



CHAPTER I

The Women

Wanda Batton-Smythe, head of the Women's Institute of Nether Monkslip, liked to say she was not one to mince words. She might add that she was always one to call a spade a spade, and that what more people needed was simply to pull their socks up and get on with it. She was saying these things now—calling on all the resources in her cliché lineup, in fact—to a captive audience of approximately thirty-five women who, to a woman, were wishing themselves elsewhere than in the Village Hall, sitting on orange molded-plastic seats that might have been rejects from an ergonomics study, on an otherwise peaceful Saturday night in September.

Reports of members present and apologies for absence received (Miss Pitchford had a head cold) had already been swiftly recorded. The women had stood to sing the traditional “Jerusalem,” if at a somewhat faster tempo than was customary. Still, they had reached this night a deep, throaty trill on “Bring me my chariot of fire!”—for so many, a favorite line, unifying the straying or hesitant warblers into a mighty whole—before the effort collapsed again at “I will not cease from mental fight.”

Finally, reports from the Flower Show and Guy Fawkes committees had been rushed through in unseemly haste, lest they detract from the main event: Wanda Batton-Smythe's address to the troops.

The men of the village, upholding a time-honored tradition in the

division of labor, were of course safely ensconced amongst the gleaming brass and cheery glow of the nearby Hidden Fox pub.

“I am, as you know, not one to mince words, and you can always count on me to call a spade a spade,” Wanda reminded them, her voice filling the room like a sonic gun. “The preparations for the annual Harvest Fayre are in an absolute *shambles*. We have all *got* to start pulling our socks up.”

Calling on her knowledge of public speaking, newly refreshed by a re-reading of the 1983 classic *Grabbing Your Audience by the Throat: Tips and Tricks for the Successful Orator*, Wanda paused, her unblinking gaze panning the crowd, gathering eyeballs like so many marbles into her rhetorical basket.

“A *shambles*,” she repeated, a doomsday prophetess. “It’s an absolute disgrace.”

Lily Iverson, rightly assuming part of this condemnation to be aimed starkly at her small head, began a stuttering apology, but in such a small voice as to be easily drowned out by Wanda’s stentorian tones. It was a bullying technique nicely honed during Wanda’s time in the trenches of the parish council meetings, where skirmishes over the proposed redesign of the coat of arms had become the stuff of legend. The name Wanda Batton-Smythe indeed was often invoked by young parents in warnings aimed at keeping their offspring in line, for she had become for many an embodiment of fear, a veritable bogeywoman.

Wanda now stood before the group, marshaling her resources for further onslaught, her broad, still-handsome face framed by a starched collar over a dark summer wool dress that Cotton Mather would have approved. Her hair was a helmet of hardened curls, like rows of teeny brown snakes highlighted and poised to strike, living testament to the efficacy of Final Net, and her bosom was tightly bound in some unmoving modern wonder fabric that rendered her body rigid and unbowing, much like her mind. The gray eyes again scanned her audience like an advance scout awaiting the approach of enemy forces. Altogether she looked, as always, more like a woman gearing up for battle than the leader of a group of well-intentioned if somewhat loopy volunteers. Much of her life with her husband the Major, as well as her own service in the Women’s Royal Army Corps, had rubbed off.

“Wanda, I don’t think—” began Suzanna Winship, the willowy blond sister of the local doctor, coming to the defense of Lily, whose lower lip had begun to tremble around her adult braces. Wrapped in a fluffy white mohair dress of her own design (Lily owned a local yarn and knitting business), her hair clipped short around protuberant ears, she resembled a Chihuahua puppy abandoned in a snowdrift.

Wanda pounced.

“You have not asked to be recognized, nor have you been given permission to speak.”

“Permission to speak?” Suzanna spluttered, looking round her: *Did anyone else find Wanda ridiculous?* They did, but no one had the courage to indicate so by word or deed, at least not to Wanda’s face. Suzanna was new to the village. She’d learn.

Elka Garth, a grandmotherly woman in her fifties who owned the village bakery-slash-tea room, did exhale a soft little sigh, adjusting her thick glasses and wishing the Reverend Max Tudor would hurry up and marry so his wife might take on the role traditionally allotted to those in her position. A palace coup, as it were, was called for. But the Vicar remained unwed—despite being a rakishly handsome man whose arrival in the village three years ago had had much the impact of a Hugh Grant exiting the elevator as Aretha Franklin sang “What you want, Baby I got” (Elka was a movie buff). His advent having utterly galvanized the female population, he remained, it was felt, *stubbornly* unattached despite the concerted best efforts of every woman in Nether Monkslip to corral him for either themselves or a relative. Over time, he tended to be thought of as “more in the mold of Tom Hanks,” which only leant more to his appeal, and to the frustration of what came to be called, with linguistic inaccuracy, the Anglican Yenta Corps.

Only slightly daunted, Suzanna now stood up in her sexy, slip-on heels, her hair artfully tousled, a cruel if unintentional contrast to Wanda’s battened-down facade. Aware that most women hated her on sight, or at least regarded her with deep suspicion as having the potential to quickly develop, without careful monitoring, into the village hussy, Suzanna had cultivated in self-defense a genuinely warm and disarming persona. The others watched in

awed silence as they realized she was going to engage. It was like watching a sacrificial virgin preparing to fling herself into the mouth of an active volcano.

“It is not Lily’s fault that the vendor let us down,” Suzanna said loudly, anticipating Wanda’s air-raid siren shout-down. When roused, Suzanna could give as good as she got, and in defense of someone already as down-trodden as Lily, Suzanna could be formidable indeed. Besides, she knew there lingered among the members of the Women’s Institute some unresolved feeling, however unwarranted, from the debacle that was the “All about Mixing Cocktails!” program of earlier in the year. Suzanna, who had suggested the scheme, and felt some ground had been lost in the sound-judgment department, was anxious to shine here.

“The Fayre this year apparently has been a cock-up all round compared with previous years, but perhaps we could focus efforts on what we should be doing to be ready anyway in one week’s time.”

Wanda, who had drawn a deep, shocked breath on the word “cock-up,” had not otherwise disturbed the loaded silence of the room. Mme. Cuthbert, who operated La Maison Bleue wine and cheese shop with a polished élan, allowed herself a small moue of approval in Suzanna’s direction. The others stared straight ahead, like zombies in a bad Sci-Fi movie.

Finally, Awena Owen, the village’s self-proclaimed New-Agey Neopagan, for want of a better description, was emboldened to speak, pushing back her thick dark hair, striking because of its single streak of white over one brow. She stood, feet solidly planted, a vital, comely, and charismatic figure who, although essentially otherworldly, managed to operate her New Age gift shop on a large profit margin. She was well liked and respected by the villagers, who called her the Great White Oprah.

“I have a few extra chairs in my shop,” Awena said now, “cluttering up the back room. One needs mending, is all. I’d bet the rest of us could have a look in our attics and find something there too. Save us money, anyway, and this *is* all for charity.”

Wanda Batton-Smythe found her voice at last.

“I Know It’s For Charity,” she bit out, her tone now apocalyptic. She looked like a bishop about to consign the Maid of Orléans to the flames.

“We’ll have a hodgepodge of furniture in the tea tent that won’t match.” Her mouth, which she had barely peeled open for speech, now snapped shut in a thin line of distaste, as if Awena had suggested they all ride naked in the fete’s pony ride.

“So?” said Awena, not unreasonably.

“Then that’s settled,” yelled Suzanna, in triumph this time. She began rootling in her handbag for pencil and paper. “If everyone would put down their name and the number of chairs they think they can provide. We’ll need tables, too, of course. Now, as to the Bring and Buy . . .”

Lily swiveled a brief, grateful glance in her direction, but overall Lily’s round brown eyes remained fixed on Wanda’s face. It was a sight not without fascination as outrage, frustration, and murderous impulse struggled for supremacy. Wanda seemed to telegraph an unambiguous *Fuck you* in Suzanna’s direction, but when she spoke she had evidently decided to “Rise Above It.” Cutting across the bring and buy chatter, she said, “As we seem to have no choice in the matter, due to the incompetence of the person in charge” (here she pointed a quivering, outraged finger in Lily’s direction, in case anyone remained in doubt who was to blame), “this poor stopgap measure will have to do.” She sighed heavily, dissatisfaction puckering her lips. “As I am in charge of the Bring and Buy, there is no need for further discussion. That will come off like clockwork.” The *or else* was implied, and hung in the air like sulfur following a visit from Beelzebub himself. “Now, tonight we have refreshments, provided by Elka Garth, so if there is no further business . . .” She brought down the gavel before anyone could speak.

Nonetheless, Elka had a small contribution to make.

“I’ve brought two kinds of biscuits—chocolate this time. As usual, one made with peanuts and one without.”

Wanda nodded her approval. She was allergic to peanuts and appreciated that Elka always made concessions in this regard. There was a headlong rush towards the food-and-drinks table followed by more than a little genteel elbowing, for Elka was a superb baker.

Pigs to the trough, thought Wanda. Aloud she said, with a regal nod, in public recognition of a good and faithful servant, “Thank you *sooo* much, Elka.”

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Lead by example, that was the ticket. Never let it be said that Wanda Batton-Smythe was not the embodiment of gracious behavior at all times. She folded her glasses into her handbag—a handbag ever present, like the Queen’s—and snapped it shut.

Never.



CHAPTER 2

The Vicar

Not far from the unpleasantness at the Village Hall, the Reverend Maxen “Max” Tudor, object of much interest and strategic planning, sat in the vicarage study. A darkened fireplace was before him, and a Gordon setter asleep at his feet; a glass of whiskey and soda was at one hand, a pen in the other, and a writing pad atop his knees. To anyone looking in through the mullioned windows of the study, the darkly handsome man presented a picture of absorbed contentment as he worked on his sermon for the next day. The topic, James and the two kinds of wisdom, was more than normally appropriate, had he but known it: The one kind of wisdom—pure, peaceable, and gentle—came from above, but the other was earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.”

That nothing had changed from James’s time did not prevent Max from believing in future miracles, but he himself thought this duality was what made the occasional monster in the room harder to spot. People, in his experience, were always a combination of good and bad, of wisdom and foolishness. The family man, loved by his wife, friends, and colleagues, who turns out to be a serial killer—the seeming contradiction of such a nature continued to provide endless fodder for psychologists and theologians. It was a question of the extremes of good and evil, not a question of whether either existed. Max knew both did.

But it was a topic too large to contain in the minutes he allotted himself for a sermon; he was ever conscious of the moment when he might lose his congregation's mind to fretting over the shopping list, or a loose button, or what was on the telly that night. Himself preoccupied and uneasy for no reason he could discern, Max set aside the pad, and stood and stretched.

Tall and with a compact, muscular build, Max Tudor was a man physically at ease in the world, and his authoritative mien stood him well among the more fractious members of his congregation. Max, they sensed, beneath his open and welcoming countenance was not a man to be crossed. Insurrections were quelled, animosities quickly put aside, in his presence. Only the weekly struggle to the death over the church flower rota was beyond his capacity to suppress, since the desire to have more opportunities to interact with Max himself was the reason behind the infighting.

Now the whiskey and the stillness of the room were making him drowsy, yet he was determined to have the sermon put to bed before he himself slept. He decided on a rousing cup of tea; stepping carefully around Thea's luxuriant black and tan tresses, he moved towards the kitchen. Thea had earlier been fed and walked, and would have a final turn around the village before bedtime, none of which prevented her from now following him in the hope of another treat, an extra walk, or a random comment on her remarkable beauty.

Writing the sermon was one of Max's favorite duties, but this week he'd put it off, like a student late with a paper. He turned the topic over in his mind as he waited for the kettle to boil, attempting to resume the theme of duality that had so captivated James—the Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde, heaven-and-hell nature of mankind. The following Sunday's sermon, much of which he had already drafted, was far easier. The topic for the day after the Harvest Fayre could only be thanksgiving for all that heaven and nature had provided: food, shelter, clothing, freedom from want.

"You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder." How much corruption, he wondered now, political and personal, came about because of greed? Out of coveting what we do not have, whether it be the neighbor's wife or the neighbor's goods, as the commandments had so neatly encapsulated men's motives?

Back in the study with his Earl Grey he sat distractedly tapping the cap

of his pen against the writing pad. It was cold enough for a small fire, he thought, and even if it weren't, he was going to rush the season. The sounds and smells of burning wood could always soothe if not inspire.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Hooser, had placed a somewhat lopsided arrangement of dried flowers in the hearth, a placeholder until the first autumn chill. He rose, set aside the flowers to open the flue, and took three of last winter's small logs from the stack, arranging them in a pyramid on top of kindling wood and crumpled paper. Soon a small blaze emerged, and he pulled his chair in closer to enjoy it. Thea hunkered down near enough to singe her coat, until he called her back. Both man and dog heaved a sigh of satisfaction.

He sipped his tea. Maybe he'd wing the sermon. It wouldn't be the first time.

The church of St. Edwold's had a small office, but Max preferred the coziness of the vicarage study. The house had been built, with uncommon foresight, along economical lines two hundred years previously. The room where he sat was effectively a study-slash-sitting room and had been the scene of many private counseling sessions with troubled parishioners, or, in some cases, parishioners with simply too much time on their hands. It was small and modern compared with what was now the Old Vicarage, occupied by Noah's Ark Antiques, the church having cashed in on rising property prices, recognizing the waste of maintaining such a large building. Everything had changed from the old days, when parsons were often the younger sons of gentry, and might themselves have private holdings. Unheard of was the stereotypical younger son choosing the church (or the army, navy, or the law) so the family wealth could devolve on the eldest. Those days had more or less gone out with the barouches of *Pride and Prejudice*.

The room where he sat was small, with wood-paneled walls and the beautiful mullioned windows, reminiscent of an old manor house. Two walls were in fact bookshelves that stretched to the ceiling; on the third wall hung Max's collection of small seascape paintings, particularly those of a local artist named Coombebridge. A cross and a copy of Caravaggio's famous *The Betrayal of Christ* hung on the wall opposite.

The room contained many museum-quality relics, including a Bakelite

phone so ancient Max was always astonished when it rang, and tended to shout into it as though, himself ancient and hard of hearing, he was calling to someone cast adrift on a raging sea. Much of the furniture when he'd arrived at the vicarage had been heavy, dark, or ugly—in other words, Victorian—and he'd had a good clearing out. Noah Caraway of Noah's Ark had taken much of it on commission.

The windows of the room were swathed by a fusty collection of curtain hangings, relicts of Walter Bokeler, his predecessor. They looked like they might have been made from Queen Victoria's cast-off undergarments. He always meant to get them changed but the money was always needed in a nobler cause. Leather chairs (his) and a skirted sofa (Bokeler's) were grouped around the attractive stone fireplace.

Some of the shelves lining the walls were filled with old volumes of sermons by presumably esteemed and undoubtedly long-dead sermonizers. Most had been privately printed and were expensively bound in dark embossed leather—walls of books that should have warmed the room but instead tended to suggest that the march of history was long, gray, and deadly dull. Max had long wished to rid himself of them, along with the curtains, but who, when it came down to it, would want them? Even the owner of the new-and-used bookshop in the village had politely declined to take the volumes on commission. Repeatedly. As had Noah Caraway.

The air in the room grew close from the heat. Max walked over and pushed the casement wide, letting into the room the night scents of the plants beneath the window. He saw a sky still and clear, bright with stars. A hint of approaching autumn hung in the air, giving the garden the smell of something just washed with cold rain. Beyond his range of vision, outside the village of Nether Monkslip, were green fields turning yellow as the earth continued its slow tilt away from the sun. It would soon be the autumn equinox, long recognized under different guises and names. In the church, the feast of St. Michael—Michaelmas—had been assigned to mark this all-important shortening of days.

He decided he was hungry, but could not get excited at the prospect of whatever foil-wrapped packet Mrs. Hooser, the woman who "did" for him

(and whom he had inherited, much like the curtains, from Walter Bokeler) had left in the fridge for him to reheat. It was more than likely a rubbery pasta-ish dish smothered in a sauce containing either suspect mushrooms or equally suspect-looking herbs. Mrs. Hooser cooked from store-bought packets for her own children, the extravagantly named Tildy Ann and her younger brother Tom, which on the whole, Max felt, may have added years to the children's odds of survival.

She often brought Tom and Tildy Ann with her to the vicarage on the occasions when her own "help" had failed to materialize. Tildy Ann, a bossy little thing, as vigilant as her mother was feckless, kept Tom on the straight and narrow, held firm in her small iron grip. She was also fiercely protective of him: woe betide anyone who might try to do Tom a harm.

That Mrs. Hooser was at best an indifferent housekeeper was a fact to which Max had long become resigned. She tended to move and speak with sweeping, theatrical gestures and, as a result, many a vicarage bibelot had met a shattering fate at her hands. With bovine cunning, she would attempt to hide the evidence of the latest catastrophe—the broken crockery, the missing drawer handle—apparently never learning that Max, the most forgiving of employers, was incapable of anything but mild reproof. Mrs. Hooser, with her indifferent Hoovering and her doubtful menu selections, had found secure employment at last, had she but known it—an island in the storm-tossed sea of life. She responded to his forbearance with an inflated protectiveness of her own, more or less frisking every visitor to the vicarage. As she was raising the two children alone, Mrs. Hooser had become an obligation Max felt both obliged and (more or less) content to accept.

She called him Father Tudor, and he knew without trying he'd never be able to persuade her to a less formal mode of address. He in his turn always called her Mrs. Hooser. The "Mrs." was a courtesy title she had granted to herself, he suspected. If there had ever been either a Mr. Hooser, or a boyfriend, he had long since left the field.

Max Tudor had been at St. Edwold's nearly three years, a time of relative peace and respite, for himself as well as Mrs. Hooser. He had gathered from

various villagers that the search to find a replacement for Walter Bokeler had not gone smoothly, particularly as three joint parishes were involved. In fact, the position had been vacant for several months.

He had been surprised to learn that many Nether Monkslip villagers had plumped for a female vicar. This seemed daringly forward looking for what was clearly a hidebound place, even recklessly avante-garde, until someone had explained the reasoning: "You can generally get more work out of a woman." Others, of course, felt this was the thin edge of the wedge and were vehemently opposed to a female in the role.

Max also had gathered his single status had been cause for debate until, as has been mentioned, the women of Nether Monkslip got a good look at him. (What the men thought in this regard as in so many others did not really matter.) Even then, the question of whether or not he was professionally celibate and intended to remain so was an argument that had raged long into the wee hours at the Hidden Fox.

For it was a truth universally acknowledged that a single vicar must be in want of a wife. Someone to make traybakes and scones; someone to teach Sunday School. Of course there were others to fill these roles but it wasn't right somehow that there was no one on hand to be officially landed with these jobs. And in some matters, it must be said, it was to a woman the parishioners wanted to unburden themselves. For some of the men and women of the parish, there was an element of embarrassment in confiding one's troubles to such a handsome male specimen, however kindhearted and well-intentioned he might be.

But the tide had turned, and those in the "Max Camp" had won out. Over the months leading into years, Max's genuine and growing affection for the countryside and its people had gone a long way toward wearing away the misgivings that naturally attended on any new incumbent. Max was, luckily, the kind of man also to inspire a fanatic protectiveness amongst all his parishioners, not just Mrs. Hooser. Within a short period of time (short by village standards, which tended to measure things in centuries) Max had become *their* vicar.

His enthusiasm for and willing participation in customs such as the upcoming Fayre had only helped in winning them over. The payoff for him—a

sense of being vital to the community—was huge. It was nearly a 180-degree change from the frequent isolation, and the secrecy, of his former life.

The Fayre's official title was "Harvest Home: A Harvest Fayre"—Max had seen flyers posted with ruthless efficiency by Wanda Batton-Smythe throughout the village (or more likely, by whomever she'd managed to shanghai onto the Fayre publicity committee). The flyer featured an amateurishly drawn collection of apples and gourds, unconsciously phallic in composition and execution. Max gathered that every year for decades there had been great excitement over the Largest Vegetable competition ("That would be my husband," was the standard comment), which was an adjunct to the Marrow-Growing contest. Both competitions had been known to produce rather strong feeling that could linger for weeks if not for generations, so those called to judge did not, if they were wise, take their duties lightly. The day also would feature many tests of skill like Ball in the Bottle. (There was, predictably, also a more ribald name for this event.)

Alongside the competitions, there would be produce stalls selling honey, jam, jelly, chutney, and pickles, in addition to all the usual handcrafted items and the parsley and dandelion wines that had come to typify the offerings of small English villages. Nether Monkslip—a village of professional bakers, tailors, knitters, potters, weavers, and so forth—was subjected to much less of the usual rubbish than other villages, where oddly misshapen baby clothes and jars of stuff teeming with gestating botulism were the norm.

And of course there was Wanda Batton-Smythe leading the charge of the Women's Institute, to insure that all went well—if not, they'd have Wanda to answer to.

The Women's Institute, reflected Max, settling back into his chair. That backbone of English village life, founded nearly one hundred years ago and still responsible for much kindhearted do-gooding in the world. Because of a paucity of volunteers, many other groups had died out; the WI had assumed disproportionate status, especially in such a small village as Nether Monkslip. The Fayre, along with the various Christmas festivities, had likewise come to assume monumental importance, with the responsibility for its success falling to the women and to whatever men could be dragooned into helping with the heavy lifting. Max, while aware of the stressors inherent in the situation,

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and somewhat ill at ease because of them, could see no way, or any real reason, to stop it.

In any event, his duties for the Fayre were not onerous, consisting of an opening blessing, judging the Largest Vegetable competition (despite his many protests, he had not been spared), and preventing various members of the choir, recruited as entertainment, from strangling Wanda Batton-Smythe to death.

Max's mouth twitched into a wry, complacent grin. It was all so predictable. All the usual harmless fun. Somehow this year's Fayre seemed to him a significant milestone, an outward sign of his successful entry into his new life. A good, solid case of, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

He found he was actually looking forward to it.