

Blessed is the Busybody

CHAPTER ONE

Teddy was getting ready to bury the cat again, and old Moonpie, whose nine lives had been used up before he was fully weaned, was not protesting. Like me, Moonpie had given up hope that Teddy would quickly outgrow this phase of her development. Too old for protest but too feline for compliance, our silver tabby hung limply in my daughter's thin arms like a burlap sack loaded with buckshot. *Drag me off the picket line if you have to, Mr. Sheriff, but I'm not going to make it easy for you.*

"We've been over this," I told my solemn-faced child. "Just remember you can't bury a living cat. Even if you intend to dig him up again."

Teddy, tortoise-shell glasses pushed to the tip of her freckled nose, didn't blink.

"Well, I felt I had to say something," I added. Teddy's blank stare seemed to demand more. "Me being your mother, your moral compass, so to speak."

Ed came into the kitchen just in time to hear the last sentence. His blond hair was ruffled and his eyes heavy-lidded. My husband always appears faintly bemused, as if there's some universal truth just out of reach, and if he only concentrates hard enough he'll finally be able to grasp it.

On this late summer Saturday morning, in jeans and an ancient Harvard sweatshirt, Ed looked more like someone the Consolidated Community Church had hired to dispose of the trash than the newest minister in an unfortunate lineup. He opened the refrigerator and stared inside. I think he hoped the orange juice would come to him.

"If Teddy doesn't have her own moral compass by now, she never will," he said.

The scent of a theological discussion was hanging thickly in the air, but we had been married for twelve years, and I could waft away this particular disagreeable odor without breaking a sweat. I put my arm around his waist and kissed his hairy cheek. Ed was mid-beard, an annual sprouting of red-gold fuzz that only resolved itself when the hottest weather made a beard unbearable. Unfortunately it was almost September and the weather had not cooperated. My lips tingled.

I stepped back and nudged the refrigerator door closed. Ed didn't notice. Outside I could hear birds singing sweetly and tires squealing on the small street that ran in front of our house. Summer noises in a small Ohio town where nothing ever happens.

"There are six new kitty graves in the back yard," I said, "and the Women's Society board is coming over in an hour to decide if we need professional help pruning the lilacs and forsythia."

"Pruning shrubs requires a visit?"

"Be glad they aren't deciding whether to buy us a new toilet seat. That took two visits. One to determine if the cracks could be repaired, and one to vote on the correct shade of white."

"They're never as bad as you make them sound, Aggie."

"And you're never around when they visit. If they came at midnight, you'd climb out the window in your bathrobe and claim you were making a pastoral call."

He sent me the eyelash lowered, "too bad the kids are in the room" look that always turns my knees to jelly. "I could try to be as bad as you make me sound."

The kids were in the room, and I soldiered on. "Why don't you shepherd the ladies around the backyard? After you help Teddy fill in all her holes and change your shirt."

"There's nothing at the bottom of any of these holes I should know about?"

I shooed Teddy and Ed toward the door. Moonpie, still passively resisting in Teddy's arms, didn't even twitch his ragged tail. "You can give her some pointers on liturgy. Her funerals need work."

"I know all the words to 'Forward Through the Ages,'" Teddy told her father.

I figured Teddy's rendition would get them through the job of filling in the ersatz kitty graves. I looked forward to the day our six-year-old daughter felt comfortable enough with death and funerals to move on to weddings or christenings, although I doubted Moonpie would stand for a long white dress.

Ed has been the minister of the Consolidated Community Church of Emerald Springs, Ohio for a year. Just long enough, I know from experience, for the applause to die down and the whispers begin.

We've done this before, Ed and I. Twice before, to be exact. Once in a medium size church north of Boston, the spiritual home of Unitarian-Universalism--which is our chosen faith. Once in an urban church in Washington DC , with politicians and bureaucrats sitting on one side of the aisle and those who were suspicious of them on the other. That was my favorite, a culturally diverse, socially active congregation who stopped arguing frequently enough to perform a plethora of good works.

I was not pleased, after that stimulation, to come here to Emerald Springs, with its small, conservative congregation and buttoned down rural charm. I was not happy, but I came anyway. I'm a coward. I'd rather be a resentful woman than the wife of a resentful man.

As Ed taught our daughter to sing "Nearer, My God To Thee," I cleared off the kitchen table, stacking dishes in the sink and cereal boxes in the pantry. Then, on second thought, I took the dishes from the sink and

stacked those in the pantry, too, behind the cereal boxes. There was only so much time before the invasion, and it was better not to trumpet the fact that a casual housekeeper had taken up residence in the Women's Society's beloved parsonage.

Although the house was held out to me as a bonus when Ed accepted this call, it's really anything but. Neither Ed nor I have wealthy families, and between us we're still paying off student loans that should have put one of us through medical school and on the road to a lucrative career. So buying a house won't be an option until our daughters have finished college. Not unless there's a mortgage company that takes down payments in sixties Superhero comic books and Great Aunt Martha's willowware. We are stuck, it seems with "bonuses" like this drafty Dutch Colonial and all the dust we can vacuum.

The vast majority of our first floor is taken up by that cavernous space realtors call a "country" kitchen and interior decorators call a "design error." Right now the counters, which lay at opposite ends of a twenty foot space bisected by an eight foot farmhouse table, were littered with mixing bowls, cookie sheets and Aunt Martha's platter half filled with chocolate chip cookies.

I'd had the notion on waking that morning that I ought to serve refreshments as the Society board traipsed through our backyard discussing the perfect height and breadth of lilac bushes. Personally, I wanted my lilacs to look like an old growth forest. I didn't want a view of the church across the alley since it already took up too many of my waking moments. But I suspected that when the Society board sat in the pews on Sunday morning, they wanted a view of the parsonage.

Just in case I had decided on a whim that week to paint the old frame house flamingo pink.

I gave the remaining dough a few slaps with a wooden spoon and checked to be sure the oven was still on. Then I opened a bag of walnut pieces so that my guests would have choices.

I doubted my culinary diplomacy was going to make much of an impression. Not a woman in the Women's Society would serve anything as ordinary as Toll House cookies to a gathering of this kind. Of course there isn't a woman in the society who still has young children, or a job, or a husband who works at home and trails papers and books through the house with the intensity of Hansel scattering bread crumbs. Most of the members of the board are thoughtful and forgiving. I'm young, of a generation not known for gracious entertaining until Martha Stewart reared her expensively shorn head. They will drink my Hawaiian Punch and ask for the recipe.

With the exception of Gelsey Falowell.

The ghostly enigma known within the confines of the parsonage as Lady Falowell followed me from counter to counter as I dropped the nut-studded dough on baking sheets that mysteriously darkened with every use.

Lady Falowell's baking sheets probably blinded the careless observer. Her baking sheets had probably been handed down through generations by women whose mission on earth was to keep dust, dirt and baked-on grease from staining any of life's little surfaces. Aluminum monuments to the importance of appearances. If our Lady possesses anything as plebeian as a cookie sheet.

Gelsey Falowell is the chairperson of the Women's Society. In the odd year when she isn't the chairperson, she stands behind whatever pliant mannequin agreed to take the job and tells that unfortunate soul when to speak and how to move. Everyone knows Gelsey continues to run the Society, but if anyone minds, I'm none the wiser. In churches some traditions are so deeply ingrained that logic--a quality on which we religious liberals pride ourselves--is lost in the whorls and grooves.

To say that *everyone* likes Gelsey would be incorrect. To say that *anyone* loves her is probably incorrect, too. Gelsey is like the furniture that's inevitably chosen for a pastor's study. Tasteful, awesomely formal, and so uncomfortable that no one who experiences it first-hand ever wants to linger.

Gelsey is ageless. Sometimes in the minutes before I fall asleep at night I lay imaginary wagers. Seventy and not a year younger is my best guess, although I could be off by as much as a decade. She carries her tall body like a debutante and moves with the sure, rolling gait of a Tennessee Walker. Her hair is a striking blue-silver and her eyes are nearly the same, both set off by the deep tan of a lifetime of tennis matches. I've seen young men trail her body with their eyes, halting ever so momentarily on a tight little rear that never, in the Lady's purpose-filled life, sat idly.

Gelsey is a woman of power and inbred good taste.

Gelsey is a woman whose bad side is a steep slope that leads to personal oblivion.

Gelsey despises my husband.

Ed doesn't believe this last part yet, and pointing it out results in questions about childhood trust issues and whether I'm having a particularly bad time with PMS. It's not that my husband isn't astute, but rather that he chooses to use his healthy intellect on questions like: "Why are we here?" And my personal favorite: "If salvation is only granted to a few, then why aren't the rest of us whooping it up?"

It's not that Ed believes everyone is good. Theoretically, of course, he believes we are born that way. But Ed is practical and experienced enough to know that things begin to change the moment that first two AM bottle is late or that first diaper drips unnoticed. He's seen the best and worst of people, an unfortunate hazard of his job. That he chooses not to see the

truth about Gelsey is more a function of personal blinders than of a rosy world view.

If Gelsey doesn't like Ed, then his life is going to become unbearably complicated. And Ed accepted the call to this nondescript church in this small, nondescript college town in this nondescript quadrant of the state of Ohio because he yearned for silence and simplicity.

Ed was, is, and always will be a scholar and not a politician.

I shoved a pan of cookies in the smoking oven. Noise echoed from upstairs now, an annoyed, ambiguous bleating, followed by my daughter Deena's shuffling feet. At eleven our oldest daughter moves everywhere as if she's slogging through mud flats on her way to an execution.

Deena's heading toward adolescence before I've had time to read up on it.

After the fulsome prelude, her arrival was a disappointment. In her father's flannel shirt and last year's gym shorts, she looked almost normal, almost happy--in its purest state an emotion I didn't expect to witness again for perhaps another ten years.

She pulled out a chair, making certain to scrape the floor as she did, and flopped down on it, resting her chin in cupped hands. Since she hadn't yet spoken, I figured we were off to a favorable start.

Time rode sweetly by. Through the window I watched Teddy and her father filling in the final hole. Moonpie was nowhere to be seen. I hoped for the best.

"I don't know why I have to get up," Deena said at last.

"I'd offer you a cookie, but you have to eat something healthier first." I pulled the sheet out of the oven and shoved the final one in its place.

"I'm going to strangle Teddy when she gets inside. I had the pillow over my head, and I could still hear her singing that stupid hymn."

"You'll need strength. She's a wiry little thing."

“How come I had to get up? Those ladies aren’t going in my room.” She lifted her head and looked at me with impossibly blue eyes. “Are they?”

I shrugged. Frankly I was already suspicious the Society was conducting surreptitious inspections of the house when we were gone. A couple of times on returning from errands I’d found things out of place or once, odd impressions in my freshly waxed kitchen floor. At least if Gelsey and crew checked the house today, I’d be here for their tour.

Deena dropped her head again at my shrug. “Bogus. Why can’t my father work for a bank or something?”

I tried to imagine Ed investing the funds of helpless old ladies. Taking breaks as the market crashed around him to read new interpretations of Buber or the spiritual significance of cellular mitosis. I told her there was cereal in the cupboard.

“Nothing I’d eat.”

There was no chance Deena would starve. My softly padded daughter has a healthy respect for food and a disdain for Hollywood’s skinny glamour girls. I’m not sure where her positive self-image originates, but I’m sure not going to root around in her psyche to find out.

Deena got up, chair riding comfortably in the grooves in the floor, and went to the refrigerator. While I finished washing dishes she stood at the refrigerator and ate a carton of blueberry yogurt, half a banana and a chocolate chip muffin I’d salvaged from Sunday’s social hour. The minister’s salary might be small, but the parish house leftovers make up for a lot.

Deena closed the door and faced me. This month her strawberry blond hair falls straight to her shoulders. Hair, we take day by day, never knowing what the morrow might bring. Her skin is still smooth and clear, her cheeks plump and rose-tinted. Most of the time she is more interested in cleaning out stalls at a country horse farm than in her image in the mirror. This will change, I know, but for now I revel in her disinterest.

"Do I have to put on different clothes?"

I recognized a challenge when I heard one. "Not if you don't care what people think."

"Not people. The ladies group."

"Last time I looked they were people. And it's the Women's Society."

"Society women. Ladies." Her shrug said it all. "Is the witch flying here on her broom?"

This particular metaphor was the first of its kind, but no mystery.

"Mrs. Falowell. And can the cute stuff, okay?"

"She acts like a witch." Deena picked at the edge of a counter where the Wedgewood blue laminate was cracking. Children, I discovered long ago, make it their sworn mission to expose and highlight all flaws.

I couldn't blame my daughter for disliking Gelsey. They'd had an unfortunate run-in. Last month Lady Falowell had caught my daughter riding her bike across the church lawn in a short cut to the street. She had lectured Deena at length on the expense of grass seed and fertilizer and respect for church property. Deena, never easily intimidated, had suggested that the Women's Society buy her a horse to replace the bike. The horse could keep the precious grass mowed and fertilized. What a bargain.

Ed had heard every detail of that conversation from a number of different sources, all of them female and post-sixty. Luckily for us, most had been smiling as they recounted it.

I tried to calm the waters. "Sometimes when people live alone, they get stuck on certain things that seem silly to the rest of us."

"She doesn't have anything else going on in her life so she picks on kids." Deena had been a PK--preacher's kid--from birth. She knew the score.

Picks on kids. On ministers. On the partners of ministers.

"Something like that," I said.

"How long is she going to be here?"

As long as it took to drop hints that whatever we thought of the Society's plans for pruning our yard didn't matter. Because the Reverend Edward Wilcox, his wife Agate Sloan-Wilcox and their two obnoxiously precocious daughters wouldn't be living in Emerald Springs long enough to disapprove.

I scoured the counter and wondered why that thought made me sad. Emerald Springs and I are not simpatico. The town doesn't have a Chinese restaurant, for heaven's sake, never mind Thai, Salvadoran, Ethiopian. The movies that make their way to the local triplex in our one and only shopping mall routinely rate two thumbs down. Emerald Springs is a one-horse town--or would have been if Gelsey had acted on Deena's suggestion.

"I don't know how long she'll be here," I told my pouting daughter as I tried not to think what that pout would do to hormonal teenage boys in a year or two. "They're coming to look at the yard. And you'll be on your best behavior."

Any argument was forestalled by Teddy and Ed's return. Moonpie streaked up the stairs, probably not to be seen or eulogized for the rest of the day.

Teddy joined her sister. They weren't peas in a pod, my darling daughters, but they clearly had the same father. Ed's reddish blond hair, Ed's dark blue eyes. Teddy was thin and athletic, the bane of every little boy on her soccer team, and the lush Deena was on her way toward being a different sort of bane. But sisters they clearly were.

I, on the other hand, look only like myself. Ed once described me as "not quite." My eyes aren't quite brown, not quite hazel. My hair's not quite black. My body's not quite fashionably thin--I have boobs that make "dartless" clothing a joke.

I'm not quite pretty, although I suspect this never deterred a man, who only saw the boobs anyway. And in my opinion, this particular "not quite" was a blessing. I gave up trying to compete with other women once I realized I was not quite in the contest.

I developed other parts of myself. Parts that are clearly going to waste in Emerald Springs.

"I think I hear a car," Ed said.

In a rush I remembered everything I hadn't done. Taken out glasses and placed them on a tray. Filled them with ice. Opened cans of juice and poured them in a glass pitcher. Discovered the latest hiding place for our paper napkins. The board was early by more than ten minutes, but I should have expected that. Gelsey was the sort of woman who would try to catch Ed off guard.

"You greet, I'll finish here," I told my husband. "But change the shirt first."

He looked down as if trying to imagine what might be wrong. It said Harvard, after all. "Something with a collar," I prompted. "Something without writing on it."

He left for the master bedroom. I made my best guess on the napkins and celebrated a minor victory in the third drawer of an old maple cabinet in the corner. Deena grudgingly agreed to change her clothes, too, and left the room, and Teddy agreed to let the board in after they knocked. Even Gelsey would have trouble finding fault with our Teddy in her beribboned pigtails and favorite denim jumper.

Motherhood is the best training for doing everything in double time. I finished piling cookies on the platters, got out the ice trays and managed to open the juice cans. I was feeling on top of things, minimally in control of my destiny, when a scream from our front yard put an end to that.

"Teddy!" I knew the scream hadn't come from my daughter since it had clearly come from an older, hoarser throat, but I was determined to make sure the next one didn't come from Teddy, either.

I sprinted down our center hallway and arrived at the front door before Teddy could open it. Another scream followed the first. Louder and longer, ending on a wail that indicated another would begin as soon as the screamer drew a breath.

"Go upstairs and get your Daddy," I told Teddy, barring the door with my body. I wasn't sure we needed Ed, but I was sure my daughter shouldn't be a party to whatever had happened outside.

Curious Teddy was less sure, trying to peer around my body and out the sidelights. Hands firmly on her shoulders, I turned her and sent her off to get her father. Teddy was on the landing and out of sight before I pulled open the heavy front door. A woman lay across our wide front porch, staring glassy-eyed at the sky-blue tongue and groove ceiling.

It only took one horrified glance to see she was badly in need of one of Teddy's funerals. And clothing, for that matter. Except for the tattoo of a cobra with a skeleton's head curving around one ample breast, the dead woman, a hard-used blonde, was stark naked.