

De' 'Ja Brewed ~ Sample

Prologue

Welcome to the story of The Mississippi Queens. I'm Lydia's mother, and the girls (now women) all call me Mother Grand.

On Lydia's first day of kindergarten, in September of 1975, I waited with her outside the elementary school doors until the bell rang. She slipped her hand out of mine and motioned for me to bend down. With her hands on her little hips, she said, "I'll be fine, Mother." She fidgeted a little. "I've lived my whole life for today. It's finally here!" With a quick kiss on my cheek, she hurried through the doors and out of my sight.

A few hours later, I stood outside the big double doors again excited to hear all about her first day of school. Several other mothers stood nearby. Lydia came out surrounded by other little girls, her face glowing.

"Mother, I these are my new friends Vanessa, Roxie, Gwen, Etta, and Annie. I met them at recess."

Five women joined us. The girls each introduced their mothers, and there were polite smiles and some nods between the adults.

The girl with tight red curls turned to me, "Ma'am, just in case you forgot, my name is Roxie. Lydia told us we could come to play at your mansion. Is that right? Because I've never been to one and I'd like to see what yours looks like."

Lydia bounced on her toes. "Please, Mother?"

I'd always known my daughter had a mind of her own, and seeing her in action was a delight. I looked at the women. "Are you available to join us for morning tea tomorrow? The girls can play and explore, and we can get to know each other."

Their mothers and I became friends almost as fast as our daughters had.

One year later, on a Sunday afternoon, my beloved husband showed the girls some pictures of a riverboat from the *Chicago Tribune*. "The *Mississippi Queen* is the biggest and most beautiful steam-powered riverboat ever built."

The girls liked the part of the article that said Mark Twain would have approved of the big steamboat. His books were among their favorites on the rainy afternoons I read out loud to them. And they loved it that they lived near the big river that Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn explored.

Etta turned to me. "I want to be a writer and a queen when I grow up. How do girls get to be queens?"

My husband chuckled and said, "You're all queens to me!"

Etta climbed up on his lap, her eyes serious. "But how do we get to be real queens? Don't we need crowns and stuff?"

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised. "What do you think, dearest?"

Just like that, an idea came to mind. "Girls, you are all dressed up in your Sunday best. Upstairs in my cedar chest are several old but beautiful May Day crowns from my childhood. My

mother made them with ribbons and rhinestones. You can each choose one. When you have them on, we'll head for the river, and Mr. Grand will coronate each of you."

As they hurried up the stairs, I heard Gwen say, "We could be The Mississippi Queens because we love the river, and that big boat Mark Twain would have liked so much is really cool." The girls stopped at the top and Etta said, "That is a great idea!" The other nodded, and they followed me into my sewing room. It only took a few minutes for them to find their favorite crowns and for me to bobby-pin them in place.

While we were upstairs, my husband called and invited their parents to a ceremony on the bank of the river.

An hour or so later, we gathered in the park, by the water. The girls stood in a circle, held hands, and promised to be the best queens the Mississippi ever had. They sealed their promise with a group hug.

I invited everyone back to the house for a celebration treat. I served lemonade in crystal goblets and sugar cookies with lemon icing on matching dessert plates. This immediately became the official Mississippi Queens treat.

Vanessa made a suggestion. "Maybe the Fourth of July could be our special holiday because there will be fireworks and sparklers and that way the day will be even more special than ever before."

The Mississippi Queens of Nice, Minnesota toasted their first unanimous decision with their lemonade.

When it was time to decide who would tell you their stories, The Queens gathered at The Galley to decide. Vanessa got all but one vote – her own. The Queens toasted the decision with mugs of hot coffee.

Chapter 1

We got to The Galley at the same time and took a few moments to say hello to some of the folks we know before ordering our favorite beverages and a plate of banana-nut mini-muffins.

Something was off, and I felt disoriented.

The sounds inside The Galley usually make me feel welcome and loved. That day, the air felt electric, and the voices were like static in my head. Even the lovely tinkle of the bell above the door jangled across my nerves. I'd been fine until I stepped inside.

At first, I wrote my feelings off because I was overtired. Things had been exciting in our house the night before. But I recognized the sensation. My great-grandmother said I had "second sight," my grandmother told me it was intuition, and my grandfather called it superstition. My mother said I had a sensitive nature, and my father told me I had insight. My husband and close friends called these times in my life *It*.

I tried to ignore the stretch across my spirit, but Annie noticed. "Vanessa, what's up?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired and excited."

Etta set her cup of chai on the table. "Excited? About what?"

Determined not to ruin Sally's surprise, I evaded her question. "About being with my friends."

It was true, but not the whole truth.

I glanced around The Galley again. Other than a stranger here and there, I recognized most of the regulars. It was business as usual.

Lydia, being the most organized of us called our book club to order. "Well, what did you think of this one?"

Her words got us focused. Almost. I still scanned the room every few minutes while *It* crept up and down my spine, across my shoulders, and danced on my scalp the way a skittering spider might. I felt as if I'd already lived the moment, but I hadn't. And I knew I was missing something.

After a deep breath, I sat up straight and tried to tune back into the discussion. The mystery we'd just read had been written by an author known for his scary stories. That had to be my problem; I was under the influence of his words.

Etta relaxed back in her chair, held her cup to her lips, and looked at me over the rim. "What do you think, Vanessa? Did the villain scare the daylights out of you the way he did me?" Coming from our courageous queen, that was high praise for the author.

Her question drew me back from another visual cruise of the room. "He kept me guessing right to the last page. And it was a little scarier than the last one of his we read."

Lydia admitted to nightmares, which for her is the sign of an excellent mystery. Annie told us with a shy smile that the hero reminded her of Jeff. Gwen admitted there was a character she'd almost prayed for. Roxie was impressed with the red-headed detective's sass and success, and Etta closed the discussion by sharing her five-star Amazon review.

About twenty minutes later, Sally joined us. It was a relief to see my beautiful daughter walk through the door. When I saw her flushed cheeks and shining eyes I knew The Queens would know something was up before she said a word.

Sally reached for my hand. Hers had the chill of nervous excitement. She turned toward our friends. "We wanted all of you to be the first to know." Her voice was quiet and my friends, already on the edge of their seats, leaned closer.

"Travis proposed, and I said yes."

The women at the table exploded into action. There was a group whoop, hugs, and tender kisses on her cheeks. I ordered another round of drinks for our friends and hot chocolate with extra

whipped cream and sprinkles for my daughter. Then we joined hands and prayed for Sally. Our princess.

Gordon, the cook, hollered at the waitress. “Shirley! Turn the sound up on that TV! It’s the anniversary of the Judge Justice’s murder.”

After the report, we waited through a commercial for a heart medication with more side effects than we could track. Shirley pointed the remote at the screen turning down the sound. Before the rest of us started conversing again, she tapped her order pad with her pen. “I wonder if the Judge knows how much pain he left in the wake of his life.”

For a little while, it got louder in the café as customers remembered the dead man unkindly.

As the conversations about the Judge slowed, *It* increased, and I shivered. Etta leaned forward. “Vanessa. Really. Tell us. What’s going on?”

“I think I’m a little shocked that I’m old enough to have a bride-to-be for a daughter.”

The Queens agreed time was sure passing quickly, and once again I’d deflected.

Sally held her hand out to each Queen so they could see her ring up close. I watched them all for a moment and tried to swallow the lump in my throat. I ached for the days when Sally was little and showing off the ring she got in a box of Cracker Jacks. But I also loved the woman she was becoming.

My daughter’s voice shook a little when she told them the story of the ring. “Daddy designed and created it. I think it’s absolutely perfect.” They listened to her tell how Travis had come to our house and asked us for her hand in marriage.

The memory hung in my mind like a warm, soft-edged, moment. Dean and I were delighted and eager to give them our blessing and hoped the engagement could happen before he died, but it wasn’t to be. My beloved went into hospice the day after the ring was done and entered heaven a week later. Out of respect for our sorrow, Travis waited ten months to propose. His tender decision made me love my future son-in-law more.

Sally took my hand. “Mom, will you walk me down the aisle? Without Dad, there’s no one else I want to be with me in those moments.”

The tears came before the words. “Of course, my darling daughter.”

We had a short group cry and then it was time for us to go. I had groceries to buy, roses to prune, laundry to fold, and lots of praying to do.

~~~

After a few hours working in my garden, I walked around our house thinking how empty it was going to be with just my cat Latte and me after the wedding.

I sat down, and my feline friend curled up in my lap. I stroked her vanilla and caramel-colored fur and remembered the day about a month after Dean’s passing when we found each other. Sally talked me into stopping by the pet adoption event going on at the mall. She’d laughed, handed a kitten to me, and said, “Look, Mom. This one looks like your favorite latte.”

The purring baby with the gold eyes rubbed her head on my chin and snuggled in. I was a goner.

Latte stretched and meowed, bringing me back to the present.

She was hungry. I watched her sit on her food rug, curl her tail around herself and eat her supper. While she cleaned her face with her paws, I microwaved some leftover spaghetti for myself and decided to watch the news while I ate.

The local and state headlines were about the Judge and his killer who had been released from prison after serving the highest possible sentence for murder in the third degree. The anchor said

something about Voluntary Manslaughter and told the viewing audience that the teenager had been tried as an adult and was sentenced to twenty-five years. Robin's graduation photo was on the screen along with her mug shot.

The lovely reporter told viewers that Robin had been unavailable for comment and since there were no current pictures of her they had her photo enhanced. If the artist was right, she'd aged gracefully. They switched to a reporter in the field who announced that Warden Brown had a few words to say.

The strong looking woman kept her comment as short as her hair. "Robin Olsen served her sentence quietly. Any debt she owed society is paid in full. It's my hope that wherever she goes, the people there will keep that in mind."

Latte stretched and yawned. I asked my feline companion the questions rumbling around in my head. "How does a former prisoner respond when a potential employer asks what you've been doing the last twenty-five years? And where do you go when you have no one?"

~~~

I brewed a cup of chamomile tea and stirred in some honey. The scent was almost as comforting as the taste. When I sat back down, I continued thinking about Robin.

She was eighteen at the time of her sentencing. Twenty-five years later the penalty still seemed harsh and unjust. In a small effort to support Robin, and out of curiosity, I went to the trial every day. The courtroom was always full. I sat on the hard bench hoping she'd know some of us were on her side.

The Justice family brought in a cool-looking, fancy-dressing, big-time attorney. Robin's public defender sweated constantly, dressed in worn-out clothes, and was shaky at best in the courtroom.

No one involved in the case seemed moved by the casts on her leg and arm or the bruises on her face. The prosecution somehow proved their case to the jury, although most of us in the gallery disagreed. Some out loud. Her best friend, Marvin, almost got arrested and was escorted out by a bailiff. Robin watched it all happen but didn't respond. When I told my mother about it later, she said, "The poor child was probably in shock."

The presiding judge gave Mrs. Justice a few minutes to confront Robin. She screamed at the teenager, "You murdered my husband! After everything I did for you and your mother." Then she melted to the floor. The judge ordered a bailiff to escort the weeping woman back to her seat in the front row. Fear shimmied up my spine when two female officers handcuffed Robin and escorted her out a side door. She shuffled through, and never looked back, but why should she?

Marvin put his head down and sat still as if in shock.

The widow hurried out to the waiting press where, in a seemingly miraculous recovery, she gave a much different performance for the cameras.

Will, Etta's husband, studied the case in law school and said the sentence was too severe. I moved on with my life trying to convince myself that the system worked and that those in authority did their best to make the right decisions.

But something inside me knew better.

It was getting late when I pulled out my senior year scrapbook. Robin and I had gone to school together since kindergarten, along with The Queens and Dean. But she was different from day one. Angry. Distant. Poor. Lonely. And at times unkind. She endured bullying and, in turn, she picked on the younger kids on the playground. When we got older, she was known for her physical

generosity with the boys. When they used and dumped her, she got angrier as she sank deeper into the role of the victim.

~~~

I woke up to Sally's voice. "Mom, are you okay?"

Before I could respond, she took the scrapbook off of my lap and started to cry. "You're remembering Dad, aren't you?"

The page I'd turned to, but hadn't focused on was of our senior homecoming. I'd been the queen and Dean the king. The Queens were my court.

She went on and on about her dad, and I let her think she was right about my thoughts. I was up to three deflections for the day.

We said good night outside her bedroom door. I longed to tuck her in the way I did when she was little, but those years were gone.

I walked down the hall to my room, and a memory of my mother and me rose up. Just before our wedding, I'd moved into our first apartment early so I could do what Mama called nesting. After a fun night of helping me settle in, the time came to say good night to her. For the first time, I would be down the street instead of down the hallway. She stood outside of my door, tears running down her beautiful cheeks, and said, "Honey, you have to shut the door. Otherwise, I won't be able to leave." I did, leaned my head on the wood, and sobbed. I heard her crying on the other side.

Now I knew how it felt to be on both sides of the door.

~~~

In my room, I heard the familiar sound of Sally on her way to me. When she called out, "Mom?" it was the sweetest of melodies to my heart. She stood in the doorway. "I love you so much. And I'm going to love Travis as much as you still love Dad. I promise."

She hurried away before I could respond.

Through my tears, I journaled my evening prayer.

Thank you for the privilege of being Sally's mom. I don't know how You do things in Heaven, but I have a request. Please, if possible, tell Dean about Sally and Travis."

I knew God didn't need any suggestions from me. But still, it couldn't hurt to ask.