

Jan's Sanctuary Walk

Patricia M. Daniels



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Chapter One

Jan Hendricks shook the rain off her umbrella and left it open on her office floor. A thunderstorm, typical for May in Tampa, Florida, had roared through that afternoon, and Jan was glad she'd remembered to bring the umbrella. She needed it to get from the car to the hospital on her rounds while visiting church members. Sitting down at her desk, she glanced at her watch. She had ten minutes to go over her weekly pastoral report before her 4:00 staff meeting. As she picked up the report, the church receptionist, Bonnie, paged her through the office intercom.

"Pastor Jan, the District Superintendent, Reverend Jim Dean, is on the phone for you."

Jan's heart skipped a beat. District Superintendents didn't call to just chat. Could this be the phone call she'd been waiting for... an appointment to her own church? Springtime in the United Methodist Church also provided the opportunity for pastors to move to another parish. Jan had been at The First United Methodist Church of Tampa as one of two associate pastors for five years, and she desperately wanted to pastor a church on her own. But women in the Florida Conference had only been ordained to the parish ministry since 1975, and now, nearly eight years later, only a few served as lead pastors. *Please God, let this be about my own church.* She picked up the intercom

phone. "Thanks, Bonnie."

Jan took a deep breath and pressed the blinking light on her desk phone. "Hello, Jan speaking."

"Hi, Jan. Jim here. Glad I caught you."

"Um, yes, hi, Reverend Dean. How are you today?" Jan cupped the phone under her chin and wiped her sweaty, rain-soaked palms on her skirt.

"I'm fine, Jan. I'll get right to the point. I'm just back from our final clergy appointment-making session for this spring, and I have good news for you. The Bishop wants to appoint you to your own church."

Jan gasped and almost dropped the phone. *Oh, dear God, thank you, thank you.*

Jim chuckled. "I knew this would please you, Jan, and I'm excited for you. You ready for the details?"

"Absolutely." She took a deep breath and tried to calm her beating heart. "Where is it?"

"Well, it's not close. In fact, it's the farthest church north in the conference. It's First United Methodist Church of Baylorsville and is about forty-five miles northwest of Tallahassee."

Jan's heart did another flop. *Tallahassee*. It seemed a million miles from Tampa and was in the middle of nowhere. *But my own church*. She changed the phone to her other ear and continued listening.

"I'm coming your way tomorrow morning, and I would love to share more details with you. Can you meet me for breakfast at 8:30? And I'll need an answer by the end of the day. We need to get these appointments set."

Jan ran through her mental calendar for the next morning. She'd need to leave early enough to get Carrie, her eight-year-old, and Sarah, her five-year-old, to school and daycare. She had no early morning appointments, but if she had, they would have been postponed. This was the meeting of a lifetime.

"Sure, fine, Reverend Dean. I can do that. Ben can come, right?" Ben, her husband of ten years, would certainly be af-

fectured by this move.

"Of course, I expect him to come."

After planning where to meet, Jan hung up. She sat for a few minutes, stunned. She wanted the chance to pastor her own church, but worried about Ben and the girls. How would they handle such a long move? She drummed her fingers on her desk and called Ben. He'd be home from his teaching job at Tampa College and have the girls back from school. She checked her watch. Jan would be late for her staff meeting.

"Ben," she said when he picked up the phone. "Jim Dean just called. They've got a church for me..."

"What?" Ben interrupted her. "Wow, that's great. Where is it?"

"Well, we've got a big decision to make. It's not close." She paused for a few seconds. "It's in a little town called Baylorsville, northwest of Tallahassee."

Jan heard nothing but silence. "Ben?" Her voice cracked. "You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Ben stammered. "Tallahassee, huh." Ben's voice rose higher. "Whoa, that's definitely not close."

"No, it's not, and we have to decide by tomorrow afternoon. Jim wants to meet with us tomorrow morning for breakfast at 8:30. Can you come?"

"You bet, and even if I couldn't, I'd still come."

"Look, I'm late for my staff meeting. I'll see you at 5:30, and we'll talk then, okay?"

"Sure. The church is in Baylorsville, right? I'll get the atlas and look it up. See you later."

Jan put the phone down. Ben had sounded shocked. They'd talked many times of the possibility of her being a lead pastor in a church, but they never dreamed it would be so far away. Moving over two hundred miles was a huge change for her family. Ben had encouraged her to take a position as lead pastor, but he loved being a humanities professor at Tampa College. It was a prestigious job, and he had worked hard getting

it. Would he be okay moving to the middle of nowhere? Could he get another teaching job? How many colleges were in that area of Florida?

Her heart was still pounding, and her face burned. This information couldn't be shared with anyone until she talked it over with Ben, so she at least needed to look calm. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her notes and left her office for the staff meeting.

But my own church...



Ben was a great cook, and supper was ready when Jan got home. After eating, she and Ben followed the evening routine of bath, reading, and bedtime with their daughters. When the girls were asleep, they sat in the den to talk. Ben had the atlas open on the coffee table to North Florida.

"Here's the town." He pointed to a small, circled dot on the top part of the Florida panhandle close to the Georgia line. "It looks to be within an hour driving distance of Tallahassee and has a huge lake not too far from it."

Jan looked at the surrounding dark green around the tiny town of Bayersville, which suggested miles and miles of undeveloped land, and her heart sank again. "It does look like it's in the middle of nowhere, doesn't it? And it's so far from here."

"Yep, that it is."

"Oh, Ben," her shoulders drooped, "we've never lived in a small town. How will we get by without the stores, the restaurants, the activities for the girls? And what about your job?"

"Yeah, I know. This isn't how I imagined our careers would flow. Always thought we'd be near a big city." He glanced at the stack of papers on the coffee table. Jan saw they were from his class. She immediately felt guilty. Ben had only been teaching three years at the college.

"I want my own church, Ben, but perhaps I should wait until a church opens closer to Tampa so you can still teach here." Jan

stood and paced the small living room.

Ben grabbed her hand and pulled her to the couch. "Jan, we've been talking about the possibility of you getting your own church for a few years now. If you turn this down, it could hurt your career."

"I know," she interrupted him. "But what about *your* career? You want to stay teaching at the college level."

"Jan, I can always find a teaching position, even if it's in the local school system. And besides, you're ready for this." He put his arm around her. "You need to say yes."

Jan sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. Ben was her rock, had been since they met the second week of her sophomore year in high school in the coastal town of Clearwater, fifteen miles from Tampa. She thought him quite handsome with his dark brown, curly hair, wire-rim glasses, and a wide smile. From the first time she had mentioned being a pastor in their early days of college, he had supported her strong desire to become an ordained minister.

Jan blew out a long breath. "You're right. First Church Tampa is great, but I do want more. Preaching every Sunday, blessing and giving the Sacraments, being responsible for the church administration and programming, all sounds exciting. It's what I'm called to do. I'm ready for this challenge." She leaned back against the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

She sat up, almost knocking Ben in the face. "What about my parents? They've been so helpful with the girls." Jan's parents, Bill and Helen Sparks, still lived in Clearwater. Carrie and Sarah were their only grandchildren, and her parents doted on them. "They'll miss so much of our children's lives if they're... what?" Jan looked at the map again. "...five hours from them."

Ben tipped her chin up so she was looking at him. "Jan, I really think you should take this church." He smiled at her. "Your parents are retired and can come visit anytime. You need this."

Jan sighed again and pulled away from him. Ben was right. She wanted this church. Few churches were willing to have

women as lead pastors, and if she turned this down, it might be years before she got another opportunity. A knot formed in her stomach. Not only did she worry about her family, but she also worried about herself. Pressure from conference officials and clergy, especially clergymen, demanded clergywomen do well as lead pastors. She could not fail.

"But the girls?" She got up and paced again. "Will they be okay? And the schools? Is the Bayersville elementary school even accredited?" Jan ran her hands through her hair, causing it to stand up.

Ben pulled her back on the couch and smoothed her hair. "I'm sure the school will be fine. You remember what we promised each other when you got ordained." She leaned against him, knowing what he would say. "We'd be open to what God was leading us to do." He lifted her chin up so she was looking into his eyes. "We wouldn't be afraid of change."

He pecked her on the cheek. "This is an incredible opportunity for you, and, who knows, maybe me, too." He laughed. "And it's not like we'll be there for years. Remember, the United Methodist Church moves its pastors around every few years."

Jan nodded. "Yeah, you're right. We agreed to move forward toward change, not away from it. But this church is a long way from our support system. It would be easier if we weren't so far away from everything."

Ben laughed again. "You're acting as if Bayersville is on another planet. It might be in the middle of nowhere, but Tallahassee's a big town. And I checked the schools. There are at least three colleges there: Florida State University, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, and a smaller, newer community college. I'm almost at the end of my semester here. I can put together a resume and send it to those colleges before we even move." He got up and pulled her up with him. "Let's pray and get to bed. Tomorrow will be an emotional day."

Jan nodded, and they both headed toward the bedroom. Her mind was still racing with questions.

The next morning, Jan and Ben met Jim at a small restaurant near the church. Jan had tossed and turned all night, debating the pros and cons. She finally slept, after realizing she needed more information to make this decision.

They joined Jim at a corner table.

“You two ready for this?” Jim asked. He was going bald, with a few tufts of silver hair around the bottom of his head. Jan liked Jim. He had supported her from the day she was appointed to First Church Tampa. She knew he had gone to bat again for her to get this church.

After they ordered their food, Jim brought out a sheet of paper and handed it to Jan. It held the details of the church. Jan’s hands shook as she and Ben read the information.

While they read, Jim chatted about the church. “It’s healthy, with a membership of three hundred, averaging about half of that in worship each Sunday. There’s a good mix of families and older folk.” He went on listing the statistics of the church as Jan’s hand clutched Ben’s under the table, and her heart pounded. *This sounds wonderful, but...* The questions whirled through her head.

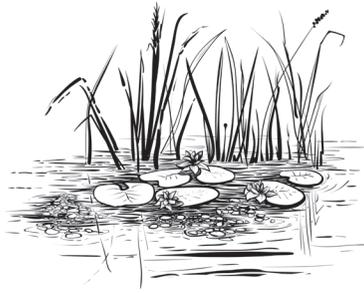
Jan waited until the waitress had placed their food in front of them, a full breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast for Jim and Ben, and a single English muffin for her. “I have lots of questions, but perhaps the most important one is, will they accept a woman?” She looked at Jim, trying to read his face.

He just smiled at her. “Yes, Jan, they’ll accept a woman, especially you. I’ve already talked to the staff parish committee, and they’re excited you’re coming.”

Ben slapped the table with his left hand and put his right arm around Jan. “I told you, Jan. I know you’ll do great.”

She took a deep breath, squeezed Ben’s hand, and, her voice shaking, said, “We’ll take it.”

For the next six weeks, Jan and her family encountered a whirlwind of meetings, goodbye parties, packing, and praying. By the middle of June, they were on their way to an entirely different world.



Chapter Two

As the exit sign for Baylorsville, Florida, came into view, Jan's heart fluttered. She tucked her hair behind an ear.

"Here we go," she said to her mother, Helen, who had accompanied her on the long car ride from Tampa. She glanced in her rearview mirror over the heads of her two daughters to where Ben was following her in a five-year-old red Ford Mustang. Her dad, Bill, trailed Ben in a thirty-foot U-Haul, which carried all their possessions. Sighing, Jan turned on her blinker and slowed down for the exit.

Helen reached over and put her hand on Jan's arm. "You'll do great, Jan. God has been preparing you for this for a long time."

Jan glanced at her mom. "I know, Mom. But everything's so different. And I'm worried about Ben and the girls. I hope they'll be okay in this small town." More so, she was afraid she'd forget the skills she had learned and make a mess of leading this church as their pastor.

She concentrated on driving her station wagon down the long, tree-lined exit. "What if the people don't like me, or stop coming because of me? They've never had a woman pastor before. And I'm preaching every Sunday. I like to preach, but I've never done it every Sunday." Jan had only preached once every three months at the Tampa church. *Will I even have enough to say?*

When Helen didn't speak, Jan glanced at her. Her mom had that "don't give me excuses" look she had used every time Jan complained as a child that something was too hard.

Jan laughed. "Okay, I know I'm whining."

"Yes, you are."

"And you don't need to remind me I asked for my own church. I am ready for it, and even Ben is excited for me."

"Yes, you are. You did an incredible job in Tampa. This church is lucky to have you."

Jan laughed again. "Well, you're a little biased, but that's okay. I appreciate your support."

Helen smiled and sat back against the seat.

Coming to the end of the exit road, Jan turned right onto the two-lane road lined with thirty-foot pine trees. She rolled down her window just enough to lift her hand in a wave to her husband. He blinked his lights in response. *Please let Ben find a teaching job.* He so loved teaching. And it would be tough for them with only one income.

Jan heard a soft sigh from the back seat and glanced into the rearview mirror again. Her daughter, Sarah, was awake.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

Sarah's honey-colored hair was mussed, and her cheeks flushed with sleep. Jan could see Sarah twisting in her seat belt, trying to take in all the sights, and her daughter's excitement warmed Jan's heart.

Jan gave a quick glance toward her second born. "We're almost there, Sarah. Make sure you stay in that belt."

"Okay," Sarah said, straightening in her seat.

Carrie, Jan's older daughter, spoke up. "Wow, these trees are huge." Jan's eyes flicked quickly to Carrie, who had put her book down and had pushed her light blue glasses up to look out the window.

Jan turned back to focus on her driving. "Yeah, the trees are much bigger up here in North Florida. There're even steep hills here. It's almost like we're in the mountains."

"And the ground's red!" Carrie exclaimed as the trees thinned out and red, clay dirt appeared on the side of the road.

Helen turned in her seat and laughed at Carrie. "It sure is, honey. Don't see any white sandy beaches like we have."

Helen was laughing now, but Jan knew her mother wasn't happy her granddaughters were moving five hours away. In fact, Jan knew her mother wasn't happy any of them were moving that far. A wave of sadness passed over her. This move was hard on everyone. *Was this right?*

Everyone quieted, and the small caravan began the final leg of the trip. Bayersville was about twenty miles from Interstate 10. As Jan watched the huge trees reflecting through her windshield, she rewound the journey she had taken to get to this point in her life. Throughout her childhood and teen years, she'd been heavily involved with the church. Then, after entering college, she felt the strong call to become a pastor, which was unusual for a woman during the late 1970s. Her parents, and especially Ben, supported that call, and after graduation, she ended up in Seminary at Duke University. Four years later, she was ordained into the United Methodist Church, and then appointed to the staff at First Church, Tampa. She loved doing ministry within the context of a large staff, but she wanted more. She wanted to be the pastor in charge. Now she had that chance. And she had to succeed.

Reaching the town, her stomach began to roll. She rubbed it. *Hope I don't get sick.* She took a deep breath and willed her tummy to behave. Jan recognized some buildings. She and Ben had made a brief courtesy visit a month ago to see the church and parsonage, the home they would live in, and meet a few key leaders. They passed the local grocery store, the Dollar General, Posie's Flower Shop, and the Bayersville Bank. They came to the top of a hill and the entire downtown of Bayersville, only two blocks long, came into view.

"Wow," Carrie shouted, "the streets are brick!"

"Yeah, Mom, look," Sarah piped in.

Jan felt a blast of hot air come through the car. Carrie had rolled down her window and was almost hanging out of it. Sarah was squirming out of her seatbelt.

"Carrie, Sarah, both of you sit back in your seats," Jan called. "Yes, the street has bricks."

Jan steered the car off Main Street onto Call Street and the steeple of First Church came into view. As they passed the church, she saw the sign out front saying: *First United Methodist Church - Welcome Pastor Jan Hendricks and family*. She heard a honk behind her followed by an even louder honk and smiled. The men in her life were heralding her.

"Why did Daddy honk his horn?" Sarah asked.

"Look at the sign in front of the church, Carrie," Helen said, as she pointed.

Carrie beamed, "Oh, that's neat, Mom."

"What's it say?" Sarah asked.

Helen read the sign and both girls clapped their hands.

Jan's face flushed with pride. *Well, God, this is in your hands*. The fluttering in her stomach had eased, but now her heart raced. She hoped it was more excitement than fear.

"What a pretty little lake," Helen said, bringing Jan's thoughts back to the car ride. "I bet you'll be walking there often."

"I sure will," Jan said, glancing at the small lake on her mother's side of the car. "Looks like a lot of the town folk walk it." She saw two elderly people walking, even in the middle of the 90-degree June day. There were picnic tables on one side with a swing, jungle gym, and sandbox. Huge oak and pine trees towered over the other side. Jan sighed as warmth ran through her. Praying while walking had always been her saving grace when things got tough. Yes, this tiny lake would be her sanctuary.

The parsonage came into view. Jan and Ben had seen it on their earlier visit, but the girls were seeing it for the first time. Jan passed three cars parked in front. *Oh, no, people are already here*. She had hoped to have time to freshen up before meeting anyone. She pulled into the carport, while Ben parked beside

her and jumped out to help Bill with the U-Haul. Jan peered around her mom at the cars.

"Looks like the welcoming committee is here," Helen said.

"Yeah, I called Betty Smith, the church secretary, when we stopped for gas and she said she would make sure people were here to help us unload," Jan said, as she climbed out of the car.

"Is this where we'll live?" Carrie asked.

"Wow," Sarah exclaimed.

The long, ranch-style brick house had four bedrooms, a study, a separate den with a fireplace, and a formal living room. The girls were thrilled they were going to have their own rooms. Ben had claimed the study, as Jan had one at the church. As Jan helped the girls out of the cart, her heart beat faster. Several people were waiting for them. She recognized Betty, and Nancy White, the chair of the Staff Parish committee. Jan smiled when she saw the two women as they had welcomed her warmly on her visit last month. *At least two allies.*

As Helen stepped out of the passenger side of the car, a middle-aged woman, who had been standing alongside the driveway, came up to Helen.

"Pastor Jan," she said, grabbing Helen's hand, "we're so glad you're here."

Helen laughed. "Oh, I'm not Jan, I'm her mother. This is Jan," she said, pushing Jan forward.

The woman's eyes opened wide and her face paled as she glanced at Jan. Jan's stomach dropped. Already people were thinking she didn't fit the description of a pastor. At thirty-three years old, and five feet, two inches tall, Jan still had a girlish figure and didn't look her age. Swallowing her nervousness and trying to maintain some confidence, Jan walked up to the woman.

"Hi, I'm Pastor Jan." She shoved her hand toward the woman whose face had now turned red.

"Uh, sorry ... Pastor Jan." The woman looked around as if trying to find someone to save her. "My name is Wilma Adams and I'm on the parsonage committee." She grabbed Jan's hand,

pumping it up and down.

Jan breathed deeply and put on what she called her 'pastor's face,' which she hoped made her look alert, compassionate, and somewhat intelligent. "It's okay, Wilma. My mom and I have always been told we look alike. It's nice to meet you."

For the next ten minutes, as others came up to her, Jan introduced Ben, the girls, and her parents. Her ministry had begun. *God be with me.*