s, mother of two teenagers. Been a Christian since childhood in rural Kansas, married to Denny—a fun-loving guy who heads up the Men’s Outreach Ministry at the Uptown Community Church. The Baxter family has only recently moved into Rogers Park (a neighborhood on Chicago’s north side) from suburban Downers Grove. Jodi is trying to live out her convictions in this urban environment, longs to have women friends from other racial or ethnic groups, but doesn’t know how to go about it. (*Jodi is a nickname for Joan: “God is gracious.”*)

Avis Johnson—African American, 50s, the principal at the public school where Jodi is a teacher, a worship leader at Uptown Community Church, saved in college, has her master’s degree, lost her husband to cancer, three grown daughters, two married with grandkids, one in grad school, dedicated to the kids in her school. Jodi is somewhat intimidated by Avis, an elegant lady, smart dresser, with painted fingernails, while Jodi feels like a country bumpkin dumped in the city. But the two women discover a common passion: discipling women. (*Avis: “refuge in battle.”*)

Florida (“Flo”) Hickman—African American, former drug addict, “five years saved and five years sober,” got her GED, now working as a postal employee. Blunt, no jiving, calls it like she sees it, full of incredible faith in the face of the most adverse situations. Husband and father of her children is unemployed. Has been trying to get her family back together again, but her youngest child seems to have disappeared along with the foster family. The prayer group throws Flo a “five year sobriety party” where Florida confronts one of the women who thinks it might not be “in the best interest of the child” to be returned to a mother she doesn’t remember. This seriously strains Florida’s relationship with the group, and even shakes her faith that God’s going to work it out . . . but within a few weeks she’s back. She *knows* the old life holds nothing for her. If not Jesus, to whom would she go? (*Florida: “flowering, blooming.”*)

Yolanda (“Yo-Yo”) Spencer—white, street tough, works as a chef at a Jewish deli, spent time in jail for forgery, now raising her kid brother and sister by herself. Isn’t sure about this “Jesus stuff.” Yo-Yo is blunt and honest; doesn’t feel a need to please others or live up to “religious expectations.” She’s learned the hard way to be self-reliant—but needs to learn how to rely on God. (*Yolanda: “lavender flower.”*)

Delores Enriques—Hispanic, an underpaid nurse at Cook County Hospital, husband Ricardo is a truck driver; they have five kids from five to fourteen. The family lives in Little Village, one of Chicago’s Mexican communities. Her teenage son is shot in a gang-infested local park while the women are attending the women’s conference. To add to all the stress, her husband loses his trucking job. (*Delores: “sorrows.”*)

Leslie (“Stu”) Stuart—white, single, sells real estate, a new Christian, a Yuppie coming out of New Age, decides to try Jodi’s “city church,” likes the non-traditional feel of Uptown Community Church. Whether intentionally or not, she makes Jodi feel like a class-A klutz in the very areas Jodi thinks are her strengths (organization, follow through), always seems to be one step ahead of her, seems bent on shouldering Jodi out of her “co-leadership” role in the group. (Jodi feels very threatened by Stu.) (*Leslie: “from the gray fortress”; Stuart: “caretaker.”*)

Ruth Garfield—Jewish, married to a blue collar man (her third husband—a good, solid Jewish man), no children, works as a secretary. Has experienced her share of Jewish prejudice, provides comic relief, *everything* is a big deal (overstatement, both positive and negative), ditsy, spontaneous, loyal, loves to talk and talk and talk, always ready to go out for coffee at the drop of a hat. But harbors a hurt that threatens the very existence of The Yada Yada Prayer Group. (*Ruth: “friend of beauty”; “friend.”*)

“Nony” Sisulu-Smith—South African, a social worker married to an African American (Mark Smith) she met at an American university, educated, intellectual (speaks several languages), knows Scripture inside out, seems “above it all.” Longs to go back to South Africa and be a force for justice and reconciliation, but her husband won’t even discuss leaving the U.S. (*Nonyameko: truth and justice*)

Adele Skuggs—Black, large woman, reddish short Afro, large gold earrings. A beautician with her own shop on Chicago’s north side. Attends an “Apostolic” church on the north side. Not terribly friendly to Jodi at first; seems to have a chip on her shoulder. Takes care of her mother; has to bring her to the beauty shop while she works. Mother has a stroke; is refused care at the nearest hospital because of lack of insurance; sent to Cook County. Delay causes worse damage. Adele sues the hospital. Jodi is shocked; Christians aren’t supposed to sue—are they? (*Adele: a French form of Adelaide. “Noble, kind.”*)

Chanda—Black, Jamaican; middle-aged; attends Adele’s “apostolic” church. Cleans houses on the North Shore. Plays the lottery. Not a mature Christian. A bit of Jamaican superstition mixed with Christianity.

Edesa—Black, Haitian (speaks Spanish). Community college student. Dolores’s friend who babysits for the Enriques children. When Jodi’s daughter Amanda is in danger of flunking Spanish, Edesa offers to tutor her—for free.

Hoshi—Asian, Japanese, a university student at Northwestern University (friend of Nony Sisulu-Smith). A new Christian. Her parents are coming to visit, upset that Hoshi has converted from Shintoism to Christianity.

Prologue

Rogers Park neighborhood, Chicago--1991

A soft mist clouded the windshield, like a thin film of dew, before being swiped away by the intermittent windshield wiper. In a moment the mist was back, playing peek-a-boo with the apartment buildings that lined the narrow streets. *Swipe*. The three-storied six-flats stood in stark relief like short cliffs crowding the concrete river. *Mist*. Their edges softened, blurred, even sparkled through the wet glass. *Swipe . . . mist . . . swipe . . .*

Jodi smiled inwardly. A Seattle rain. The kind she grew up with, a damp mist that seemed to rise up from the ground more than fall down from above. The kind of rain that made umbrellas virtually useless. In fact, she had never owned an umbrella until she moved here to Chicago after she got married. That was one thing she loved about the Midwest: macho thunderstorms, blowing in on big winds, shaking the trees, darkening the skies. Jagged lightning and cracks of thunder so loud they threatened to split her eardrums, followed by sheets and sheets of rain . . . and then it rolled away, leaving puddles and sunshine.

Usually. But today . . . Seattle rain. *Mist . . . swipe . . . mist . . .*

A dark, blurred shape rose up in front of the car through the thin film of mist. Startled, Jodi stomped on the brake. *Swipe*. The clear windshield showed a bedraggled person—man? woman? She couldn't tell—banging on her hood.

“Mom-meee!” A frightened wail from the carseat behind her stifled Jodi's first instinct to lay on the horn.

“Shh. Shh. It's okay. Someone walked in front of the car, but I didn't hit him. Shh. It's okay.”

The figure stopped banging on the hood and came around to the driver's side window. Uh-oh. Jodi steeled herself. She was going to get yelled at. But the person hunched down, tapped gently at the window, and whined loudly. "Got any change?"

Anger and relief shredded Jodi's anxiety. Just a panhandler. A woman at that, small and bony. But the nerve! Stopping her car like that!

She rolled down the window a couple inches.

"Mom! Don't!" commanded her six-year-old man-child in the back seat.

"It's okay, Josh. Just take care of your little sister." Jodi peered at the woman who stood just inches from her face. Dark-skinned, bug-eyed, her shirt damp and limp, buttoned askew . . . but the mist clung to the woman's uncombed nappy hair like shimmering glass beads.

"Got any change?" the woman repeated.

Jodi channeled her voice into assertive disapproval. "You shouldn't jump in front of my car like that! I could have hit you."

"Need food for my babies. And diapers," said the woman stubbornly. She peered past Jodi into the back seat. Her voice changed. "You got kids?"

Jodi was tempted to roll up the window and move on. She and Denny had made it a rule not to give money to panhandlers, which undoubtedly bought more booze, cigarettes, or drugs than bread and diapers.

But she hesitated, thinking of three-year-old Amanda and six-year-old Josh in the back seat. What if the woman really did have kids and needed food or diapers?

Still she hesitated. Then an idea popped into her head. "My church is just a couple blocks over. Uptown Community Church? If you stop in there, I'm sure somebody will help you. Ask for Pastor Clark."

The woman, damp and glistening, shook her head. "Been there b'fore. Don't wanna wear out my welcome. Just a little change, lady? A dollar will do."

If you do it unto the least of these my brethren, you do it unto me.

Jodi sighed. Life would sometimes be a lot simpler if years of Sunday school lessons didn't follow her around like Jiminy Cricket sitting on her shoulder. She leaned

over and pulled up the lock on the passenger side of their '86 Toyota. "Come on," she said to the woman standing in the mist. "I'm going to the grocery store."

"Mom!"

The woman scurried around and got in the car. She didn't put on the seat belt and Jodi tightened her mouth. She couldn't be this woman's keeper about *everything*. She turned and glared at Josh before he opened his mouth again.

Jodi usually shopped at Dominicks Finer Foods, just over the Chicago line into Evanston. But if she took the woman there, she'd either have to bring her back to this neighborhood, then go back and do her own shopping . . . or do her shopping at the same time. But it would be awkward loading ten bags of groceries into the back of the Toyota if all she got for the woman was bread and diapers.

Or maybe Josh was right—this was crazy, picking up this woman! On an impulse, Jodi turned onto Pratt, then onto Ashland, slowed beside the old brick storefront that housed Uptown Community Church, and turned the ignition off. The wipers died.

The woman in the passenger seat narrowed her eyes. "Thought we was goin' t' the store."

"We are," Jodi chirped brightly, hopping out of the car. "I just have to drop off something at the church. Be right back." She opened the back door. "Come on, kids." Another encouraging look at the woman in the front seat. "I'll be back in a minute."

With Amanda's legs wrapped tightly around her waist and Josh plodding along in sulky silence, Jodi pulled hopefully on the handle of the glass door. *Open*. Relieved, she hustled up the narrow stairs to the second floor that had been remodeled into meeting rooms and offices. She poked her head into an open door, interrupting a committee meeting. "Uh, Pastor Clark, could I see you a moment?"

A tall thin man with wispy gray hair and warm eyes behind thick glasses stepped into the hallway. Quickly Jodi described the woman who had stopped her in the street and her intention to get her some groceries. "But I've got the kids, you know . . . what do you think?"

Pastor Clark nodded, his large adam's apple bobbing. "I know the lady. Last time she was here I tried to get her into a detox program, but she didn't follow through. Probably not too anxious to see me again." He smiled. "She can be a nuisance, but is probably harmless. Sure, get her a bag of groceries . . . just don't give her any money."

Relieved, Jodie ruffled Josh's hair. "See, kids? It's okay. We'll just help this lady out, then finish our errands." Josh pulled away from his mother's hand but allowed himself to be guided back down the stairs and out the door.

"Now be nice," Jodi muttered under her breath as they approached the Toyota. "We're supposed to help people, even when it's inconvenient." Right.

"Hey, mom, look!" Josh pointed an accusing finger at the car.

The woman was gone.

Chapter One

Chicago, 2001

I didn't really want to go to the weekend "women's conference." Spending two hundred bucks to stay in a *hotel* for two nights only forty-five minutes from home? Totally out of our budget, even if it did include "two continental breakfasts, Saturday night banquet, and all conference materials."

Now if it had been Denny and me, that'd be different. A romantic getaway, a second honeymoon . . . no teenagers tying up the phone, no dog poop to clean up in the yard, no lesson plans to keep thirty noisy third graders busy. Just Denny and me sleeping late, ordering croissants, fruit plate, and hot coffee for breakfast, letting someone else make the bed (hallelujah!), swimming in the pool . . . now *that* would be worth two hundred bucks, no question.

But I'm not generally a conference-type person. I don't like big crowds. We've lived in Chicago for almost twenty years now, and I still haven't seen Venetian Nights at the lakefront, even though Denny takes Josh and Amanda almost every year. Those pukey Port-a-Potties—ugh.

I like retreats, though—the kind our church has from time to time. Denny has gone with the men sometimes, and we've had a few women's retreats too. But those have been a smaller group, where I know most of the folks, held at a "camp and conference center" out in the country where you can wear jeans to all the sessions and walk in the woods during free time.

But listening to the cars on I-90 roaring past the hotel's manicured lawn? Laughing at jokes told by high-powered speakers in tailored suits and matching heels?

Having to take “After Five Attire” for a banquet on Saturday night? (Why would a bunch of women *do* that with no men around to admire how gorgeous we look?)

Uh uh. Was not looking forward to it.

Still, Avis asked if I’d like to go with her, and that counts for something. Maybe everything. I’ve admired Avis ever since she started coming to Uptown Community a couple years ago, but never thought we’d be pals or anything. Not just because she’s black and I’m white, either. But she’s so tall and elegant—regal looking, really. Her skin is so smooth, a rich milk chocolate color, and she gets her hair done every week at a salon. Couldn’t believe it when I found out she was fifty and a *grandmother*. (I should be so lucky to look like that when Josh and Amanda have kids.) I feel like a country bumpkin when I’m around her. My nondescript brown hair loves Chicago’s humidity, which means I have to keep it cut short (“short,” not “styled”) because it has a mind of its own.

Avis is one of Uptown Community’s worship leaders and has really helped our motley congregation of former Presbyterians and Baptists, “Evee-Free” and Methodists, Mennonites and no-church, get beyond keeping our noses in the hymnbook and following an “order of service” like automatons to actually participating in *worship*. She can quote Scripture, too, not only from the New Testament, but from those mysterious Minor Prophets, and Job, and the Pentateuch, while I have a hard time remembering where to find *anything* in the Bible beyond John 3:16, even though I’ve been in Sunday school since “Climb, Climb Up Sunshine Mountain” days.

Not that some people don’t complain about shouting in church and going past twelve o’clock. Don’t know why Avis stays at Uptown sometimes—we’re a hardheaded, opinionated lot. (My humble opinion.) But she says God called her to Uptown, and Pastor Clark preaches the Word. She’ll stay until God tells her to go.

Denny and I have been at Uptown over ten years, since the kids were little. Guess we didn’t want to end up “fleeing the city” like all the other white folks and ending up at a megachurch in Downers Grove. But sometimes I don’t know what we’re doing here. We have a handful of black members, a few Hispanic, one Asian . . . but we’re still

mostly white in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the U.S.—Rogers Park, Chicago. Josh says at his high school cafeteria, the black kids sit with the black kids, the Latino kids sit with Latino, nerds sit with nerds, white with white, Asian with Asian. A little spillover here and there, but not much.

Diverse, but not exactly a melting pot. And the churches aren't much better.

Ever since we moved from Kansas to Chicago, I've wanted a black friend. I grew up on missionary stories—Africa, China, Ecuador. But it occurred to me when I was still carrying Josh around in a backpack that we ought to be able to relate across cultures right in our own cities before we go winging across the ocean to “save the natives.”

But it's not so easy. Most people I know in the neighborhood are friendly—friendly, but not friends. Not the kick-back, laugh-with-your-girlfriends, be crazy, cry when you're sad, talk-on-the-phone-five-times-a-week kind of friends.

So when Avis asked if I'd like to go to this women's conference sponsored by a coalition of Chicago area churches, I said “Yes.”

I had no idea I was about to meet some “sisters” who would change my life.

* * *

The lobby of the Embassy Suites hotel in Chicago's northwest suburbs was packed with women. An intense hum rose and fell, like a tree full of cicadas. “Girl! I didn't know *you* were coming!” . . . “Where's Shirlese? I'm supposed to be roomin' with her.” . . . “*Look* at you! That outfit is the bomb.” . . . “Pool? Not after spending forty-five dollars at the salon this morning, ' honey. Who you kiddin'?”

Avis and I wiggled our Mutt and Jeff selves through the throng of perfumed bodies and presented our reservations at the desk.

“Jodi Baxter? And . . . Avis Johnson. You're in Suite 206.” The clerk handed over two plastic key cards. “If you're here for the Chicago Women's Conference”—knowing smile—“you can pick up your registration packet at that table right over there.”

Avis let me forge a path back through the cicada convention to a long table with boxes of packets marked A—D, E—H, all the way to W—Z. As we were handed our packets emblazoned with CWC in curlicue calligraphy, I noticed a bright gold sticker in the right hand corner of mine with the number 26 written in black marker. I glanced at the packet being given to the woman standing next to me at the A—D box—gave her name as Adams, Paulette—but her gold sticker had the number 12.

“What’s this?” I asked the plump girl behind the registration table, pointing to the number.

“Oh that.” She smiled sweetly. “They’ll explain the numbers at the first session. Don’t worry about it. . . . Can I help you?” She turned to the next person in line.

Hmph. I didn’t want to wait till the first session. I was nervous enough surrounded by women who seemed as comfortable in a crowd of strangers as if it were Thanksgiving at Grandma’s. I didn’t want any “surprises.” Avis waved her packet at me over the heads of five women crowding up to the table between us and nodded toward the elevators. We met just as the door to Elevator Two pinged open, and we wheeled our suitcases inside.

“What number did you get?”

“Number?”

“On your packet, right hand corner, gold sticker.”

“Oh.” Avis turned over the packet she was clutching in one hand, along with her plastic key card, purse strap, and travel-pack of tissues. “Twenty-six. What’s it for?”

I smiled big and relaxed. “I don’t know. They’ll tell us the first session.”
Whatever it was, I was with Avis.

As it turned out, we didn’t need our key cards. The door to Suite 206 stood ajar. Avis and I looked at each other and stole inside like The Three Bears coming home after their walk in the woods. The sitting room part of the suite was empty. However, through the double-French doors leading into the bedroom, “Goldilocks” was sitting on the King-size bed painting her toenails while WGCI gospel blared from the bedside radio.

The stranger looked up. “Oh, hi!” She waved the tiny polish brush in our direction. “Don’t mind me. Make yourselves at home.”

We stood and stared. The woman was average height, dark-skinned and lean, with a crown of little black braids falling down all around her head sporting a rainbow of little beads. Thirties, maybe forties, it was hard to tell. Her smile revealed a row of perfect teeth, but a scar down the side of her face belied an easy life.

Avis was braver than I was and said what I was thinking. “Uh, are we in the right room? We didn’t know we had another roommate.”

The woman cocked her head. “Oh! They didn’t tell you at registration? Room 206, right?” She capped the nail polish and bounced off the bed. “Florida Hickman—call me Flo.” She stuck out her hand. “Avis and Jodi, right? That’s what they tol’ me downstairs. Anyway, I was going to room with this sister, see, but she had to cancel, and I didn’t want to pay for a whole suite all by myself. Had to sell the kids just to get here as it is.” She laughed heartily. Then her smile faded and she cocked her head. “You don’t mind, do you? I mean . . . I don’t need this whole king-size football field to myself. Unless . . .” Her forehead wrinkled. “You want me to sleep on the fold-out couch?”

My good-girl training rushed to my mouth before I knew what I was saying. “Oh, no, no, that’s okay. We don’t mind.” *Do we, Avis?* I was afraid to look in Avis’s direction. We had pretty much agreed driving out that since it was a suite, we could each have a “room” to ourselves. Avis was definitely not the stay-up-late-sleepover type.

“Oh. Well, sure, it’s all right,” Avis said. “It’s just that no one told us.” I didn’t know Avis all that well, but that wasn’t enthusiasm in her voice. “I’ll sleep on the fold-out,” she added, wheeling her suitcase over to the luggage stand.

I noticed that she didn’t say “we.” I stood uncertainly. But our new friend had generously offered the other side of the mammoth bed, so I dragged my suitcase into the bedroom and plopped it on the floor on the other side of Florida’s nail salon.

Well, this was going to be interesting. I had thought it quite an adventure to get to know Avis as my roommate for the weekend. As members of the same church, this was a chance to get beyond the niceties of Sunday morning and brush our teeth in the same sink. But I hadn’t counted on a third party. God knows I wanted to broaden my horizons, but this was moving a little faster than I felt ready for.

As I hung up the dress I hoped would pass for “After Five” in the narrow closet, I suddenly had a thought. “Florida, what number is on your CWC packet?”

Florida finished her big toe and looked at it critically. “Number? . . . Oh, you mean that gold sticker thing on the front.” She looked over the side of the bed where she’d dumped her things. “Um, twenty-six. Why?”