

Mother Jessup's Hottest Christmas

by ML Barnes

I don't see why she picked the hottest day of the year to weed the gardens!" Daisy Franklin plopped down on the porch. Strands of her long brown hair escaped from beneath her sun hat and clung to her face.

Days like this made Deanna Ramsey glad for the short hair she had adopted since she'd been forced to have her hair cut during a "surveillance mission," the term she chose for what Daisy called her "snooping expeditions."

"You know how Mother Jessup is about her yard," Dee said. "And she's having the Mothers Board over for a garden party next week. She wants it to look perfect. Besides, you volunteered for this."

"In a moment of weakness induced by Mother Jessup's fried chicken last Sunday. It was a set-up." Daisy leaned back and fanned herself with her hat.

Daisy Franklin and Deana Ramsey weren't related by blood, but they had shared most of their sixty-two years. They were sisters in every sense of the word and that was how everyone had always referred to them, even their own mothers.

Marva Jessup, a tiny, round bundle of energy with cottony hair, was the most influential member of the Mothers Board of the River Jordan Full Gospel Church. She'd been with the church longer than anyone else. The three women were bound as family with the church as the center of their world.

Mother Jessup joined Dee and Daisy on her immaculate sun porch, pushing a rolling cart that held lemon tea cakes and her special iced tea, made with alfalfa blossom honey and a whisper of mint. Her yard was overflowing with color from the summer flowers. Fat bumblebees buzzed over a trellis covered with purple clematis and the window boxes were filled with bright red geraniums.

Once they'd settled in cushioned wicker chairs, Mother Jessup watched the moisture roll down the sides of her glass and sighed. "This reminds me of Christmas."

Dee and Daisy gave each other a look, wondering how the blistering heat could make anyone think of a winter holiday. They both knew how Mother Jessup mangled metaphors and similes. Leopards changed their stripes and you couldn't teach an old dog new licks, according to Mother Jessup. Dee and Daisy settled in for a story.

"I guess it was 1944. The Honeybees of Harmony were entertaining troops in Tuskegee, Alabama. It was Christmas Eve and it must have been eighty-five degrees that night! The hottest Christmas ever." Mother Jessup took a sip of lemonade.

"We were really swinging! We were every bit as good as the more famous all-girl bands—the Prairie View Co-Eds and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Those women were good, but so were we." She smiled at the memories.

"That night, though, we were wailing! It was always like that when we played for all black crowds, especially in small towns. The people really turned out and showed so much love and appreciation."

"You played trumpet, right?" Dee prompted, even though she knew the answer.

"I could play trumpet, but that night I played trombone. That's kind of how we got in trouble."

"Trouble on Christmas Eve?" Daisy asked, realizing she'd never heard this story before.

"Don't forget, it was the south in the 1940s. Jim Crow laws had everything separate and unequal. We weren't allowed to have white musicians in the Honeybees, but we did. And that made us even hotter than the temperature or our music."

Dee's jaw dropped. Mother Jessup was always telling them stories about the past. How had they never heard this one?

"We had a trumpeter and a sax player—Margie Bennett and Earline Bryant—both white and both incredible musicians. Those girls could really take off! They hadn't been with us long, but them playing with the Honeybees made us all criminals."

"That was a da—darned shame!" Daisy's anger almost made her slip! Mother Jessup didn't tolerate "cussin'."

“That night, the audience was filled with soldiers, just hundreds of young black men all handsome in their uniforms. We were playing *Jump, Children*. That was a Sweethearts song, but we did it better. Margie had a solo and she was on fire! The crowd was going crazy. And then we noticed it—her make-up was streaking!”

Mother Jessup wiped her brow. “Yep, it was as hot as we are now, *and* we had on those long black and yellow gowns. Streaked make-up was something that the police watched for, to see if any white girl might be passing for black. When we saw what was happening, well it was a good thing we were playing that song because we had a plan.”

Dee and Daisy leaned forward to listen.

“Our leader was Melvin Allen. When Melvin called out ‘Do you wanna jump, children?’ we would switch instruments and keep playing. Audiences loved it. What they didn’t know was that little whirling dance move we used was a way for a musician to actually leave the stage in a way where no one would realize she was gone.

“Jump was also our password. If we said it three times, it meant, danger, clear out! Melvin somehow caught sight of the cops. He shouted, ‘Jump, jump, jump’ and we moved fast. I took over the trumpet for Margie and our other trombone player took over the baritone sax for Earline. We whispered, ‘jump, jump, jump’ and swung as hard as we could on those horns.

“The police were trying to make their way to the stage, but the crowd was on its feet and dancing in the aisles. It slowed the police down just enough.”

“God, I would have been terrified,” Dee said. “Was it like that everywhere you went?”

Mother Jessup’s smile bunched up her cheeks. “Everywhere down south. But it was part of the job. Everybody knew what they were signing up for. It was hard—sometimes we had to sleep on the bus because there were no ‘colored-only’ rooms, or we had to change on the bus because the place we played didn’t have colored dressing rooms, or there was only a tiny bathroom for staff to use. We knew having those girls with us was dangerous for us and them, but it was all about the music for us. They were our musical sisters.”

Daisy fidgeted impatiently. “Well, what happened? How did you get away?”

“We had a singer, Irene Tucker. She could do it all, rot-gut blues all the way to Puccini arias. Melvin let the Jump go on for a few more minutes and then he made an announcement.

“In honor of Christmas Eve and our brave servicemen, we’d like to slow things down with a special song.”

Mother Jessup continued, “The rest of us girls had filed back stage, leaving only Irene and her guitar. The audience groaned and hooted. They weren’t ready for a change like that. But as soon as Irene sang the first note, you could hear a pin drop. She sang *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* in a beautiful, slow way. By the second chorus, everyone in the place was singing along.”

Nibbling a bit of a tea cake, Mother Jessup dropped her voice to a whisper. “It was peaceful out front, but backstage was a mad house!”

We had a white bus driver named Pete Woods. Pete got us through a lot, sometimes by posing as the owner of the band when the authorities couldn’t believe that a black man could be in charge. Pete was a really good guy and a really good driver. That night, he had to do what we called our ‘Pete Special.’

“He and the girls grabbed all the instruments and began to pack the bus as fast as they could. Then he fired up that old bus and blasted the horn—once, twice. That meant that anyone who wasn’t on the bus should break for the nearest corner. Pete would whip that bus around the block only two times—any more than that could get us caught.”

Daisy and Dee leaned forward so far, they were practically falling out of their seats.

“We took a corner on two wheels. Pete kept the door open and we reached out and grabbed the hands of anybody running to get on. We spun around the corner again and there were Melvin and Irene running flat out. Melvin had Irene’s guitar by the neck, no idea where the case was. A couple of girls reached out and hauled them in like pulling laundry off a line!”

“We had Margie and Earline hidden away on the floor. We stripped out of our gowns as fast as we could and piled them on top of those girls. By some holy miracle, the police didn’t follow us. Somebody started singing carols and we kept that up until we crossed the state line into Illinois. That was the last time we played in Alabama.”

Dee let out a long breath and Daisy collapsed back in her chair.

Mother Jessup grinned her biggest grin. “See, like I said. The hottest Christmas ever!”

