

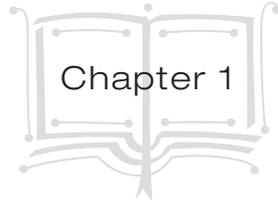


a novel

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Heavens to Betsy





I swear this is my last wedding. All around me candles blaze, and the scent of roses overpowers the congregation. Men in black tie. Women in frothy hats. The vaulted ceiling of the church rises above me, its mahogany beams arching toward heaven. I drink in the scene, lingering over every detail, and my knees quiver. A deep breath does little to calm my nerves. There won't be any more after this.

Next to me, Dan stands tall and handsome. His tux fits perfectly—no sign of the slight paunch his usual T-shirts reveal. The organ swells as the pipes ring out the last notes of “The Wedding March.”

It's the lifetime commitment I've always wanted. A deep connection through all the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” No more loneliness. No isolation. I look up to keep the tears from flowing. No time to cry.

I open my officiant's book and begin. “Dearly beloved...”

These are magic words, an incantation of love that required months of intense preparation on the part of the bride and groom. Dress fittings, repeated trimming of the guest list, bridesmaid negotiations, nagging Dan to pick his groomsmen. And that little trifle known as the ceremony.

“Who brings this woman to be married to this man?” I ask.

Stacy's father beams, despite the stiffness of his stance. Beside him, Stacy glows beneath the thin cover of her veil.

“Her mother and I,” her father replies, just as we rehearsed.

Fathers of the bride come in three types. The first one’s angry about the cost of the pageantry. The second is relieved that his daughter is now another man’s problem. The third is shattered to part with his little princess. Stacy’s father is the third kind, lucky girl. Her dad lifts her veil back over her head, murmurs words of love in her ear, and places her hand in Dan’s.

Now it’s just the two of them in front of all these people. And me, of course. The minister.

“Dan, will you have Stacy to be your wife, to live with her in holy matrimony? If so, please say, ‘I will.’”

The Declaration of Intent always comes as a surprise to grooms. All of them look shocked, as if what they’re doing at the front of the church in their penguin suits has come as a complete surprise. We’re not to the real vows yet; just this spot check to make sure both parties are willing. It’s the place where we used to ask if anyone objected to the marriage, but given what I know about Dan and Stacy’s extended families, we decided to leave that part out. The ice sculptures at the reception would melt by the time we sorted out all the protests likely to be lodged.

“Ar...will.” Dan echoes me as if a boa constrictor has wrapped itself around his throat. Stacy beams as if he’d shouted his vow from a rooftop. I ask her the same question, and she starts to cry. Since we’re not even to the vows yet, I save the tissue tucked in my book. I only hope she doesn’t forget herself and use the back of her hand to wipe her eyes. I can already see she’s not wearing waterproof mascara, and I’ve had more than one raccoon bride in the past few years.

“Marriage is a gift from God, bestowed upon us for the mutual benefit of men and women...” The familiar words roll off my tongue,

even as they pierce my heart. Will I ever be on the receiving end of the wedding vows? A thirty-year-old, single woman minister lives in dating Siberia. The last time I went out with a man, he turned out to have a serious criminal record.

Note to Self: Never let one of your congregants fix you up with her grandson who “just needs the love of a good woman.” The wayward grandson would have been happy to pursue a long-term relationship with my credit rating—I saw his eyes lusting after my American Express when I opened my purse to pay for dinner—but I’m not that desperate. Yet.

“Dan and Stacy, join hands and, with your promises, commit yourselves as husband and wife.”

Does any couple really know what they’re saying when they parrot back the words I read from my book?

“For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer...”

How will a couple who couldn’t agree whether to have lamb or fish at the reception navigate the complexities of married life? Sure, I see their joy today. But in five years, maybe ten, they’ll be in some other minister’s office wondering where it all went wrong. And what will that preacher tell them? That it all started with Lamb v. Fish?

“As a sign of their commitment, Dan and Stacy have chosen to exchange rings. The wedding ring is an enduring symbol of the promises they make this day...”

The best man and maid of honor fumble for the rings, and I pray over those golden bands. I pray hard because my parents taught me how difficult it can be to keep vows made in a church. Somewhere between the custody battle, the divorce settlement, and my new half brothers, my parents’ vows crumbled.

Now comes the tricky part of the service. The congregation holds

its breath while the bride and groom light the unity candle. Even though I always check the wick before the service, I'm never confident this part will go well. At the first wedding I performed, the unity candle was a no-go. The couple divorced within a year, and when I saw the bride in the grocery store, she blamed it on the wick. I myself would have blamed it on the fact that the groom and maid of honor had yet to conclude their extracurricular relationship when the wedding took place. Fortunately, the candle behaves itself today as the bride's cousin warbles "Endless Love," so often sung at weddings in spite of the fact that it's an ode to a scorned teenager-turned-stalker who ends up burning down his girlfriend's house.

"Inasmuch as you have exchanged vows and rings this day, I proclaim you to be husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no one separate. Dan, you may kiss your bride."

The groom swoops in and proceeds to wash his new wife's tonsils. Funny, I'd pegged him for a peck-on-the-lips man, given that he ultimately lost *Lamb v. Fish*. For this brief moment, though, after weeks of having his wishes ignored and his preferences shunned, he takes charge.

The kiss starts to take on biblical proportions. People giggle, then squirm. Finally, the groom comes up for air, and I present the newlyweds to the congregation. The organ bursts forth, and they're off, trailed by assorted bridesmaids and groomsmen and two rambunctious flower girls. Privately I say another prayer, borne of thanks and worry, and then follow the wedding party down the aisle.

At the back of the church, the wedding coordinator gives me two thumbs up. Then she turns to hustle the bride and groom out to the Garden of Prayer for a quick photo op. Her assistant will gather the

congregation outside the doors of the church for the staged departure. The bride and groom will dash for the limo while the guests release live butterflies from little triangular boxes. I look up at the fifteen-foot doors of the sanctuary and wonder how many of the butterflies will find their way inside to entertain worshipers during tomorrow morning's service.

I backtrack up the side aisle to the sacristy, where I stow my clerical robe and pull my purse out of its cubbyhole. That empty feeling in the pit of my stomach has become a regular visitor, and once again it makes itself known. Another wedding reception solo. But this is the last one. In six months I'll be free. I've learned the hard way that I don't belong in the ministry.



If I ever do find Mr. Right, I will insist on having my wedding reception at the Hermitage Hotel. It's all marble and elegance, two things that can be scarce commodities in Nashville. Even the replica of the Parthenon in Centennial Park isn't the real deal. It's made out of the same little pebbles and concrete as my grandparents' driveway.

The Hermitage, though, feels like a bit of European elegance plopped down amid country-music staples like the Ryman Auditorium and Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. I'm not ten steps inside the door before a black-tied waiter appears at my elbow to offer me a glass of wine. I decline, because that innocent little glass is two points on Weight Watchers. Besides, if I'm going to splurge, it will be on the newest wedding-reception phenomenon: the chocolate fountain.

Dan and Stacy are holding court in the lobby, and the guests are

mobbing the buffet tables. I know almost everyone here, and yet I stand awkwardly on the fringes, trying to decide whether to join the sea of people around the hot hors d'oeuvre or elbow my way through to the bride and groom.

There are more delights to look forward to, of course. Eventually we'll move into the ballroom for dancing, and then all of my elderly parishioners will politely ask me to fox-trot around the hardwood. When I interviewed with my ordination committee, the white-haired men who held my future in their hands informed me that they were delighted I wasn't one of those bitter feminists. They approved me within minutes. I might not be bitter, but I definitely had unchristian thoughts about those guys. I still do from time to time, when I'm not holding the hands of men just like them as the orderlies wheel them into surgery, my not-a-bitter-feminist voice assuring them they're going to make it through the bypass/transplant/prostate procedure.

Someone materializes at my shoulder, and I jump.

"Take it easy, Blessing. People will think you're up to something."

"David!" I swat him on the shoulder. The Reverend Dr. David Swenson. Nemesis. Competitor. Confidant. Friend. The only brown-haired, brown-eyed Lutheran preacher I know, thanks to his Italian mother.

"Nice job on the nuptials. Do they let the associate do many weddings over there at Church of the Sheep?"

I'd like to correct David for twisting the name of my church, but when you're ready to resign, you don't feel like defending the people who've driven you to it. "I'm a last-minute fill-in for Dr. Black. After this, it's strictly Christian-education programs for me."

I haven't actually told David about my decision to leave the ministry. He's not going to like it. "What are you doing here?"

“Stacy’s folks are parishioners.”

“Well, that explains a lot.”

He swats me back, and I laugh for the first time today. “That’s assault, Swenson.”

He grins. “So have me arrested.”

“I will when you hit the dance floor. Your waltz is a criminal offense in ten states.”

“Hey! Watch it, girl. I may be the only guy under seventy who asks you to dance.”

This statement is soberingly true, so I change the subject.

“How’d your date go last night?”

David snorts and snags a glass of water from a passing waiter. “Great, until I was forced to reveal what I do for a living.”

I wince because I’ve been there myself. “And after that?”

“She kept looking at me like I was a freak of nature.”

“And your point is?”

“Should I hit you again?”

Mutual abuse has always been the cornerstone of our relationship.

When I fled my demonic little country church six months ago, I limped into Nashville, seeking shelter in the relative anonymity of being an associate minister of a large congregation. I was delighted to again be in the same city as David. We’d been friends in divinity school here at Vanderbilt, but in the intervening years, our jobs had taken us in opposite directions.

“Want to hit the buffet?” David is well over six feet tall and too thin for his own good. He could eat the entire kitchen of the Hermitage and not gain an ounce. I resent that.

“No swiping the shrimp off my plate,” I warn, based on my past experience of dining with him.

“Would I do that?” His smile is as wide and open as the sky.
“Oh yes you would, Dr. Swenson. In a heartbeat.”



David's words about my dance card prove depressingly prophetic. He's the only guy who steers me around the dance floor without my worrying that he might have a stroke from the effort. Frail Mr. Benson breaks my heart, telling me how much he misses his wife. I did her funeral three months ago when Dr. Black was on vacation, and poor Mr. Benson still hasn't stopped thanking me for my eulogy. The dutiful Mr. Sanderson whisks me away under orders from the formidable Mrs. Sanderson and remains mute throughout the four-minute ordeal. And the retired Reverend Squires is, as always, an energetic polka partner.

When David looms over me a second time, I'm grateful for the reprieve.

“Dance?” He extends his hand and winks at me. Unfortunately, Edna Tompkins sees that wink. She is the greatest gossip at the Church of the Shepherd (a title for which she beat out some rather gifted competition). I foresee my name being bandied about during the next meeting of the ladies auxiliary. They will not approve. David and his congregation are suspect because they only celebrate Communion once a quarter. At the Church of the Shepherd, we're weekly folks. I wonder if it has occurred to Mrs. Tompkins and Company that maybe we're just bigger sinners and need more forgiveness.

Here's what they don't tell you in divinity school: You will fall in love with your parishioners, even the snarky ones. Professors tell you

how you'll have to teach your congregation, how you'll have to guide them and correct them and make sure they think like theology professors. But they don't tell you those folks sitting in the pew will worm their way into your heart. They don't teach you not to look at the mothers when you baptize their children, because then you'll start crying too, and there's already enough water involved. They never say what you should do in the middle of a eulogy when your throat chokes up so tightly you can't get the words out because you're already missing the bear hugs you used to receive from the deceased.

They also don't tell you what to do when a congregation turns on you. How to respond to the people who parade through your office with lengthy lists of complaints about your performance, when what they really don't like is your gender. I hadn't served in my first church for very long before I realized a group of my parishioners was out to get me. (Hey, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.) These folks didn't just dislike me; they hated me. Scathing verbal attacks, unsigned letters, secret meetings—Christian charity had fled for warmer climes than that icy congregation offered.

Six months after my departure and hundreds of miles away, I'm still licking my wounds. So when David offers me his hand, I take it gladly. Moments of respite are few and far between in this business, and David is one person who would understand exactly what I'm feeling—if I had the courage to tell him.

"Do you think they're laying odds yet?" He smiles over my shoulder at the interested audience our two-step has garnered.

I want to laugh, but something about this wedding has gotten under my skin, made me feel vulnerable. I came to Nashville to escape the loneliness and conflict of being a single woman minister in a small

town. Yet except for David and LaRonda, my best girlfriend from my divinity school days, I've had little success in widening my social circle. It doesn't help that Valentine's Day is next week.

"I think my parishioners have moved beyond betting on my love life. They've resorted to prayer." The moment I say those words, I want to take them back. The one thing I like about David is that I never get any pity from him. Only good-natured ribbing, and lots of it.

He twirls me around and then smoothly guides me across the floor. "I wouldn't worry until they start organizing twenty-four-hour prayer vigils."

I laugh. I always do when I'm around David. I laugh a lot in general, too. I think it's one of the better aspects of my personality, although I haven't had much opportunity for laughter in the past few years. No one thinks you have a sense of humor if you're a preacher. They refuse to tell you the risqué jokes. Conversation grinds to a halt at your approach. This line of thinking is too depressing to pursue while dancing with David, so I change the subject.

"What's new at St. Helga's?" It's been a tough year for the parishioners since a tornado ripped through the sanctuary. They've been worshiping in their activity center for months while the debris is being cleared away. Currently, David is refereeing the design of the new "worship center"—apparently sanctuaries are passé.

He grimaces. "The vestry has formed a subcommittee to hold listening conferences about rebuilding."

"I'm in prayer for you, friend." We shake our heads over this development. Church committees move at glacial speed. Listening conferences (also known as gripe sessions) progress at the speed of

geological epochs. At this rate David will be preaching from underneath a basketball goal for the next twenty years.

He shrugs. "This too shall pass."

I admire his stoicism. He twirls me around at the far end of the dance floor. "So, what are you up to after this?"

I sigh. "Quality time with my remote control. A pizza with everything if I'm feeling truly dangerous."

"How about a movie?"

I'm immediately on my guard. Action flicks are David's secret vice, his guilty pleasure. "Not if it involves Schwarzenegger, Vin Diesel, or Will Smith."

"What do you suggest? Romantic comedy?"

"How about *Pride and Prejudice* meets *The Matrix*?"

Laughing with David is *my* guilty pleasure. And one I sorely need tonight.

"Okay," I concede. "I'll go watch a couple of testosterone-challenged men blow things up—if you're paying."

"Deal." He grins, and I'm reminded that he is, in fact, a nice-looking guy. I could do worse on a Saturday night.

But shouldn't I be doing better than a movie with an old friend? What if it's not the clerical robe? What if it's me?

I lower my eyebrows and shoot him a meaningful look. "Let's be clear about one thing. If you want popcorn, order your own. No mooching off me."

David spins me around and dips me until I'm so off balance I expect to feel my head make contact with the parquet. He snaps me back up, and I'm pressed against his chest. He grins down at me—half boy, half man. "Would I do that?"

“Hah!” I push him away. “Of course you would. And I have the scars to prove it.”

“Reverend Blessing, you’re a harsh woman.”

“Yeah, well, don’t you forget it.”

His expression suddenly sobers. “Believe me, I won’t.”

Ouch. Where did that come from?

“David?”

But in the blink of an eye, he’s his usual self. He playfully punches me on the arm. “Gotcha.”

“Mooch.”

“Shrew.”

“Shall we?”

“But of course.”

He offers me his arm, and we make our way off the dance floor. A quick good-bye to the bride and groom, and we’re tumbling out of the hotel into the cold February night. Two preachers trying to pass for normal people.