

Chapter 1

"Are you all ready for Saturday, Mrs. Bascomb?" asked Father Charles Hervey.

"Yes, Father," she said. "I must say, it's a real pleasure working with a couple who understand and appreciate sacred music the way Dr. Dobbs and Miss Orford do."

Mrs. Bascomb was nothing if not old-school. Even Father Charles himself would have said "James and Anne" instead of "Dr. Dobbs and Miss Orford," but it had always seemed to him to be the prerogative above all of church-musicians to keep the old ways, and he loved and appreciated St. Gabriel's choirmistress for it. Father Charles, spending his days as he did among his flock, ministering to their needs, had to adjust to the ways of the 21st Century. Mrs. Bascomb, widow, originally of Shropshire, spending her days at her console and with the little choir who adored Cranmer's language and Byrd's music as much as she did, kept a sacred—a literally sacred—flame alight for them all.

"What did they choose, then?" he inquired.

"Well, the professor was so kind and said that any Bach I wanted to play would be lovely, but Miss Orford made him admit that he has his heart set on the big 'Komm, Heiliger Geist', and she said she wouldn't mind if I played it for both prelude and postlude."

"Nor would I!" said Father Charles. "He really is a man of taste!"

"It's a bear, and it's been a while, but I couldn't refuse."

"But you won't do it for pre and post?"

"Oh, no, of course not. After, I think, so they can enjoy it. Before, just the usual."

Father Charles hummed *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, his eyebrows lifting to keep the high triplets in tune, and they both laughed.

"And the choir?"

"'If Ye Love Me' and 'Ave Verum'. Dr. Dobbs suggested 'Ubi Caritas', but Miss Orford put him in his place and told him that, unless he was planning to wash her feet, she wouldn't have that at her wedding. 'James,' she said, 'you know yourself that that is absolutely a Maundy Thursday piece. I don't want to be thinking about Gethsemane when I'm giving you my troth!'"

Father Charles chuckled. "Sharp as a tack, that one."

"Don't I know it. She's promised to come back to the choir after their honeymoon."

"And James?"

"She thinks she can convince him. I wish he were a tenor, but he'll definitely be able to sing solos, if his hymn-singing is anything to go by."

"Oh, that'll be brilliant!" said Father Charles, sounding like a little boy. "Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on Christmas Carols?"

"Oh, Father don't get your hopes up, but I suppose it's possible. If you get carried away, though, the warblers might rebel." ("Warblers" was their private term for the older women in the soprano section.)

"Let them, if we have Anne!"

"Father! You are so naughty!"

Father Charles sighed. Mrs. Bascomb was right. He loved liturgy and worship so much that he did often forget that liturgy was for the faithful, not the faithful for liturgy.

"You're right, Mrs. Bascomb. Of course you're right. We mustn't upset the warblers."

They were in the nave of the little clapboard church that Father Charles had worked so hard to make look Norman on the inside, by the organ console on the Epistle side of the tiny choir stalls. Mrs. Bascomb had just finished her Thursday practice and Father Charles, as was his custom, had come to discuss the weekend's services.

"Did you meet that friend of Mrs. Orford's who's come to stay?" Mrs. Bascomb asked. "They say she has a lovely voice, too—and Mrs. Orford said she would be with us for several months."

"They registered her, then?" asked Father Charles with surprise. He had indeed met Laura Standish, the divorcee who had come to stay with the Orfords, but there had been no indication she was planning to remain with them more than a few days.

"Yes—Miss Orford said that Mrs. Orford persuaded, er, Mrs.—that is to say—"

Father Charles couldn't suppress his smile. "Why don't we call her Ms. Standish, Mrs. Bascomb?"

Mrs. Bascomb's mouth became small with distaste. "Very well, Father."

"That's not a bit of a tendency to back-bite, is it there, that I see, Mrs. Bascomb?"

The sight of the sixty-year-old Mrs. Bascomb blushing was, in its way, delightful. "Yes, Father," she said penitently. She took a tiny notebook from its place on the organ console, found

a page, and made a mark. Father Charles knew that that meant she would remember to confess it, next time. He pushed back a sigh at the thought: Mrs. Bascomb's confessions could go on a bit.

"At any rate, Father, Mrs. Orford persuaded Ms. Standish that a long stay in Middlefield might be a very good thing for her. Miss Orford was certainly happy about that; she calls Ms. Standish 'Aunt Laura'."

"She certainly seemed like a lovely person during the little time I had to chat with her."

In fact, Laura Standish had made much more of an impression on Father Charles than he cared to admit to Ginevra Bascomb. The previous Sunday, as soon as he had walked up the length of the nave in the opening procession and turned to his congregation to say "Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," he had noticed that there was an unfamiliar face in the Orfords' usual pew, halfway up on the Epistle side (his left, as he faced the people). Her lovely voice had been immediately apparent during the Gloria, and he had been uncomfortably conscious that he was having a hard time keeping his eyes on the little rose window at the back of the nave, where they usually rested while he was singing with the congregation or saying the prayers of the Mass. The newcomer was tall, and quite, well, buxom (as Father Charles put it to himself). She had chestnut hair that was short, but not too short, and bright blue eyes. She wore a lovely grey dress that somehow made him think of home—of Lincolnshire, so many miles and years away. Perhaps it was the way the grey of the dress and the blue of her eyes evoked English skies, with their lowering rain-clouds that could clear into blue without a moment's notice. She seemed about the same age as Caitlin Orford—40? 42?

On the way out of the nave, as he had stood greeting his parishioners, he had been struck by her beauty and by the quietness of her demeanor. Surely he was imagining things, but he had even felt, on shaking her hand, that something had been communicated from him to her, and from her to him: some reassurance that they would find an opportunity to get to know one another better.



The wedding of Miss Anne Orford to Dr. James Dobbs was celebrated at St. Gabriel's on the Saturday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity, in June. The little church was filled with well-wishers. The Orfords had been some of the earliest residents of Middlefield, way back in

Colonial days, and Dr. Dobbs was well-known and well-liked despite the few months when his affair with a student—Miss Orford—had been the current rumor of the town. All scandal had been avoided when their engagement was announced several months after Miss Orford's graduation. If there were anyone who knew to the contrary, he or she did not come forward, undoubtedly (were such a one to exist, that is) out of his or her love for Anne and James. The only member of the wedding party who showed any sign of misgiving was the bride's father, Joe Orford. But he was a quiet, though intense, man, and such displeasure as he felt, he kept to himself.

Laura Standish was visibly in attendance, in one of the front pews on the bride's side. Presiding from behind the altar, Father Charles found it difficult to keep his eyes off her. Her voice was lovely indeed: truly almost of operatic quality. As he went through the wonderful old ritual of the nuptial Mass, he found his mind wandering to a single question over and over. Why was Middlefield a good place for Laura Standish to stay for a while? Was it to do with the closeness of Laura to the Orfords? Or was there, as it seemed there might be, some reason in the life of St. Gabriel's itself?

Charles had, over the years, accustomed himself to a certain amount of envy towards the couples he married, but he found it particularly hard not to envy this bride and this groom. Anne looked so very lovely in her lace-covered wedding gown, and James, in his impeccable dinner-jacket, seemed fully cognizant of his incredible good fortune. Their love had been tested, and they had won through to this marvelous day. As Father Charles heard Anne recite her vow in her clear alto, he thought of the many choices in his past that had led him to his celibate state.

Charles Hervey was a dominant. He had known it from earliest childhood, when, at the age of eight, he had gotten in trouble for spanking his younger sisters. Strapped himself for his trouble, he remembered feeling guilty in the knowledge that, although he had certainly been able to trump up a fine pretext for the mass chastisement he had organized (his sisters had plucked the flowers from their mother's rose-bushes), his real motive had been that, even at that age, spanking another's bottom was something that gave him a funny, but very pleasant, feeling that he seemed to want as much of as he could get.

How does a dominant become a priest? The standard path is for the boy in question to flee to the Lord for succour from the terrible desires of his flesh. Later, to his horror, he discovers that somehow being consecrated to undertake the cure of souls has not in fact relieved

him of his erotic need to discipline. That need, twisted, turns him into a terrible priest and a terrible person, whether it emerges into the open or not, and whether atrocities are committed or not.

There was a bit of the flight to God for Charles at the beginning of the process of discernment that led finally to his decision to apply to seminary and to seek the priesthood. His intelligence, however, from an early date, was such that he knew with certainty that God had made him as he was. For one thing he thanked God every day: that he had been born an Anglican. Indeed, as often as he could remember, he said a silent, secret prayer to Joan Cranmer, the poor early-dead wife of the archbishop responsible for the English reformation; without her, he thought, Charles's own life might have been twisted like so many others of those spiritually inclined, but also of strong erotic disposition.

Almost as often as he had confessed to his own confessors his attractions to dominant erotic practices like spanking and anal sex, he had been assured that erotic acts among consenting adults were not inherently sinful, no matter what their nature. He knew that BDSM was not wrong; the difficulty was in finding the sort of partner whose desires he might fulfill, and who might fulfill his desires, in a world that would not have the same theological understanding that his confessors did—a world that would be watching the Internet for any sign that a local priest was taking women to the rectory to give them a thorough hiding.

This difficulty had not prevented him from attaining, over the years, to a very considerable degree of skill in the erotic practice of Dominance and submission, though. Dominants in masks are generally welcome anywhere kinksters gather, and Charles, in his twenty-first year, on the verge of ordination, had commissioned a sturdy, comfortable, full-masked hood that had lasted him until he had finally taken the decision, on the offer of a like-minded priest who needed an assistant who would someday succeed him, to remove to Middlefield. The hood had been useful beyond, as well, the few times he'd gotten to Burlington for BDSM events, though he was actually so occupied with affairs at St. Gabriel's, and so satisfied with the work of making a *de facto* BDSM church run smoothly, that it had been months since the last time he had actually spanked anyone, let alone had the kind of assignation that had made New York bearable for him. More than that, though, one of his hopes in moving to Middlefield and St. Gabriel's had been that there he could stand even a slight chance of finding a play-partner who might also be something more.

Chapter 2

Laura Standish came to meet with Father Charles on the Monday after the Feast of Corpus Christi—that is, ten days after James and Anne's wedding.

"Good morning, Reverend Hervey," she said, pronouncing it correctly, "Harvey." That pleased him much more than it should have, he supposed. "Or should I call you Father Charles?"

"Parishioners usually call me Father Charles, but please employ whatever style makes you comfortable, Ms. Standish."

"I'll call you Father Charles, then. I grew up in an Anglo-Catholic parish, actually."

"Really?" he asked. "Where?"

Laura named a parish in the Midwest, where Charles had known many of the clergy, and they compared notes, companionably, for a little while, still standing at the church door.

"It was such a lovely wedding, wasn't it?" she said, then. "I don't know whether anyone has thanked you as much as you deserve for making it so special for them. Anne's told me a great deal about how it all came about, and it seems to me that you truly deserve much of the credit!" Charles felt in danger of blushing, an extremely unfamiliar and rather uncomfortable feeling, but Laura continued on, "Did you see the pictures Anne put up? It looks like they're having such a wonderful time in Rome!"

"I didn't see them—I'm on the 'net very rarely. I'm just too old, I guess."

"No you're not!" said Laura. She pushed a few buttons on her phone. Charles was distressed to find that he was, frankly, enchanted. "It's so easy, and if you need help I'll help you anytime. There."

She turned her phone towards him, and Charles saw a picture of Anne and James—that is, Dr. and Mrs. James Dobbs—in front of St. Peter's. James's arm was lightly around Anne's waist, and she was looking up into his eyes. The looks on their faces were radiantly happy. "Oh my word," Charles couldn't help exclaiming. "Those two." For the tiniest moment, Charles wondered what they had been doing the night before—whether Anne had been tied to the bedpost, whether James had bought an expensive Italian flogger in Rome—but he managed to push such things from his mind.

"I know," said Laura. "It kind of gives you hope." To Charles's surprise, she seemed to be blushing. "I suppose I really need that kind of hope right now." She looked into Charles's face as if seeking an indication that it was all right for her to be divorced.

"I understand, Ms. Standish."

"Please, call me Laura."

They went into the Rector's study and sat down.

"First of all," Charles said, "I want you to know that St. Gabriel's, and I, are here for you. I know only the vaguest outline of your situation, Laura, but all such upheavals in our lives are painful and stressful, and to the extent that you feel that anything in the spiritual realm might help you get through your days, I want you to know that you may call upon this parish."

"Thank you, Father."

"With that in view, could you tell me whatever you're comfortable telling me about your intentions with respect to St. Gabriel's? When I know something about what your interest is in that respect, I'll be better able to inform you about what we might have to offer."

Laura took a deep breath. "All right," she said. "I was, I suppose, both hoping and dreading you might say something like that. I'm just going to lay the whole thing out in front of you. I don't know what you'll think or what the Church will think, but I want to start being part of a community again, and it seems like St. Gabriel's may be a good place to begin.

"I was married at eighteen to a kind man—Victor—he's an engineer. We had one beautiful child: a girl. They still live in Southern California, where I lived with them for the past eighteen years, until ..." Laura looked down at her hands in her lap, then back up at Charles. "... something—something I had known for a very long time ..." She looked into his eyes with a kind of plea for help, and Charles understood, and he had to conceal the shudder that went through his frame by shifting suddenly in his seat.

"Ms. Standish," (He didn't think under the circumstances he should accept the invitation to call her by her Christian name right then.) "I have an inkling that you're referring to what I would call 'erotic matters'."

Laura nodded gratefully, paused, then nodded quickly again. Suddenly the words rushed out of her. "I decided that I needed to try to live out what I was feeling ... what I had known I had needed for so long, but hadn't been able—or willing—or felt right about" Just as soon as the flow of words had begun, they dried up, but then she saw that Charles knew what she was talking

about, and a smile of happiness broke out on her face. The shadow of an idea that had been making its way to the surface of Charles's consciousness since the moment Laura had started pressing buttons on her phone broke out into his full awareness at the very same time. Father Charles was falling in love. *Well, he thought, that's got to be stopped, or I'll never hear the end of it from Mrs. Bascomb.*

Laura was going on more fluidly again, now. "I was living a lie, and it seemed to be harder every day. And meanwhile my friend from college, Caitlin Sullivan, had married Joe Orford, and here they were, and Caitlin finally told me about how special St. Gabriel's is, and they're so happy ... and I was so unhappy. I had to see—I had to try."

Charles tried to put his next question as delicately as he could. "And were these matters the only reason ..."

"Oh, no. Victor and I had been making each other miserable for ten years."

There was something pat in the response that Charles didn't like much. Laura seemed so genuine and honest with herself in every other respect, but it seemed to him that perhaps the matter of her divorce, and its real reasons, were something she might not be quite as willing to examine.

"Thank you, Laura—that helps a good deal. Let's get the formal part out of the way: would you like to be received into the parish?"

"Yes, Father. Very much."

"Do you consider yourself to be a Head of Household, a taken-in-hand, or neither?" He watched an exquisite blush cross her face, and found himself in very grave danger.

She looked down and said, softly, "Taken-in-hand, Father."

"Very well—in that case there are some other questions I need to ask, if that's all right."

She looked up and the blush cleared. "Oh, quite all right, Father—Caitlin talked me through the whole process."

Why the blush, then, at the first question? That was troubling, in its own way.

"Did Caitlin explain to you about the way the Sacrament of Reconciliation works here at St. Gabriel's?"

The blush returned. "She did, Father."

"When, if ever, was your last confession?"

"Oh, not since I was a girl. Twenty-five years?"

"Caitlin probably also told you that the sacrament is one that I recommend to all parishioners. Your status is a bit unusual though, Laura, so at least as of now I'm not going to make a specific recommendation. On the other hand, it may well be that upon reflection you decide that you would like to confess."

"Actually, father I have already reflected. I would very much like to confess."

"All right, then," replied Father Charles, "why don't we set up a time for later this week?"

"Not now?" asked Laura, surprised.

"It's important that after the little chat we'll have right now, you have some time to meditate on what we're going to talk about. Especially after such a long break, you'll have to decide what's best, to your way of thinking, in terms of how much detail you want to go into. A twenty-five year confession can be a very long thing, or a relatively brief one." Father Charles chuckled. He reached into the file and pulled out a little brochure, which he gave to Laura, with the title "Reconciliation and You." "This brochure should help a bit. The main thing," he continued, "is to meditate on what it is that troubles you—what makes you wish to be reconciled to God and to yourself, in the things you have done and failed to do in the intervening years. I suspect that you'll have some things to confess in more detail from the last little while. There's no harm in letting that conduct stand for the conduct of the whole twenty-five years."

Laura nodded. Her charming blush had faded, but then it suddenly returned. "Father?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Should I expect ... I mean ..."

Father Charles had a notion of what she was trying to ask, but he didn't feel comfortable helping. He tried to regard her with a look of patient, kind expectation.

"Oh, what the hell ... How many lashes do you get for twenty-five years of sin?" The blush seemed to suffuse her face and travel down to her bosom.

Father Charles smiled. "That depends almost entirely on the penitent," he said.

"And not on the sins?" she asked, surprised.

"No, not at all," Father Charles said. "There are those for whom one lash can do what would require fifty for someone else."

"How do you know? I mean, how do you know who needs one and who needs fifty?"

"It takes a while," Charles admitted. "For your first confession to me, one of the questions

I shall ask is how many lashes you think you deserve."

"Will you follow my suggestion?" Laura asked, astonished.

"That will depend upon your confession, but it's a very important guideline for me."

"So if you think I'm not being hard enough on myself ..."

"Well, more importantly, if I think you're fooling yourself. The reason I believe so strongly in penitential spanking is that I believe it has two very beneficial effects on adults who have submitted themselves to the practice. The first is a cleansing effect, as I call it. Absolution is lovely, but Absolution plus a spanking, for those who feel the need, is even lovelier. The second effect, though, is perhaps even more important. For those who embrace spanking, the real physical pain of it can break through psychological barriers, I have found."

Charles regarded Laura frankly. From long experience, he knew what the next question she wanted to ask was. He wondered whether he would have to help her ask it.

He watched her take a deep breath. She looked into his eyes, as if trying to determine whether it were safe. Then she spoke: "There's something rather embarrassing that I asked Caitlin about, Father. And she said I should talk to you about it. We already touched on it a little bit. It's the ... erotic part. Do the other single women ... become ... aroused?" She lowered her voice at the last word to a confidential whisper, which father Charles found, unfortunately, enchanting.

"Almost all of them," Charles reassured her.

"And that's okay? I mean, they don't get more lashes for it?"

Charles laughed. "We leave that kind of thing for the bedroom, Laura." He shouldn't have said it, he knew, but the conversation seemed to be leading down delightful paths that he was having great difficulty resisting.

"Oh," she said, looking down into her lap.

This was becoming very dangerous, Charles realized. He was very close to asking Laura whether she thought she would become very aroused, and if so, just how aroused she thought she might be. His dominant tendencies had never interfered in this sort of interview before, but suddenly he felt kind of crossover beginning. For one agonizing moment, he pictured Laura arrayed not for a penitential spanking, but naked on her back for a full-on S&M flogging, her legs tied apart with her feet bound above her.

His cock was so hard that he dared not move.

"Thank you, Father," said Laura. "Why don't I call to set up an appointment when I've thought a bit?"

"That would be perfect," said Charles, as he tried to rise from his chair in such a way as to rearrange the bits of his lap into a less-obviously tumescent configuration.