

EXCERPT from *THE WINNER'S CIRCLE* by PJ Colando

UNLIKE JACKIE, FRAN WAS irked by “Amazing Grace”. Especially when Bonnie’s ringtone interrupted steamy Tom Selleck dreams. She groped the nightstand for her cell, clicked it on, and croaked, “How—”

Fran swallowed to regain her voice and attempt cordial. She needed to reply, “How sweet the sound.” It was the obligatory response among friends, but just now the ritual undermined behavior management principles. One shouldn’t reinforce disruptions like nighttime phone calls. Though she was a late-in-life newlywed, who didn’t require beauty sleep, she did need peace.

Fran opened one eye to sneak a clock peek: 10:33 p.m. In the jostling, her phone dropped to the floor, but their carpet prevented clatter. She gratefully rolled over, mindful not to bump her snoring mate. His guzzle-snort camouflaged a phone call that would awaken him and ignite his potential to pray.

Joan Baez’s famed anthem resumed. Fran suppressed a groan. Her clumsiness had disconnected the call of a persistent friend. Rolling to a crouch on the floor, she scooped up the phone and clicked on.

“The new sweet sound will be cha-ching,” Bonnie said. “Write these numbers down!”

“Hold your horses if you want to remain friends. I didn’t hear *please*. Also, speak softly. Paul’s asleep and I need to locate paper and pen, plus my bookmark. I’m reading the new Jan Karon book.”

This was a half-truth, a misdirect to cover her irritation. *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* lay spread-eagled on the nightstand. A moment ago, it covered her phone.

“Trying to learn how to be a pastor’s wife?” Bonnie joked.

“Bad move, Bonnie. Thank your stars you’re long distance. Do you want me to write the number or not?”

Fran hustled into the robe draped across the foot of the bed. A double bed shared with a pastor, who performed un-puritanically beneath the sheets, then cozied her onto the mattress edge where she tried to read herself to sleep. Marriage was unexpectedly exciting. Apparently, abstinence did make a body grow fonder. Fran was considering an additional wedding gift—purchase of a king size bed to ensure her own space.

She grabbed her phone and held it low, amidst the rustle and swish of the silken fabric, hoping the noise would infuse sense into Bonnie’s head. Fran padded to her office down the hall and Brailled the desktop. A tablet and pen aligned in their always-place. The silver patina of her recent wedding photo’s frame twinkled in the moon glow.

Fran startled. She’d never noticed Paul’s tie skewed to spoon the folds of her wedding suit sleeves. Significant lust hidden in plain sight.

She smiled as she recalled squeezing her nosegay during the ceremony and the subsequent photo shoot. Moments later, she lofted the roses over her head backwards for a perfect landing into the hands of Bonnie, Paul’s secretary. The same still unmarried woman who’d quit her job and left town a few days ago with Carl, Steve Breeden’s half-brother. California bound, they said. What an upended apple cart to accept, to explain, and, eventually, to embrace.

Bonnie Voss. The same woman who’d lost her morals and her mind. The same woman who called her for a favor in the middle of the night. *Please*.

Fran’s chair rewarded her careful sit with silence. Her knees complied, noiseless too. She poised the pen and drew her cell to her ear. “I’m ready. Shoot me the numbers.” Fran cleared her throat to underscore her great effort.

“Please? 10. 11. 31. 41. 44. 14. 24.”

“Okay. Let me repeat them to make sure I got them right.” Fran adjusted her robe. “10. 11. 31. 41. 44. 14. 24.” After Bonnie’s confirming purr, she continued, “What are these? Sounds like high school locker combinations.”

“Good guess, girl! It’s Carl’s combination from his junior and senior years of high school. He was excited to have a locker in the jock block twice.”

“Is that the hell why he remembers the numbers?”