

Five free advance chapters of

# The Awful Mess

A LOVE STORY

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Maybe a Cat

IT WAS THE WARMEST DAY since she'd arrived in Lawson, New Hampshire, a sunny day in March, and the Took River was swollen with melted snow. For the first time since Mary had begun these daily walks, there were other people clustered on the Main Street Bridge to watch the river. Uncomfortably conscious that she knew none of them, she considered hurrying past, but told herself that it would be ridiculous and stopped at her usual spot at the bridge railing.

"Impressive, isn't it?" a man said, and settled in next to her at the railing.

It was hard not to stare at him in appalled fascination. His face was extraordinarily craggy – almost like a gargoyle, or Abraham Lincoln at his most depressed. The rest was not bad. He had a healthy shock of salt and pepper hair, large grey eyes, a friendly smile. The French had a term for it, she thought. *Laid-beau*, ugly-beautiful.

He leaned towards her and lowered his voice to a

compassionate murmur. “Forgive me for intruding – but would you, by any chance, need some help with food?”

She blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Sorry. I should have started with introductions. I’m Arthur Tennant, the rector of St. Andrew’s. Just there.” He gestured up at the old Episcopal church that sat overlooking the Main Street Bridge, then stuck out his hand. Mary shook it automatically. She hadn’t realized he was a cleric. His collar, if there was one, was covered by a scarf.

“And you’re Mary Bellamy, of course. Everyone in town knows about the young divorcée from Boston who bought Miss Lacey’s house. I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just – well, it seems to me you’ve gotten rather thin, and we all know how expensive a new roof can be. I thought I’d take the opportunity to check. Because we can help, you know.”

It was true, she had a new roof. And she’d lost some weight. But surely it crossed some sort of boundary for him to admit he’d noticed it, even if he was a priest? “I’m fine, thank you. I don’t need help.”

“I’ve been meaning to call on you at home, actually. But since you haven’t shown up in any of the churches, I suspected you wouldn’t particularly welcome it.”

“No, that’s true, I’m a heathen.”

He grinned. “Heathen? Well, there aren’t that many churchgoers these days, you know, even in a little town like this. That’s probably why my colleagues and I keep such close tabs on newcomers. We’re all hoping it might

be somebody new for our own congregation—”

“I’m Catholic, actually.”

“Ah, a Catholic heathen. St. Mary’s would be the church you’re not attending, then. But you would certainly still be welcome at St. Andrew’s. We have quite a few Catholics in our congregation, actually. Some heathens, too, I expect.”

“Well, it was very nice to meet you, Father, but I’m afraid I need to get back to work...”

“Yes, yes, of course.” He raised his voice to hold her there a moment longer. “I’m in the book if you need any help or just want someone to talk to! Arthur Tennant. Please don’t hesitate. It can be very lonely being new in a small town.”

“But I’m not lonely at all.” It was, in fact, a tremendous relief to be alone. But he couldn’t know that.

As she walked up the hill, she had the disagreeable feeling that she was being watched.

During the divorce, Mary had comforted herself with a fantasy of living in a quaint little house in charming little Lawson. She would have a beautiful and affectionate ginger tabby (her ex was allergic), take long walks, and listen to National Public Radio whenever she wanted. The yellow winter sun would stream onto her kitchen table and illuminate a vase of wild flowers which, if she had thought this through, could not have come from the nearby field covered in a foot of snow, but whatever. The fantasy had sustained her. Reality was quite differ-

ent, of course – the house was draftier than she had hoped, even a little dank, and the winter sun never made it onto her little kitchen table. And flowers for the supermarket weren't really in her budget. But it was fine. She was fine.

It was true she had lost weight, but she was hardly starving. Mary put the odd encounter out of her mind and sat down to work. She liked to think she had been granted permission to work from home because she was a talented editor who could take garbled manuscripts turned in by deranged authors and gently and diplomatically shape them into books. The manuscript she was working on right now, though, was for a book called *Healing Yourself with Amazing Supermarket Cures*, and it had obviously been written by a hack copywriter claiming to be a medical expert instead of the usual sincere nutcase on a crusade to save the world with wheat berries and flaxseed. While this meant it was remarkably easy to edit, Mary suspected the author had simply made up his anecdotes of miraculous recoveries, especially when she got to Chapter Six (“Amazing Cures in the Pet Food Aisle!”) and read about catnip tea curing a couple's infertility.

Should she challenge this? Or would that simply betray her sensitivity on the subject? Her boss had made it clear that this was an important title for which Shanley was projecting strong sales. Mary was uncomfortably conscious that in having been allowed to work from home, she had been granted a favor.

As she sat there contemplating the mysteries of catnip, it occurred to her that she hadn't yet acquired the ginger tabby from her fantasy. A nice warm cat in her lap would do nicely about now. And if somehow, beyond her control, her face was betraying something that inspired strangers to inquire after her wellbeing, perhaps having another living creature in the house would help.

At the shelter they didn't have any ginger tabbies like the one she'd imagined, but they did have a sweet-looking black cat that meowed in a personable and not overly needy way. According to the tag, he was named Bob. That seemed like more of a name for a shoe salesman than a cat, really, but there was no one she needed to impress with a clever pet name.

"Do you have any other pets at home?" the clerk asked. She was a tall, brisk woman who wore her hair in a practical silver bob and kept her reading glasses on a chain around her neck. Mary didn't need glasses yet, and still wore her hair long, but she could imagine looking like this in not so many years. A brisk, efficient, cheerful, independent woman – this was exactly the life Mary was aiming for.

"No, no other pets."

"Children?"

"No." Comforting, really, that someone in town didn't already know this.

"Well, you'll have no problems, then. He's even been

declawed. You don't plan to let him out, do you?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"No, since he's de-clawed. And Hill Street is murder on cats, I'm afraid."

"Okay, I'll keep him in," she agreed. The woman asked her to wait while she went to fetch a carrier. All the cats of Mary's youth had either died under the wheels of South Boston traffic or disappeared into the night. It might be nice to have the same one around for more than a year or two.

"I live near you, you know," the woman said when she returned. "Agnes had such a beautiful garden in front of the house there, before she got too frail. Do you garden?"

"A little."

"You'll find a wonderful perennial garden under all those weeds if you work at it this spring. If you need help telling what's what, just look me up. Carrie Woodbury at Number Four, Old Street Road. I'd be happy to help you out, especially if you could let me have some divisions from her peonies. It was really something to look at, her garden. Shame how it went to ruin when she couldn't take care of it anymore, but she wouldn't accept help. Such a pity."

Mary couldn't tell if the pity was for Agnes Lacey or her garden. "Well, thank you." She hoisted Bob in his cardboard carrier.



"You take care, now. Hill Street can be murder on cars, too, in bad weather. They say there's a big one coming in tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right – thanks." Bob's meows grew more alarmed as Mary neared the door. She knew about the forecasted Nor'easter, but now she needed to stock up on supplies for Bob before it arrived. It had been months since she had needed to worry about taking care of anybody other than herself.

"Got a new cat?" the woman at the market asked.

"Yes," Mary said, with a tight smile. She was probably spending twice what she should for the single flimsy plastic litter tray she'd found. Lawson General Market dealt with its limited display space by stocking only one or two of almost anything anyone could ever need.

"I'm a dog person myself."

"Dogs are nice," Mary said diplomatically.

"But they're a lot of work, especially if you live on your own."

"You live on your own?"

"Oh God no."

The cat spent the evening slinking around the house, nosing into nooks and crannies, eventually disappearing. When Mary woke up in the morning, however, he was lying next to her on the bed, purring.

"It's nice to have someone in my bed, Bob."

Bob stretched, exposing his belly.

"And you're a slut!" Mary said happily, and petted him. This would do fine, she thought. This was all she needed.

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Ice Storm

THE NEXT AFTERNOON when it started snowing and she still hadn't gotten in her daily walk, Mary added an extra layer of waterproofing and headed out.

Not counting the state highway that skirted the center of town, Lawson proper had grown up along the convergence of two rivers that ran between the area's low hills. Mary's section of town was not densely populated because a quiet religious retreat of some kind owned most of the property behind the string of modest houses on Hill Street. There were trails crisscrossing their woods and a complete absence of NO TRESPASSING signs, and she had gotten into the habit of taking a wooded path down the hill to town instead of the sidewalk because it was pretty and private.

She was about halfway through the woods when the silent snow changed over to the muted rattle of freezing rain. Undeterred, she walked down to the library to choose some books for the weekend. Mary had nearly

exhausted the Lawson Free Library's section on home décor and still hadn't decided how to paint her interiors. By now Roger would have hung drywall over the cracked plaster and painted everything white. She didn't miss his color palette, but she did miss the free labor and the way Roger just barged ahead and got things done. Every time she thought she had decided on a color, she began to doubt herself: what if that sunny yellow turned bilious once it was up on the wall?

She moved from the books to the magazines, looking for articles on wall color and flea market furniture finds. Agnes Lacey's heirs had thrown her old furniture in with the deal, happy to avoid the chore of clearing it out. Mary knew most of it would have to go, especially after smelling it for two months, but in the meantime she had somewhere to sit and sleep. She also hoped some of it might be salvageable with paint or stain or upholstery. The days were gone when she could go out and buy a new sofa or even a bedspread without a second thought.

She jumped when the librarian tapped her on the shoulder. "The town just called, dear, and said we'd better shut down. It's getting slick out there."

Mary checked her watch. Just past four. She got into her winter gear while the librarian waited anxiously by the door. "Careful, now!" she clucked, when Mary stepped out and almost slid off her feet. In the time she'd been inside, the sky had darkened, the wind had picked up, and a thin, treacherous layer of ice had coated every surface.

Occasionally struggling for balance, Mary navigated the sidewalk and crossed the bridge. She paused a moment to admire the grey, pounding river before heading down River Road to the entrance of the forest path. Under the trees the footing was sure to be easier. But when she got there, the trees were groaning in the wind and the path into the woods looked ominously dark. She heard a sharp crack and a bough landed heavily on the path ahead, showering the ground with broken twigs and tiny slivers of ice. She backed away. She'd be safer on the street – at least there someone might notice if a tree fell on her.

She tramped back along River Road, crunching her way along snowy lawns where she could, the drumbeat of the freezing rain on her outerwear punctuated by choruses of screaming crows.

Hill Street was where it got steep. She caught herself from slipping a couple of times before she got to the long stretch in front of St. Andrews church and rectory. No doubt many people considered the sooty chiseled granite and Romanesque arches of the church elegant, but it reminded Mary of intransigent state agencies and bleak college administration buildings. A prickly barberry hedge along the sidewalk blocked better footing on the lawn, and there was no sidewalk at all on the other side of the street, just an impenetrable wall of evergreens, as if whoever lived there didn't care to admire the building either. She stepped into the road to see if that would be better, but had to scramble out again to

make way for a car that went fishtailing up the hill like a drunk in an alley.

She had stopped to assess her chances of actually making it the rest of the way up when she saw another car slowly descend, blinking for a left turn into the rectory, just ahead. As she watched, it gently slid downhill out of its turn and landed with a *whump* in the hedge.

She instinctively stepped forward to help and her feet slipped out from under her. She landed jarringly on her tailbone and thumped the back of her head on the sidewalk. She lay there, stunned, wincing up at the clouds while freezing rain peppered her face, listening to the excited cries of the crows. She knew she should move, but for the moment it seemed easier to just lie there. Her tailbone throbbed and her head hurt in a thick, blocky kind of way.

She heard a car door slam and then someone was looming over her. Arthur Tennant. Well, it was his church.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

There was a pause. "Can you get up?"

"Sure." She took a breath, then rolled over onto her hands and knees.

"Better come in the house," he said, extending his hand.

She looked up at him, then over at the rectory a good hundred feet away, and accepted his help getting up. On her feet again, she brushed herself off and said, "Thank

you, but I'm on my way home."

"Nonsense, you'll never make it. Come in the house."

She sighed, eyeing the glazed sidewalk, not eager to depend on the kindness of a man who was likely to examine her even more carefully than he already had for signs of malnutrition or potential choir membership.

"Come on," Tennant said firmly, gripping her arm. "There's a break in the hedge there, and then we can go across the lawn."

"What about your car?" It was still sitting cockeyed at the entrance to the driveway, barely off the road, flattening the end of the hedge.

"Not much point trying to move it now. With any luck it will ruin the hedge and we can finally rip the damned thing out."

They crossed the lawn and he ushered her into a mud room, where he helped her get out of her gear, and then into a large, steamy kitchen. "Have a seat," he said, and gestured to an old kitchen table. She was relieved to find a cushion on the bench that served as seating and eased herself down.

He bustled around gathering and measuring ingredients into a pot. "The perfect afternoon for hot cocoa, I'd say. What were you doing out in this weather?"

"Walking home from the library."

"You're quite the determined walker. I see you all over town."

"What were you doing out in this weather?"

"One of my parishioners is in the hospital." He stirred

his mixture and adjusted the heat. "They thought she was going, but she rallied."

"You must be relieved."

"Well, she sinks and rallies pretty regularly." To her surprise, he prepared three mugs, not two. He placed one before her and said, "Drink up. I'll be back in a minute." Then he took one of the others and left the room.

She'd finished only a few sips when he returned. "My wife enjoys hot cocoa, too," he explained.

Ah, that was right. Episcopal priests could marry. "Will she be joining us?" Mary asked. The wife of a priest might be a formidable woman.

"I doubt it. She seldom feels up to company."

"She's ill?"

His air of authority faded for a moment. "Yes." The moment strung out between them and she felt he was considering telling her more. But then he said, "So how are you finding things? It must be lonely, being so new in town."

"No, not at all." He sure liked that lonely idea. Mary saw no point in starting to feel lonely only a few months into what she expected to be a lifetime of solitude. After a moment, she added, "I have a cat."

He smiled as if this amused him.

"So, how do you suppose I can get home?"

"Once they get some salt on the hill here, I can try to give you a ride in the car. Worst case, this is supposed to turn to back to rain tomorrow."



"Tomorrow!"

"Don't worry, we have plenty of room."

"But – I need to feed my cat..."

"Oh, I'm sure a cat can survive missing a meal or two."

Mary winced and tried to find a more comfortable position. Her tail bone was throbbing and the ache in her head was intensifying. "Do you have any Tylenol?"

"Oh, of course! How thoughtless of me!" He left and returned to place several pill bottles in front of her. "Take your pick," he said, and handed her a glass of water. He sat down on the opposite bench. "My last church was in South Carolina. When we moved up here, I wasn't used to ice and fell on my backside in front of the congregation my very first week. There was the most awful silence. I just kept imagining the headline: *Priest falls down on job.*"

Mary smiled.

"No children?" he asked.

"No." She said it as curtly as she could.

"Perhaps a good thing, considering the divorce."

He either hadn't heard the warning in her tone or had decided to ignore it. "If I'd managed to have them, I might not be divorced."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That can be very painful. We have a couple in the parish..."

"You have children?" Mary interrupted. She'd heard more than enough stories of people in similar straits. It didn't help that so many of those stories ended with *they*

*adopted a lovely baby girl from China or now they have twins, or her least favorite – as soon as they adopted a baby she got pregnant, just like that!*

“We have a 16-year-old daughter who’s away at boarding school right now – Lucy.” He looked down. “We also had a boy, Matthew, who died when he was nine.”

*Good God.* “I’m so sorry.”

“It was some time ago now. Not long after we arrived here. He had an undiagnosed heart defect.”

“You must have been devastated.”

“Well yes, of course.” He drained his mug and stood up. “I’d better get dinner started.” He began to pull items from the cupboards and the refrigerator. “Is chicken all right?”

“Yes, fine. This is very kind of you.”

“Not at all – it will be a pleasure to have company.”

“Doesn’t your wife eat dinner with you?”

“Not very often.”

“Then she’s an invalid?”

“I suppose. That sounds rather romantic, doesn’t it?” He dredged chicken in flour. “The diagnosis has been a tad elusive. One doctor thought she had MS, but we were able to rule that out. Another diagnosed Epstein-Barr. Fibromyalgia has been floated about.”

“Does she make it to church?”

“Oh no. Not in years.” He whacked a clove of garlic flat with the side of a cleaver.

When dinner was ready, Arthur took a tray upstairs, after inviting Mary to help herself from the skillet of chicken breasts in a rather nice lemon caper sauce. She peered out the window. The wind was howling as fiercely as ever and frozen rain crackled against the panes.

He came down looking a bit peevish, served himself a plate, and sat down with a quick prayer: "For what we are about to receive, Lord, let us be truly grateful."

How annoying it must be to have to be grateful all the time to a God who has treated one so badly. This man's losses would have pushed her completely into atheism, or worse. Perhaps she would have started worshipping golden idols, just because God was supposed to really hate that.

"This is delicious," she said, and he smiled. He had a nice smile. It mitigated the cragginess. She wondered whether a married Episcopal priest was a figure of fantasy to the ladies of his congregation the way the younger Catholic priests had always been at her own childhood church.

"I'm relieved to see you eating. There's a young woman in my congregation who has had been battling anorexia for years. I thought perhaps –"

"I'm not anorexic. I just forget to eat."

"Forget? Why? Are you depressed?"

"No. It just hardly seems worth the effort to prepare meals for just one person."

"How long ago did you say you were divorced?"

"Two months. But we were separated for several months before that."

He frowned. "Most people need time to recover from that kind of loss."

"Maybe it wasn't that much of a loss." She coughed uncomfortably.

"How long were you married?"

"Eight years."

"You don't see that as a loss?"

"Well, the years, maybe." Her *youth*, she thought, but didn't say – he would feel obligated to tell her she was still young. "At this point I'm just glad to be out of it."

"You know, Lawson has a rather well-organized ecumenical counseling service which is completely free—"

"I'm sorry, but I wouldn't be caught dead doing anything ecumenical."

"Why ever not?"

"I already told you – I'm not religious."

"I don't believe there's any great expectation that you will actually be religious," he said, but then he looked uncertain. "Well, it depends on the particular counselor, I suppose. If you don't mind me asking, why aren't you religious? Are you mad at God? Angry with the church?"

"I just don't see any rational reason to believe there is a God."

He regarded her with an expression she couldn't quite fathom – speculation, perhaps? "Pity. Faith can be a comfort."

"I can comfort myself just fine." It sounded petulant even to her, but she wasn't the one who'd turned this into a religious discussion.

"How exactly do you do that? I'd like to know."

Mary hesitated. She had never mastered the art of ignoring questions she didn't want to answer. "Well. I take walks. I listen to music. I pet my cat..."

"Walking, music, cat," he murmured. "And this does it for you?"

"It's enough. I don't have to wonder when the next bad thing will happen anymore. Living alone is paradise compared to what I had before." She looked away, embarrassed to realize she was on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry."

Now he was probably going to hit her up with God's redeeming grace. But all he said was, "I was being far too intrusive. Please forgive me."

Mary nodded, thrown off. She felt oddly stirred up, perhaps because this was the most intimate conversation she'd had with anyone in months.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"No thank you."

He took her empty plate and started getting the dishes together.

They had no dishwasher. Neither did she, in her new house. "I'll dry," she said.

He handed her a clean towel. "So what do you do for a living?" he asked.

"I'm a development editor. Have you heard of Shan-

ley Publishing?”

“Oh, yes. Sharon’s a big fan of Shanley vitamins. No doubt she has some of your books up there next to her bed.” He flushed. “*Our* bed.”

There was an amused snort from the door, and Mary turned to see a tall, pale woman in a bright red robe.

Arthur’s flush deepened. “Sharon! Here’s the woman I told you about, Mary Bellamy. Mary, this is my wife, Sharon.”

“Hello,” Sharon said. She spared Mary a brief smile and a handshake. Her hand was cold and she did look ill, with dark circles under her eyes. Her long hair – nearly black, with a few streaks of silver – was neatly combed but in need of a wash.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I need my pills.”

He looked irritated. “I was going to bring them up shortly. When I collected your dishes. Left them all up there, did you?”

“I told you I was tired today.” She sank down into the chair at the head of the table and sighed. “Doesn’t it seem as if winter will never end?”

“Yes,” Mary said. “It’s so icy–”

“It is staying light later, but that just gets our hopes up. And on a day like this it’s dark all day anyway. Could you get my pills, Arthur?”

Mary watched as Arthur took bottle after bottle of what looked like vitamins, many indeed featuring green Shanley labels, and tapped capsules out of each. He

brought them to Sharon with a glass of water, and she took them one by one while they watched.

"Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, Mary." Sharon slowly pushed herself up from the chair. "You're new in the parish, I suppose?"

"Actually –"

"She may need to stay over, dear," Arthur said.

"Oh, I wouldn't think so!" Mary said.

Sharon gave Arthur a sharp look. "You must use your own judgment, Arthur. I'm off to bed now." She turned to Mary with a stiff smile. "Good night, then."

"Good night," Mary said. She turned back to drying dishes.

He finished his washing without comment. Dishes and cutlery clinked. Water splashed. She was conscious of the silence as rather awkward, but had no idea what to say. When he'd handed her the last dish, he turned and smiled thinly at her. "Excuse me. I need to go get hers."

Mary dried industriously. She lived less than half a mile up the hill. She would simply have to hold firm about getting home for the night. This might be New Hampshire, but it was hardly the wilderness.





## CHAPTER THREE

# It Wasn't the Trim

"YOU'RE NOT THINKING of going now?"

Mary looked up from zipping her parka. "I'm sorry, but I really must."

"Well. If they've gotten some salt down, maybe I could get you up in the car." He shrugged into a coat and hat and grabbed a bucket of salt by the door.

As soon as they stepped out, Mary realized it was impossible. The wind was howling. Heavy snow streamed nearly horizontally, and tall drifts had half-buried Arthur's car and hidden the road. Except for the wind, the town was silent – no traffic, not even a snow-plow.

"This is bad. I really think you'd better plan to stay."

"But – "

He turned and disappeared through a doorway, so she followed him into a small room crammed with an old computer, books, photographs, and religious figurines. He noticed her looking at a plastic Madonna

nightlight and smiled. "Gag gift," he said. He punched numbers into his phone. "One of my parishioners is a town cop. I don't know whether he'll be able to help you out tonight, though."

Mary waited. She surveyed his shelves. Just how many of these assembled items were gag gifts? She leaned in to examine the holographic postcard of a Jesus whose arms moved up and down as she shifted her position. Come unto me read the caption.

"It's ringing. They must be busy. Hey – Eunice! Art Tennant up at St. Andrews. Is Winslow there?" A pause. "Thing is, I've got a pedestrian stranded here. Mary Belamy. You know, the woman who bought Miss Lacey's house." A longer pause. "Oh, I didn't know that. Well, good luck. Ask Winslow to give me a call if he gets a chance, okay? Thank you."

He hung up. "Power's out on the other side of town and the state roads are a mess, people stranded in their cars. Your chances for tonight look pretty slim. But our guest room is fairly comfortable, I assure you. Sharon does skulk around a bit, but she won't burn the house down like the first Mrs. Rochester or anything. Come on up and I'll show you."

She followed him up the narrow stairs. That had been a rather disloyal thing to say about his wife. Perhaps he'd intended it as a kind of secret code from one reader to another. Perhaps he was hoping to talk about books all night.

She hoped he didn't fancy himself a Mr. Rochester.

Though his looks did kind of fit the part.

He led her up the narrow stairs to the guest room, which had a bleak monastic look – white chenille bedspread, worn braided rug, simple cross on the wall. She sat on the bed and wondered if she was expected to go to sleep now. There wasn't even a good spot for reading, not that she had a book. She pulled out the drawer in the bedside table, half expecting to find a Gideon Bible, but there was nothing.

But Arthur reappeared at the door with a flannel nightgown and a robe and a set of towels. "Would you like to take a shower?"

"Maybe later," she said, unwilling to lounge around in someone else's nightwear.

"Well, come on downstairs, then. You could watch TV. I have to work on my sermon, but I'll get you settled first. You won't think it too rude if I leave you alone?" He gestured her into a living room.

"No, not at all." She was actually quite relieved.

"I reward myself with dessert when I've finished a draft, but you can have some earlier if you'd like. We have ice cream, and an apple pie from one of my parishioners."

"I'm still full from your delicious dinner."

He smiled with such delight she got the idea he wasn't used to compliments.

Left alone, Mary turned on the television for weather

news and surveyed the room. Essentially off-white, it was decorated here and there with colorful pillows and afghans of unfailing good taste. Mary wondered whether they were gifts from grateful parishioners or signs of life from Sharon.

There were numerous photographs on the baby grand piano: Sharon, looking young and slim and chic in an artistic black and white, with a baby who could have been either a boy or a girl; a young girl who was presumably their daughter with a younger, paler boy who was presumably the lost son – both on the gangly side, like Arthur, as if they still needed to grow into their bones. An older school picture of the same girl. Black and whites from older generations, and a formal wedding picture of Arthur and Sharon. There were already distinctive crags evident on young Arthur, though he also had a cute mop of dark hair and an appealing smile. Sharon looked elegant and poised, nothing like the tired woman in the bathrobe.

Mary sat down on the sofa with a coffee table book on gardening. The book was soporific, the drone of the television lulling, and before she knew it she was being lightly tapped on the arm. She gasped as she awoke to Arthur Tennant's face, horror-lit by the lamp on the side table.

"It's only me," he said mildly. "Would you like a piece of pie, or perhaps you'd prefer to go straight up to bed?"

"I think I'd better eat so I can take some more Tylenol." She followed him stiffly to the kitchen. "Did you

finish your sermon?"

"First draft." He brought her the Tylenol, then served them both slices of pie. "Milk?"

"Yes, thank you."

They ate in silence for a few moments. The pie was stodgy. Mary sucked down milk to wash it down.

"This would probably be better heated up," he said.

She nodded, still chewing.

"Although I have heated up some of Bertha's pies and it hasn't really helped much. She's so persistent. You have to admire a woman who never gives up making pies from scratch no matter how badly they turn out."

"Sounds like the devil's work to me," Mary said, getting a startled laugh out of him. "How often does she inflict these pies on you?"

"Every week. Even in Lent. Not all prayers are answered, you know." He grinned, then looked anxious. "Don't get me wrong – she's an excellent woman."

"No, of course."

"So many excellent women," he sighed.

She smiled. "Not me."

"I don't know. I sense that you are potentially excellent."

"I never bake."

"But you're Catholic. And you have a cat."

"Lapsed Catholic. Determined heathen. Sorry."

He snorted. "I love that word, heathen. It's so old-fashioned. Probably I ought to try to hold you here and

feed you doctrine until you get over this lapsed business.”

“I don’t think that’s too likely to work.”

He smiled. “No, probably not. Though if I combined it with extreme social isolation, perhaps a little sleep deprivation... that seems to work for cults and monastic orders, anyway. Maybe I should just threaten you with additional pieces of this pie.” He got up and looked out the window. “Do you want to watch some TV?”

In the living room she sat down on one end of the sofa and he sat on the other and clicked on the television, watching the weather news. The whole Northeast had been shut down by ice and driving snow and sleet.

“I’ve always found storms exciting,” Arthur said.

“Awe-inspiring Acts of God?”

“I don’t connect God with the weather. It’s just exciting. When I was a child we lived in coastal North Carolina – hurricane country. When one was bearing down on us, we’d gather in the sturdiest house on high land and have a wonderful time. To us kids it was as good as any holiday. Maybe even better, because of that little thrill of mortal danger. Of course, we never lost our roof, and we never got flooded out. I believe that might have changed our attitude.”

“You don’t have much of a Southern accent.”

“Boarding school. My mother came from old money in Boston.”

“And you left hurricanes and old money behind to become a priest in New Hampshire?”

"There wasn't much of the old money left. Lucy got some when my mother died. She has a trust," he said mockingly. "It pays for her schooling. I swore I'd never send any child of mine to boarding school, but now I think it does her good to get out of the house."

Mary smiled uncomfortably. He was surely being a little too forthcoming.

"So what brought you to Lawson?" he asked.

What indeed? As winter ground on, Mary had occasionally wondered why she'd given sway to her fantasy of the table and the cat and the little house near the river. "I thought it was a pretty town. And I needed a change."

He looked as if he thought there must be more. "And how do you like it?"

She hesitated. "I still think it's very pretty. I'm surprised, though, at how much everybody seems to know everybody else's business."

He snorted. "I take it you've never lived in small town before?"

She shook her head. "No. So how do you like it?"

His face turned careful. "I think it's a lovely town. Very good people."

He doesn't really like it at all, she thought. "So you're here until you're reassigned?"

"No, that's not how it works in the Episcopal Church." He shifted in his seat. "I'd have to find another church willing to call me, or switch to another kind of job."

“So you're likely to stay until retirement?”

“Well, no. It's possible to get stale with a parish. But we've only been here six years, and I don't happen to be in a great position to move anywhere else right now. Sharon's not keen on moving again.” There was a touch of bitterness in his tone.

Mary fell silent. Better to stick to safe subjects like the weather, really.

She was tired, the news was repetitive, and she realized without much ability to do anything about it that she was in great danger of dozing off again.

“Mary.”

She turned her head into the light caress.

“Mary.”

She opened her eyes, disoriented. Arthur was peering down at her with a quirky smile.

“You dozed off again, my dear. Let's get you upstairs.”

She got up slowly, surprised at how stiff she was, still in a fog. Why was he smiling? Had she drooled? Snored?

The stairs were steep and strange. He turned down the bed clothes before whispering “goodnight” and closed the door softly behind him. Mary barely managed to unlace her shoes before she fell into bed and a deep sleep.

She awoke in darkness. Sharp gusts of wind were rattling the windows. She put together where she was and wondered if she'd left any lights on at home and



whether Bob had managed to chew his way into the cat food box.

She was still wearing her watch. Just past three in the morning in a strange house and she needed to pee, damn it. Fighting stiffness, she got up and cautiously opened the door. She was thankful to find the long hall lit by a dim lamp.

She crept back to her bedroom and gasped. A ghostly figure stood there in the dark.

"Oh," the figure said. "I wondered who was using this bed."

Sharon, of course.

"Your husband invited me to stay because of the storm."

Sharon shrugged. "I see he loaned you one of my nightgowns."

"Yes. I hope you don't mind."

"You might as well be comfortable for the duration. That's my philosophy." Her tone was flat. She leaned in closer. "Have you seen his room?"

"His room?"

"My son's." Sharon opened the door directly across the hall and pulled Mary after her, turning on a blinding overhead light.

Mary blinked desperately. When she could see again, she found herself in the carefully preserved room of a young boy, heavy on red and blue, well-stocked with toys and models.

"I stripped and sanded and painted this room myself."

“It’s lovely.”

“He was a beautiful boy. You see?” Sharon handed Mary a framed school picture from the bureau. “He was playing in the snow after school when he collapsed. He had a heart problem we didn’t know about.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Sharon gave her an oddly satisfied smile. “Well, good night.” She padded off down the hallway and down the stairs.

Mary turned off the light and shut the door of Matthew’s room. Her pulse was racing. She lay in bed and listened to Sharon below, who seemed to be walking around restlessly, then channel-surfing on the television. Later, Mary thought she heard the door across the hall open and the light flick on again. Eventually footsteps receded down the hall and quiet reclaimed the house.

She woke to the sound of a ringing phone. The morning light was grey and the radiators were thumping. It was impossible to see much through the fogged up window, but she had an impression of whiteness. She dressed and walked stiffly to the bathroom, where she washed her face and tried to smooth her hair with her fingertips. She could smell coffee, so she headed down to the kitchen.

She couldn’t help a little yelp when she walked into the kitchen and there was a policeman standing in the middle of it.

She stared a moment longer than she should have, a little awed by his blond curls and blue eyes. He really was one fine looking man.

“Ah, good morning,” Arthur said, bustling in from his office, fully dressed in suit and collar. “Mary Bellamy, Winslow Jennings. This is the fellow I told you about last night.”

She’d expected a grizzled old Yankee. Who named a kid Winslow? “Nice to meet you, Officer Jennings.”

“Winslow,” he said, and shook her hand with a strong grip. She had the feeling he was checking her out, though politely, and she was conscious of being in a particularly disheveled state. Not that it mattered, she reminded herself. She was done with all that.

“Do you think I can make it up the hill now?” she asked.

“We’re all going momentarily,” Arthur said. “We’ll drop you off. Winslow already helped me get my car off the hedge, but I need some coffee first so I won’t murder anybody.” He handed her, then the policeman, steaming mugs and gestured at a bakery box on the table. “Winslow brought donuts.”

She sat down carefully as Winslow swung onto the other end of the bench. Arthur quietly placed a bottle of Tylenol at her left. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine.” After a swallow of coffee, she said as casually as she could, “I ran into Sharon during the night.”

Arthur nodded. “She wanders. Too much sleep during the day.”

"She showed me Matthew's room."

His face darkened, but he said nothing.

Winslow shifted uncomfortably.

"My sick parishioner, Olive Cantwell, is Winslow's great aunt," Arthur said. "So he's not only here to rescue you, but to ferry me over to the hospital."

"You bought Miss Lacey's house," Winslow said. "It was in pretty bad shape."

"Yes, I have plenty of work to do."

"Fixing it yourself?"

His blue eyes were watching her carefully. Had she neglected something in terms of building permits? "I hired a roofer. The rest I'll be doing myself, bit by bit."

"Sharon did a lot of redecorating when we first got here," Arthur said. "Annoyed the hell out of the building and grounds committee. They're supposed to approve any changes to the rectory. Maybe that's why she loves to scare poor innocent women with Matthew's room in the middle of the night. As I recall they weren't at all thrilled about the red trim."

The phone rang again and Arthur went to his study to answer it.

"I don't think it was the trim," Winslow said.

Mary felt a little thrill at being included in any flow of town gossip. "No?"

"She just wasn't popular. Didn't join the altar guild. Never volunteered for clean-up."

Mary wouldn't be caught dead joining an altar guild either, but her mother had belonged to one. "Ah, the

hanging offenses.”

Winslow grinned.

Arthur hustled back in with the phone in his hand. “Lucy is having a small crisis at school. Winslow, perhaps you could drop Mary and then swing back for me?”

Winslow nodded and they stood up. Arthur clasped Mary’s hand, looked her in the eye, and gave her a warm smile. “It was a great pleasure having your company, Mary.”

“Thank you for taking me in.”

Yes, she was quite sure there were women in his congregation who swooned for him. He knew how to shake her hand as if she were the only other person in the room. No doubt it was a useful job skill. She watched as he patted Winslow on the back as if they were old, dear friends. Were they really, or was that also part of the job?

She navigated a narrow canyon of shoveled snow to Winslow’s monstrous sport utility vehicle and climbed into it using the steps and handholds. “Big,” she observed.

Winslow grunted. “This is Lawson’s official unmarked police vehicle. Also its official all-weather, all-terrain vehicle.”

“You must have been very busy last night.”

“Yes. I’ve only been home for a shower. After I drop Father at the hospital it’s back to work.”

“Sorry about that.”

"I'm not complaining. But that's why we couldn't help you out last night."

"I guess I'll think twice before I set out in bad weather next time."

"Perhaps it was meant to be. God works in mysterious ways."

She expected that kind of sentiment from silver-haired old ladies, not handsome blond policemen. "You think he had me fall on my ass to save my soul?"

"I was thinking more that Father Arthur might have needed the company." The SUV climbed easily over the mound of plowed snow at the end of her driveway. Now it would be even harder to shovel, but she could hardly complain. Winslow put the car in park and gave her an assessing look. "You're not religious?"

"No, not at all."

"Still, you'd be welcome at St. Andrews."

"Thank you, but that's not likely to happen." She peered at the drifts covering her front walk. She was going to have a bit of job just getting in the house.

"Do you have a snow blower?" he asked.

"No, but it's a small driveway. Thank you for the ride. I'm sorry about your great aunt."

"Why don't you let me help? I carry an extra shovel in the car."

Mary met his eyes. There was something there – a touch of wistfulness, perhaps? For some reason she

thought: with this one word, my whole life could change.

“Oh, no,” she said. “No, but thanks anyway. I’ll be fine.”





## CHAPTER FOUR

# Rescuing Arthur

THE SNOW AND ICE melted quickly in the longer days of late March, and in her walks Mary noticed buds swelling on the trees. Crocuses bloomed on southern slopes and skunk cabbages unfurled on the forest floor. She cut forsythia from overgrown bushes in the yard and forced it into bloom in the house. Spring was coming, but first they had to get through mud season.

She was summoned to a meeting at work to discuss her willingness to train as a web editor. “According to their fancy new consultant, this is where our business needs to go,” said her boss, Carmen. “Anyway, it’s a good marketable skill to pick up.”

“And I can do it from home?”

“Yes, once you learn it. The training isn’t that far from you – Nashua.”

Yes, that wasn’t too far. “Since when did they hire a consultant?”

Carmen scowled. “Apparently our revenues are ‘trending down’. People in suits have been nosing

around. There's a rumor the book group is up for sale."

"But they wouldn't send me to training if they were planning to sell us, would they? I mean, what would be the point?"

Carmen shrugged. "I stopped trying to figure out the point of anything we do around here awhile ago."

Back home, Mary walked around her little house. She tried to reassure herself that nothing happened quickly at Shanley. But John Shanley Senior, passionate vitamin enthusiast and fastest two-finger typist in the building, couldn't live forever. And John Shanley Junior, with his freshly-minted MBA, was already an object of terror.

Even if the division was sold, wouldn't the new employers need skilled employees, too? How was she supposed to find another publishing job within commuting distance of Lawson, New Hampshire?

Calm down, she told herself. Worst case, she could just sell the house and move again. Thanks to Roger, she already knew how to move on with her life.

She wasn't expecting anyone on the East coast to wish her a happy birthday that year, though she did get a lottery ticket inside a nearly-pornographic birthday card in the day's Fed-Ex from Carmen. Hope you strike it lucky on your birthday, she'd written. Mary didn't win anything, but it was nice to be remembered. That evening when the phone rang, she expected it to be her mother or her sister. But it was Roger.

"Happy Birthday," he said.

"Oh. Thank you." How had he gotten her phone number?

"Doing anything to celebrate?"

"Not really."

"Why not? You should go out."

"Did she have the baby yet?" she asked.

"No. Any minute now."

"You must be excited."

"Yeah." He didn't sound excited.

"Well, I hope it all goes well."

"Mary..." He breathed heavily, apparently in the grip of some emotion.

"You know, Roger, I'm really enjoying the peace and quiet. Things worked out for the best, just like you said they would. Bye now!"

She hung up. Her heart was pounding – she'd never simply cut him off like that before. She waited, but the phone didn't ring again.

She leaned down to pet Bob, who was enticing her with a wanton display of his belly.

All in all, a cat was much easier to live with than a man.

Her training wouldn't begin for another week, so Mary enjoyed the improving weather on her walks while she could. She got frequent waves from Winslow on patrol, but she hadn't seen Arthur Tennant in days.

When she did see him again, she almost walked right

past. He was sitting limply, eyes closed, on a bench in the little park at Underwood's Folly, surrounded by the brown remains of the previous summer's perennials. The Folly was the ruined foundation of a mill built on the modest falls where the smaller Cattigutt River dropped out of the hills to the west to join the Took. The Catgut, as locals sometimes called it, often dried up during droughts, but John Underwood apparently hadn't known that when he built his mill. Bankrupt, he'd hanged himself in it one hot, dusty autumn in the late 1800s. Lawson celebrated his tragic end with a tidy historical marker, extensive plantings from the Lawson Garden Society, and the sturdy bench where Arthur now sat, so still and pale that Mary feared for a moment that he might be dead, too.

Given his own tendency to intrude, he could hardly object if she checked on him. She coughed, but he didn't react. She tapped his shoulder. "Father!"

He opened his eyes and peered at her. "Ah. Mary. Hello."

"You okay?"

"Bit under the weather. Today was so warm – I thought, let me get some sun." He coughed. "Arthur will do, you know."

"Oh, sorry – Father Arthur."

"No, just Arthur. Or even Art," he said, with a little laugh and another, deeper cough.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

He looked blank and coughed again. Unless she was

much mistaken, that was a moan he stifled as he hunched over.

"How about I help you get home?"

"I'm fine. Rectory's right there." He gestured irritably.

She looked and realized the rectory was there, barely visible through a stand of bare trees. "That's not really that close, unless you're planning to swim across the river." The late afternoon sun was no longer providing much warmth, and the wind had picked up. "I don't think I should leave you here."

He leaned his head back against the bench and closed his eyes.

"Arthur?"

"Peace be with you," he muttered, without opening his eyes.

"And also with you," she replied, annoyed at being dismissed so liturgically. She returned to her walk, then thought better of it and detoured to the town's small police station.

"May I help you?" asked a young woman wearing a startling amount of make-up.

"Is Officer Jennings here?"

"Winslow!" she bellowed into the back. "There's a lady asking for ya."

Winslow smiled when he saw who it was. Mary blushed. Yes, she was done with men, but this guy was so damned attractive it was like trying to act natural with a movie star.

Conscious of the woman's avid stare, Mary moved off to the far end of the front desk. "It's about Arthur Tennant."

"Father Arthur?" Winslow seemed to be correcting her, and Mary fought a ridiculous urge to argue the point with him. "What is it?"

"He's sitting in the park looking rather ill. I'm not sure he can get himself home."

"Well, let's go see." He raised his voice. "Eunice, we may have a citizen in difficulty at the park. I'm taking the SUV."

"Who is it?" Eunice asked, wide-eyed.

But Winslow strode away silently.

"He'll be annoyed," Mary said.

"I wouldn't worry. Why don't you come along?"

She hesitated. "Okay." Having rattled Arthur out, she felt bad just slinking away.

The ride to the park took less than thirty seconds. Winslow didn't put the siren on, to Mary's relief. When they got there the sun had disappeared behind a cloud, and Arthur's face was tucked down into his jacket.

"Good afternoon, Father," Winslow said.

Arthur lifted his face, blanched in cold or fatigue, and focused on Mary. "You're back."

She nodded. "Getting cold out here."

He grimaced. "Yes, it is. I will take a ride home, Winslow, if you're offering."

"That I am," Winslow said, and helped Arthur get up from the bench. They shuffled slowly over to the SUV.

"Bit off more ... than I could chew," Arthur said breathlessly.

"Are you sure he doesn't need the hospital?" Mary whispered to Winslow.

Winslow raised his eyebrows.

"That cough sounds bad. I think he may be wheezing."

"What are you whispering about?" Arthur complained.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Winslow asked him.

"Marsha stopped by."

"Marsha's a podiatrist."

Arthur coughed and moaned softly. "It's just that it hurts a bit."

Winslow looked at Mary, shrugged, and opened the back door for her. She hesitated, then got in. Somewhat to her surprise, Winslow drove off away from the bridge. Arthur, apparently preoccupied with breathing, didn't appear to notice until they'd pulled into the small local hospital. Then he looked up and paled. "God help me."

"Let's just get you checked out," Winslow said. "Once they say you're fine, I'll drive you home."

The intake nurse listened to Arthur's chest and shepherded him back into an examining room.

"Shouldn't we call Sharon?" Mary asked Winslow.

"Let's see what the story is first."

"She'd want to know he's here."

“You can try calling if you want. If you leave a message she might get it. She won’t pick up the phone.”

“How do you know?”

“Everybody knows.” He gestured at the small, nearly empty waiting room. “Why don’t we sit down? This shouldn’t take long.”

She took a seat. “You’ve never been married, have you?”

An older woman across the room perked up at the question and looked over expectantly.

Winslow stared at the woman until she turned back to her magazine. “No, I haven’t.”

The woman quite distinctly snorted.

Winslow sighed and started working on a report.

Mary picked up a magazine. Perhaps there was also something that everybody just knew about Winslow.

Eventually a doctor came out and looked curiously at Mary, who was munching crackers from the vending machine and thinking that Arthur Tennant was a bad influence on her cat’s feeding schedule.

“Who are you?”

“A friend,” Winslow answered for her. “How is he?”

The doctor frowned. “Is there a family member available?”

“Not at the moment.”

“We’ve got a bunch of new HIPAA rules. I need Sharon.”

“I’ll take you over there if you want to talk to her.”



"You know I can't leave right now."

"If she's willing, I'll bring her back. I wouldn't count on it, though. I take it you're keeping him?"

The doctor nodded.

"Can we see him?"

"Yeah, but don't tire him out."

"I'll wait here," Mary said.

"Don't be silly," Winslow said, and gestured her to go ahead of him.

Arthur looked much diminished in a pale blue hospital gown. He was dozing against the lifted back of the examining table. There was oxygen attached under his nose and an IV tube snaking into his hand.

"Father Arthur?" Winslow said.

Arthur barely opened his eyes.

"I'm going to go tell Sharon you're here and make sure she has some dinner. I'll tell Marsha too. Don't worry about a thing."

Arthur nodded almost imperceptibly and closed his eyes.

"Feel better, Arthur," Mary said gently, and squeezed his hand. She was pleased to get a little smile, though he didn't open his eyes. Winslow, she noticed, looked a trifle taken aback.

"Poor man," she said, once they were in the car.

"He's had more than his share of crosses to bear."

"Who's Marsha?"

"She's our warden. Of the church."

"Keeps the inmates in line."

He smiled. "She tries."

When he stopped at the rectory, Mary climbed out of the SUV and tasted freedom. "If you don't mind, I think I'll just walk up from here."

"I was hoping you'd come in with me."

Mary lowered her voice. "I think that woman is scary."

"I know. Come on, I need back-up." He knocked on the side door and walked in. Sharon was fully dressed and sitting at the kitchen table in front of a bowl of soup and a loaf of bread.

"Hello, Sharon," Winslow said.

"Hello, Winslow." She looked curiously at Mary. "Do you have a new deputy?"

"No. She's –"

"Mary, isn't it? Would either of you happen to know where my husband is?"

"That's why we're here," Winslow said.

She put down her spoon and gave them her full attention.

Winslow recited the facts with the precision of a man used to giving testimony.

Sharon looked relieved. "I knew he wouldn't just forget dinner."

"Would you like me to drive you back there so you can see him?"

Sharon paled. "I don't like that place."

"But —"

"He'll be fine. You just said so. You'll look after him, won't you, Winslow?"

"Dr. Potter would like to be able to talk to you about his condition."

"But you just told me his condition."

"It could change—"

Her face turned hard. "He can call."

Winslow grimaced. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you for asking." She took another spoonful of her soup.

Winslow just stood there.

"Is there something else?" she asked.

"Maybe I could take him his toothbrush or something?"

"He keeps a travel kit in the bathroom closet."

Since she made no move to get it herself, Winslow ran up the stairs. He'd left her alone with Sharon. Mary smiled awkwardly.

"So how are you finding St. Andrew's?" Sharon asked.

"I've never been there."

Sharon paused. "You're in one of the ecumenical groups?"

"I don't go to church at all. I just keep bumping into your husband."

"Must be God's will," Sharon said dryly.

"I'm not religious at all, actually."

Sharon looked at her with new interest. "No? Good

for you! I think it's just the most amazing load of shit, don't you?"

Winslow came back down, kit in hand. "Is this it?"

"Yes, that's it." Sharon winked at Mary. "Thank you, Winslow. Please tell Arthur I hope he feels better soon."

"She seems happy to have the house to herself," Mary said, heaving herself back up into the SUV. What exactly had that wink signified? Was it from one unbeliever to another? One woman to another? Was it something connected to Winslow? She eyed him critically as he backed the car out of the rectory.

"She kind of lost it when their son died," Winslow said. "Hasn't been right since."

"Seems pretty lucid to me, if not all one could hope for in a wife."

He gave her a sidelong look and pulled into her driveway.

"Well, it sounded like they might send him home tomorrow," Mary said. She put her hand on the door handle.

Winslow cleared his throat. "Would you like to go out sometime?"

She stopped and stared at him. "Out?"

"Yes, out. On a date." His eyes fell on her in that assessing way they had.

"Oh, I can't do that. I only just got divorced."

"Then how about a cup of coffee sometime?"

"Just a friendly cup of coffee?"

He nodded.

“Okay, sure. Coffee sometime.”

“I’ll call you,” he said, as she got out.

She hadn’t given him her phone number. But then, everyone in town probably already knew it.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Just Coffee

MARY HADN'T ANTICIPATED needing to fend men off.

A man like Winslow wasn't part of her dream of the little house and the ginger cat and the sun falling on the table. She could adjust to minor changes, like a black cat and a table that didn't get any sun. Add a tall, blond policeman and the house got too small and cramped and fussy. Arthur Tennant she could imagine fitting in occasionally – visiting priest has cup of tea, behaves impeccably, leaves promptly. Priests were practically half-women to begin with. But Winslow was a cop, which made him twice the masculine threat of the average man. He wore a uniform and carried a gun and probably knew exactly how to murder her and safely dispose of her body.

On the other hand, she'd have to be dead not to feel gratified that she'd been asked out by anybody at this point in her life.

He called later that evening and asked her to join him

for coffee at the hospital the next day. While they were there they could also check on Father Arthur.

“Okay,” said Mary, disconcerted. Perhaps he was actually just trying to keep her involved in the tortured life of Arthur Tennant.

But she didn’t mind checking on Arthur. Somebody should.

The next day was warm and sunny, so Mary decided to hike to the hospital even though it sat on the ugly state road that bypassed the center of town and provided a home for two apparently warring tire stores (“We’ll match ANY competitor’s price!!!”), a used car lot, and the town’s only strip mall, populated by a Freihofer’s bakery outlet, a propane dealer, a Goodwill thrift store, and the town’s lone pizzeria.

Winslow was already there when she arrived breathlessly, the walk having taken longer than she’d expected. He smiled and laid aside a sheaf of reports.

“I’ll just get my coffee,” Mary said. She didn’t want him to think for a minute that this was a real date.

He had started to rise, but sat back down. “I believe Margie just made a fresh pot.” He nodded towards the pretty blonde working the counter. “She’s one of my cousins.”

Margie’s gaze was frankly appraising when Mary came up to get her coffee, though she didn’t say much – just looked over at Winslow with raised eyebrows.

Mary took a cautious sip when she sat down again. “Not bad.”



“Margie’s a good kid.”

Mary guessed that Margie was at least in her late twenties. How old was Winslow? He had one of those ageless Scandinavian physiques. “How long have you been a policeman here?”

“Awhile now,” he said, not very helpfully. “I joined the force a couple of years after I left the Marines.”

“You were a Marine?” A Marine was even less likely to fit into her cottage than a cop. Mary was not exactly a snob – she’d grown up in a working class family herself – but she immediately slotted Winslow into a category of guys she would never consider dating even if she wanted to date, which she didn’t.

“I enlisted after college.”

Okay, perhaps she’d been a little hasty. “What did you study?”

He looked embarrassed. “Philosophy.”

“Philosophy!” She’d never known anyone to actually major in that. “Why?”

Winslow shrugged and hunched over his coffee. “I liked it. What about you? What did you study?”

“Oh, English.” She had long felt mildly embarrassed by her English degree, but compared to philosophy it was practically vocational training.

“And you’re an editor.”

“Yes.”

“Do you get free books?”

“Nothing too exciting, unless you’re into amazing vinegar cures or wheat grass shakes.”

He wrinkled his nose. "No. I'm a cop, I eat donuts."

She was about to ask him where he'd studied when he said, "So you were married?"

It didn't really matter how old he was, because after this conversation it wouldn't matter. She smiled tightly. "Yes, for eight years. But he wanted kids, and I couldn't have any."

"You couldn't adopt?"

"We never got to that point. Anyway, he's already remarried and expecting a baby."

"That must hurt."

"It did at first." Politeness perhaps required that she ask him about his own romantic history, but what was the point? She drained the tepid remains of her coffee. "Shall we go see the patient?"

Arthur appeared to be dozing when they first walked in, but roused when Mary whispered, "I think he's asleep."

"I am not!" He scooted up on the pillows. "You think people can sleep in hospitals?"

"You look better," Mary said.

"I've coughed most of my lungs out already. Anything left has got to be much healthier."

"Praise God," Winslow said and Mary cringed inwardly. Who talked like that?

"I'll praise God when they let me out of here," Arthur said. "I'm hoping they'll discharge me this morning."

"Is that likely?" Mary asked.

"Damn well better be." But he ruined the effect of his

declaration by coughing.

Winslow's police radio squawked and he excused himself.

She sat down in the side chair. "Pneumonia?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Did they get the culture back?"

"Culture? You seem to know more about this than I do."

"My mother was a nurse. We got to hear all the gory details."

"She died?"

"No, she moved to Arizona."

He lay there, smiling oddly at her.

"What?" she asked, patting her head. "Is there something in my hair?" Once she'd gotten home and found a rather large twig entangled there.

He flushed slightly. "No. I was just thinking that you are a rather lovely woman."

She felt a little involuntary thrill. Perhaps he thought ministering to her might involve shoring up her feminine self-esteem. Or maybe he was just a hopeless flirt. "We stopped in and saw Sharon yesterday. Have you been able to talk to her?"

He rolled and unrolled the hem of his blanket. "I left a message."

"Does she have agoraphobia?"

"Does she? I suppose it's possible. Preferable to thinking she just doesn't give a damn."

"She did ask about you. She does appear a bit..." Mary was about to say detached.

"Mental?"

She was shocked into silence.

"Well, I hope that's it. I hope she's mentally ill, and not just spiteful. She didn't want to move here, you see. She argued, among other things, that the health care would be primitive. And then Matthew died right here in this hospital." He coughed, then winced. "Maybe she was right. Or maybe he would have died anyway. We'll never know. But she'll never forgive me."

"Losing a child is probably enough to unhinge any mother."

"Oh, no doubt, but it gets old, especially when there's another, living child in the picture." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. This is far more than you want to know."

Mary was wondering what to say to that when Winslow returned. Arthur asked him something having to do with the church, then started coughing and didn't stop. A nurse leaned in the door. "Bringing anything up, Father?"

Arthur was too busy coughing to reply, but the answer was obvious.

"Very good!" the nurse said. "I'll be right back."

"You'd better leave," he managed to gasp out, tears in his eyes.

"I'll check in on you later, Father," Winslow said hurriedly, and put his hand on Mary's shoulder.

"Feel better," Mary said. She squeezed Arthur's hand

briefly. He gave her a plaintive look before he was overtaken by coughing again.

Winslow had to get back to work. She accepted a quick ride to the police station, but refused his offer to drop her at home.

“Would you like to try this again?” he asked, as they pulled up in front of the station.

It had been a quiet drive, which she’d attributed to the effects of hearing someone gag his lungs out, or her infertility disclosure, or his mind already running ahead to work. But apparently he was still trying to enlist her in *The Friends of Father Arthur*. “You mean visit Arthur again?”

“No, I meant coffee. Or lunch or something.”

What could he possibly see in her now? “Well, the thing is, I have out-of-town training coming up next week. I’m going to be kind of busy getting ready for that.”

“I see.” He got out of the car.

“I enjoyed the coffee, though!” she said, after she’d joined him on the sidewalk in front of the police station. This felt all wrong. Groping for a way to put it right, she stuck out her hand for a handshake. “Thank you, Winslow. It was a pleasure getting to know you better.”

He raised an eyebrow and shook her hand formally. “Likewise, Mary.” She had the impression he was mocking her, but figured she deserved it. Stupid handshake!

She was terrible at all this and always had been. It was just as well she had put it all behind her.

**THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET MESSY.**

Cast off by a husband who wants children he thinks she can't provide, Mary leaves behind prosperity in the Boston suburbs to telecommute from tiny Lawson, New Hampshire. Even though she's only in her thirties, she's resigned herself to a life of peace and solitude -- not in the least anticipating the keen curiosity she'll encounter there.

First there are attentions from Arthur, the unhappily-married Episcopal priest, who'd like to save her heathen soul, but is also susceptible to more earthly temptations. Then there's Winslow, the handsome cop who charms Mary even as he confuses her by being a good kisser who's in favor of gay rights – but also opposed to sex before marriage.

Soon she's also coping with a crushing job loss, a pregnancy that wasn't supposed to be possible, a secret she must keep even at the expense of all her hopes, and an ex-husband whose steady disintegration threatens all she has left.

In this witty, often affectionate tale of small town life, Mary discovers that the connections we make can result in unexpected blessings ... and terrifying risks.

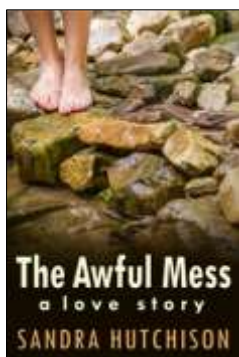
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SANDRA HUTCHISON'S career has shifted between teaching, writing, editing, marketing, and advertising, all of which she enjoys. She founded Sheer Hubris Press in 2013 in order to publish her novels and enjoy using all of these skills at the same time.

Born and raised in the Tampa Bay area, Hutchison survived a transplant to Western Massachusetts in high school and has stayed in cooler climes ever since. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, she also has an MA in fiction writing from the University of New Hampshire. She currently lives with her husband and son outside of Troy, New York, where she teaches writing at Hudson Valley Community College.

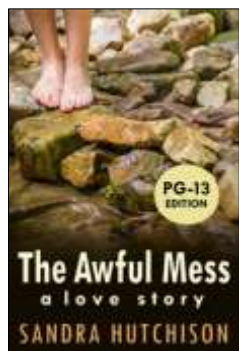
Hutchison's short play *Nude with Bearded Irises* will be performed at the Sand Lake Center for the Arts by the Circle Theater Players this October as part of a festival of one act plays.



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If you are a reviewer, bookseller, or librarian, you can request a complete ARC by sending an email to [sandrahutchison@sheerhubris.com](mailto:sandrahutchison@sheerhubris.com).

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You can also visit [sheerhubris.com](http://sheerhubris.com) or [sandrahutchison.com](http://sandrahutchison.com), or follow the author on twitter: [@sheerhubris](https://twitter.com/sheerhubris).

## Why a PG-13 Version?

We don't want to censor sexual scenes or dialogue that we feel fit our characters and plot, but we also understand that some readers (and parents and teachers) don't welcome explicit sex or bad language. We're taking advantage of e-publishing's low cost of publication to offer a version for this audience.

This is a technique borrowed from fanfic that we haven't seen in the trade before. (We're very curious to see how it all works out!)