

re·deem

re·deem (ri-dēm') *verb, transitive*

re·deemed, re·deem·ing, re·deems

1. To recover ownership of by paying a specified sum.
2. To pay off (a promissory note, for example).
3. To turn in (coupons, for example) and receive something in exchange.
4. To fulfill (a pledge, for example).
5. To convert into cash: *redeem stocks*.
6. To set free; rescue or ransom.
7. To save from a state of sinfulness and its consequences. See synonyms at *save*.
8. To make up for: *The low price of the clothes dryer redeems its lack of special features*.
9. To restore the honor, worth, or reputation of: *You botched the last job but can redeem yourself on this one*.

[Middle English *redemen*, from Old French *redimer*; from Latin *redimere* : *re-*, *red-*, *re-* + *emere*, to buy.]

Chapter One

She couldn't remember if peonies were her grandfather's favorite flower. Or if Grampa simply mandated them as the traditional altar flower. All Charlyn knew was that if it weren't for the powerfully fragrant peonies she held under her nose, the sulfuric reek of urine in the recessed entryway would make her flee. If she needed further proof that her grandfather was no longer the minister of this aging relic of a Gothic church, that ammonial stench was it. Even when he was ninety and his congregation dwindled to sixteen doddering but faithful members, the age-worn stones in this entry were scrubbed clean until they were rinsed of their sins.

Of course Grampa had been dead four years and the St. Mark's congregation no longer existed. This husk of a building—as much a home to her as the one she grew up in miles from here—had lain vacant since his death. Charlyn had been asked to play the piano at the inaugural service of The New Pentecost Covenant Church, new owners of the property. Though she thought it strange they would ask her, Charlyn accepted, if for no other reason than to play once again the beloved piano she grew up with. So at 8:30 on a hot July morning, a mere three blocks away from some of Chicago's worst housing

projects, Charlyn was here to rehearse her musical selection. You'd think the new minister would appreciate that a forty-year-old white woman stood out like a bull's-eye target in this neighborhood, but Reverend Regg was already twenty minutes late.

“Yo! Mo' fo'!” Charlyn heard to her right.

Her heart lurched. She couldn't see who had spoken, but she slid her hand inside her pocket and fingered her car's remote control.

A brown bulky pantleg came into view from the right. Then another leg emerged. It was a teenage boy in baggy pants and oversized tee shirt, his hair in a skullcap of tight corn rows, his right shoulder pumping as his feet slid in the defining ghetto stride. She could feel the sweat dripping between her breasts, her ivory silk blouse clinging to the damp skin on her back. She tried to make herself small in the dark corner, but then she froze, afraid any movement might call attention to her.

What had she thought? That Grampa's protection still worked on this street?

Two other boys, also in baggy pants and nearly knee-length tee shirts, followed behind the first one, who now pointed at something down the street. She looked to see what it was.

Her BMW.

Please no, don't let them stop by my car.

But, they did. Her shoulders sagged as the boys leaned into the car's side windows and peered in. She had just finished repairing a scratch gotten in the parking lot of the high school where she taught music.

Charlyn's eyes grazed the church's heavy, dark wood doors to her left. Why had Charlyn let the new minister talk her into coming here? Was she that hungry to find out

what it felt like to be inside St. Mark's again? Why, when this was the place where a lifetime of loneliness began for her?

She focused on her car again. The boys still hung around the precious BMW that was Matt's latest gift to Charlyn. How would she explain her presence here to him? For seven years, Matt had worried consistently about Charlyn's personal safety, wanting her to get the best security alarm system she could buy for her car and house. She wondered if he worried as much about his wife.

Where was that minister? Reverend Regg was already twenty minutes late! And the church doors were locked; Charlyn had checked already.

She kept her fingers on the remote control, ready to squeeze the panic button. Her fingers trembled so much, she feared hitting hit the panic button by mistake. She took her hand out of her pocket and thought again about how being asked to perform at the inaugural service might actually be Grampa's final revenge. For whole stretches of years, Charlyn made it a point not to even think about St. Mark's. But by listing Charlyn as the Blake family contact, Grampa's long, bony arm had reached out to bring her back here.

One of the boys looked up and started coming toward her. Her heart thumped. Had he seen her? Would anyone on this block, in which maybe three in five storefronts hid behind locked metal shutters, come to her aid? Was there *anyone* left here from Grampa's time who might remember Charlyn Blake?

What the hell was Charlyn doing here?

"It would be closure and continuity at the same time," the Board President had told her on the phone when he invited her to play at the dedication service.

You can't pay me enough, had been her first thought. Then she thought, Do it for

Grampa. *He* would be curious to see what they've done with the place he ministered to for almost sixty years.

No, that boy wasn't coming toward her. She let her breath escape. The young boy had gone to check the BMW's doors on the street side. The three boys then huddled together and argued about something. One of them kept raising his fist and then pointing his finger to the ground. What did that mean? Sweat ran down her face. She didn't dare wipe it off. Her heart pumped so hard she was tempted to look down at her chest to watch the heaving. Reverend Regg should be here by now!

The boys broke apart. One of them leaned over to look inside the car again. Had she left something in there they wanted?

Grampa, this better be worth it.

Because she might lose her car for forgetting—how could she forget?—how this neighborhood had deteriorated. And she could count herself lucky if losing her car was all that happened to her.

Though that *would* be ironic, wouldn't it? If Matt's wife even suspected Charlyn existed, his wife would be the first one egging the thieves on. And her grandfather, wherever Grampa was, would probably shout, Amen! at Charlyn's loss of her ill-gotten gains.

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“Lemont!” The voice was shrill now.

The boys stepped back from the BMW, nodded, and strode away. Still shaky, Charlyn watched their hands, which grazed their bulky trousers. They could still pull out a gun. Only after they passed out of range did she slide along the wall toward the street. Her blouse snagged on a protruding stone. She didn't bother examining the tear. Her blouse would have to be the latest sacrifice offered up to St. Mark's.

She came to a stop this side of a column holding up the entry's arched ceiling. She could try to hide behind that column if she had to in a hurry. Below her, cars whizzed past, their exhaust enveloping her in the heaviness of a summer inversion.

“Lemont! You get on home now!”

Charlyn stepped forward from the shadows and her eyes panned the street, but she still couldn't see the woman who called. It didn't matter. Those teenage boys had jolted Charlyn into realizing she better get the hell out of here, fast.

She was halfway down the granite steps when she caught sight of the sad-looking glassed announcement board on the other side of the steps. Why hadn't the new church replaced it yet? Or, at least, cover up the *Reverend Jeremiah Blake, Senior Pastor*, still visible beneath the smudged layer of grime. That's how old this announcement board was—there was still both a senior and an assistant pastor here.

She glanced up and down the block. All she needed was one minute. She ran back up to the board and stood in front of its shattered glass. When had she stopped noticing that Grampa started to let things slide? Some of the letters of the St. Mark's slogan—*His truth is marching on*—were missing. The electrified *St. Mark's* sign above the frame was

now vandalized by graffiti, a sure sign Grampa was gone. On this street, everybody had called him The Old Prophet. Hey, Proph, some would call out as the lanky old man with red hair leaned forward and strode down the street. White though he was, Grampa was treated like an elder, a village griot. Grampa would nod back and say, “Hello, Mrs. Myrtle, Mr. Brown.” Or it could be Mr. Landrum, Miss Shirley Ma’am—he knew all their names, though not one was a church member.

“Lewwwwwmohnt! Now don’t you make me call you again now.”

Hey now, Miss Charlyn girl, go on and run your little white behind faster.

It’s what Charlyn should be doing now, instead of remembering the buxom, laughing women who used to lean out of their upper-story windows to call out as a younger Charlyn ran out of St. Mark’s. She’d dart in and out of the street’s doorways and vestibules, her little legs pumping fast, trying to get her as far away from her tiresome mother as they could.

“Lemont!”

Charlyn now saw a lace curtain fluttering inside a window across the street above *Prairie Liquors*. An older woman—in her seventies, easy—leaned against the burglar window gate, her hands grasping it. The woman’s arm reached out through the gate, and she wagged her finger. “Lemont, what is wrong with you, Boy? Didn’t you hear me calling?”

Out of the corner of Charlyn’s eye, to her right, a bundle of plump energy ran out of an empty lot and shimmied himself between two parked cars to stand on the street, waiting to cross. The frowning Lemont—with that face, he couldn’t be more than thirteen even if he was already about five-foot-six—lunged and retreated as the traffic whizzed by

without giving him an opening. What was he doing at eight-thirty in the morning during school vacation that his grandmother—at least that's who Charlyn assumed the old woman was—already wanted to track him down? Lemont fumbled across the street, not an athlete, definitely an uncool kid despite the retro Afro.

The old woman stayed at her window, watching the street, even after her grandson entered the building. Charlyn bit her lip and glanced at her BMW. Did Lemont's grandmother know something? Maybe it wasn't just teenage boys eyeing her BMW that Charlyn should worry about. Maybe a whole gang was on its way here. She fled down the steps. Her heel caught on a cracked granite step. She popped the heel out and nearly leapt toward her car. She beeped her remote and wrenched open the driver door. Peony petals dropped on the car seat as she threw in her purse and the bouquet.

So much for having tracked down those peonies to present as a gift. They had cost her a bundle this late in the season, but she'd never been inside St. Mark's when there weren't peonies in the altar vases, even if they were only silk. Now the flowers were falling apart.

She lunged into the car and slammed the door shut.

"Jesus!" She leaned back, breathing hard. What was she thinking, coming back here?

She put the car in gear and pulled the wheel to the left, ready to peel out when she found a traffic opening.

What she had been thinking was that a white woman dressed in expensive clothes could arrive in a BMW and walk unscathed into St. Mark's because Grampa's memory was still alive on this street.

Well, Grampa was gone. And, damn it, had all the buses and trucks on the south side decided to show up on this block? She kept glancing at her mirrors. Her heartbeat still hadn't settled down. She tried to pull out when the corner light changed, but was too late. A slew of cars had turned onto Prairie. Her cell phone rang in her purse. She ignored it. She couldn't go fishing for her phone, even if it was Matt calling about getting together tonight. She could just see herself—bending over to get her phone only to straighten up and find somebody pointing a gun at her and telling her to get out of the car.

Come on, traffic!

Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God?

Oh, yeah, Grampa would say that. Sin always had a price in his book.

“Hello, Mrs. Fontenaux,” a woman called out behind Charlyn.

She whirled toward the sound. A heavy-set, thirty-something white woman in a turquoise-and-yellow caftan stood not far from Charlyn's car.

That woman shouldn't be wearing those heavy silver-and-diamond dangling earrings—or were those crystals? Whatever they were, they brought too much attention to her fleshy jowl. But her curly black hair did look kind of nice with that Native-American turquoise-studded comb.

Charlyn hit the steering wheel with the flat of her hand. What the woman was wearing! So what? Where had she come from, was more like it. Charlyn had been watching the street like a hawk. She hadn't seen anybody park nearby.

“Morning, Reverend Regina,” Lemont's grandmother called out and waved her crooked hand through the window burglar gate.

The overweight woman waved back.

Reverend *Regina*? Charlyn sat up straight. Regg. Regina. *This* was Reverend Regg? Sweet Jesus, Grampa. A female minister! You must be about to pop a vein. Grampa could never get it into his head that women should be ordained. It was the sort of thing that made him hard to peg. Civil rights? Grampa marched in Selma. But female ordination? Oh no.

Never mind that Reverend Regg was female, what was a white *anything* doing buying a church in a depressed black neighborhood like this one? Charlyn had assumed that the purchasers of St. Mark's were black. Of course, they would be. In this neighborhood, what else would they be?

Reverend Regina approached Charlyn's car. The woman was right up against the door before she looked down and said, "Ms. Blake?"

Charlyn turned off the ignition and rolled the window down. "Yes, that's me. I was beginning to think you weren't going to show up."