

CHAPTER ONE

As a minister I rarely found the entirety of a Sunday service depressing. But some mornings disease and despair seemed to permeate the congregation like floodwaters in sandbags, and the only people who stood during the moment when we shared our joys and concerns were those souls who were intimately acquainted with nursing homes, ICUs, and the nearby hospice. -Concerns invariably outnumbered joys, but there were some Sundays that were absolute routs, and it would seem that the only people rising up in their pews to speak needed Prozac considerably more than they needed prayer. Or yes, than they needed me.

On those sorts of Sundays, whenever someone would stand and ask for prayers for something relatively minor—a promotion, traveling mercies, a broken leg that surely would mend—I would find myself thinking as I stood in the pulpit, *Get a spine, you bloody ingrate! Buck up! That lady behind you is about to lose her husband to pancreatic cancer, and you're whining about your difficult boss? Oh, please!* I never said that sort of thing aloud, but I think that's only because I'm from a particularly mannered suburb of New York City, and so my family has to be drunk to be cutting. I did love my congregation, but I also knew that I had an inordinate number of whiners.

The Sunday service that preceded Alice Hayward's baptism and death was especially rich in genuine human tragedy, it was just -jam--packed with the real McCoy—one long ballad of ceaseless lamentation and pain. Moreover, as a result of that morning's children's message and a choir member's solo, it was also unusually moving. The whiners knew that they couldn't compete with the legitimate, -no--holds--barred sort of torment that was besieging much of the congregation, and so they kept their fannies in their seats and their prayer requests to themselves.

That day we heard from a -thirty--four--year--old lawyer who had already endured twelve weeks of radiation for a brain tumor and was now in his second week of chemotherapy. He was on steroids, and so on top of everything else he had to endure the indignity of a sudden physical resemblance to a human blowfish. He gave the children's message that Sunday, and he told the children—toddlers and girls and boys as old as ten and eleven—who surrounded him at the front of the church how he'd learned in the last three months that while some angels might really have halos and wings, he'd met a great many more who looked an awful lot like regular people. When he started to describe the angels he'd seen—describing, in essence, the members of the church Women's Circle who drove him back and forth to the -hospital, or the folks who filled his family's refrigerator with fresh vegetables and homemade carrot juice, or the people who barely knew him yet sent cards and letters—I saw eyes in the congregation grow dewy. And, of course, I knew how badly some of those -half--blind old ladies in the Women's Circle drove, which seemed to me a further indication that there may indeed be angels among us.

Then, after the older children had returned to the pews where their parents were sitting while the younger ones had been escorted to the playroom in the church's addition so they would be spared the second half of the service (including my sermon), a fellow in the choir with a lush, robust tenor sang "It is well with my soul," and he sang it without the accompaniment of our organist. Spafford wrote that hymn after his four daughters had drowned when their ship, the *Ville de Havre*, collided with another vessel and sank. When the tenor's voice rose for the refrain for the last time, his hands before him and his long fingers steeping together before his chest, the congregation spontaneously joined him. There was a pause when they finished, followed by a great forward *whoosh* from the pews as the members of the church as one exhaled in wonder, "Amen. . ."

And so when it came time for our moment together of caring and sharing (an expression I use without irony, though I admit it sounds vaguely like doggerel and more than a little New Age), the people were primed to pour out their hearts. And they did. I've looked back at the notes I scribbled from the pulpit that morning—the names of the people for whom we were supposed to pray and exactly what ailed them—and by any objective measure there really was a lot of horror that day. Cancer and cystic fibrosis and a disease that would cost a newborn her right eye. A car accident. A house fire. A truck bomb in a land far away. We prayed for people dying at home, in area hospitals, at the hospice in the next town. We prayed for healing, we prayed for death (though we used that great euphemism *relief*), we prayed for peace. We prayed for peace in souls that were turbulent and for peace in a corner of the world that was in the midst of a civil war.

By the time I began my sermon, I could have been as inspiring as a tax attorney and people would neither have noticed nor cared. I could have been awful—though the truth is, I wasn't; my words at the very least transcended hollow that morning—and still they would have been moved. They were craving inspiration the way I crave sunlight in January.

Nevertheless, that Sunday service offered a litany of the ways we can die and the catastrophes that can assail us. Who knew that the worst was yet to come? (In theory, I know the answer to that, but we won't go there. At least not yet.) The particular tragedy that would give our little village its grisly notoriety was still almost a dozen hours away and wouldn't begin to unfold until the warm front had arrived in the late afternoon and early evening and we had all begun to swelter over our dinners. There was so much still in between: the potluck, the baptism, the word.

Not *the* word, though I do see it as both the beginning and the end: In the beginning was the Word. . . .

There. That was the word in this case. *There.*

"There," Alice Hayward said to me after I had baptized her in the pond that Sunday, a smile on her face that I can only call grim. There.

The baptism immediately followed the Sunday service, a good -old--fashioned, -once--a--year Baptist dunking in the Brookners' pond. Behind me I heard the congregation clapping for Alice, including the members of the Women's Circle, at least one of whom, like me, was aware of what sometimes went on in the house the Haywards had built together on the ridge.

None of them, I know now, had heard what she'd said. But even if they had, I doubt they would have heard in that one word exactly what I did, because that single syllable hadn't been meant for them. It had been meant only for me.

“There,” I said to Alice in response. Nodding. Agreeing. Affirming her faith. A single syllable uttered from my own lips. It was the word that gave Alice Hayward all the reassurance she needed to go forward into the death that her husband may have been envisioning for her—perhaps even for the two of them—for years.

THE NEXT MORNING a deputy state’s attorney, a woman perhaps five years younger than me with that rare but fetching combination of blue eyes and -raven--black hair, would try to convince me that I was reading too much into that single syllable. The lawyer was Catherine Benincasa, a name I would have remembered a long while even if our paths had not continued to converge throughout the late summer and autumn, because she was named after the saint who convinced Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome in 1376, after three and a half generations of exile in Avignon. But I reminded Catherine that she had not been present at the baptism. If she had, if she had known all that I did about Alice’s pilgrimage to the water—if she had spent the time that I had listening to her and offering what counsel I could—she would have understood I was right.

When Alice had emerged from the pond beside a wild rosebush with some of its delicate flowers still in bloom, she had fixed her eyes for a moment on the cluster of people in a half circle at the lip of the water. Their collective gaze was as bright as the sun. My parishioners were dressed for a picnic, and they were joyful. I watched Alice give her daughter a small wave. Katie had turned fifteen that summer and had suddenly, almost preternaturally, been transformed from a girl into a woman (or, as her mother had put it to me once when we were alone, her voice rich with love, “a tart with a heart”). The baseball caps, an affectation that had once been as much a requisite part of her clothing as her sneakers or shoes, were gone, and she had allowed her dark hair to grow long. She had replaced her overalls and T-shirts with skirts and short summer dresses and skinny jeans that seemed to cling to her long legs like Lycra. She wore -flip-flops and ballet flats -instead of the sneakers or the black patent leather shoes with neon spangles she had worn to church as a little girl and christened her “happy Janes.” She had a small stud in her nose and great hoops in her ears. She looked nothing like the child I would recall eating a blue Popsicle on the steps of the village’s general store or the reserve outfielder I had coached for two years on the town’s Little League team, a player more likely to harvest dandelions in the grass than run down fly balls. She was disarmingly precocious and always had been. Now she wrote for the school newspaper and the school literary magazine, and she was one of those children who seem to defy the logic of genes: She was, in my opinion, smarter than both of her parents. She was a good kid who had become a good teen—too intelligent for drugs and too ambitious to get pregnant. She had survived the worst a man like her father could offer and moved on. In two years, I told myself, she would get out of Haverill, whether it was to a small state college in a remote corner of Vermont or to someplace more impressive in Massachusetts or Maine or New York. My money was on the latter. I hoped the child was thinking Ivy or Little Ivy.

She no longer came to church or to the church's teenage Youth Group meetings with any regularity, but she had come to her mother's baptism that morning, and I was pleased. She waved back at Alice, perhaps a little embarrassed, but I imagine also happy for her mother, since this was something that her mother clearly desired. As Katie had grown older—more mature, more confident—I sensed that she had begun to intercede on Alice's behalf when her father would threaten her mother. I knew of at least one punch she had prevented with her screams and her anger, and I assumed that Ginny O'Brien, Alice's best friend in the Women's Circle, knew of a good many more. When Alice glanced back at me, she wiped the pond water from her eyes and used her thumbs like hooks to hoist back behind her ears the twin drapes of auburn mane that had fallen in front of her face. She then started from the pond, pulling at her long wet T-shirt the way all the women did, holding the material away from her chest so it wouldn't cling to her breasts as she returned to dry land. Beneath that shirt she was wearing a Speedo tank suit with a paisley pattern that reminded me vaguely of the upholstery on the couch in my mother's apartment in Bronxville, and her feet were bare. She had painted her toenails a -cupcake--icing pink. Most women were baptized fully clothed in the baggiest pants and sweatshirts they could find, and—given the man to whom she was married — I found myself pondering the reality that she would never have worn only a bathing suit and a T-shirt had her husband been present. He wouldn't have allowed it, even though the T-shirt happened to fall to mid thigh. But I also wondered if this was a rebellion of some sort, a challenge, because there was always the chance he would hear and there was always the likelihood he would see one of those photos that Ginny was taking. Had I not known the details of what she endured in her home, I would have found the image of Alice Hayward emerging wet like a sea nymph from the Brookners' pond an inappropriate, earthy, but inescapably erotic treat. She was -thirty--eight when she died, the -second--youngest member of the

Women's Circle, and she had been blessed with eyes that were round and deep and that rested in her pale face like circles of melted chocolate.

When she reached the grass, almost neon green that morning after a week of midsummer rains, her friend Ginny hugged her. The clouds had finally rolled east in the night, and the sun shone down upon the two women, now sisters in Christ, as they embraced.

Years earlier Ginny had joined the church by a simple statement of faith. Not quite five minutes out of a Sunday service, a little paperwork, a handshake, some polite applause. No water.

Not Alice, not at that point in her life. She wanted to leave absolutely nothing to chance, and so she wanted baptism and she wanted it by immersion. Full immersion. She had come to Christ, and she wanted to be certain that she wouldn't be kept from the kingdom by an ecclesiastical technicality.

And so we went to the Brookners' pond after the regular worship service, the water high and clear that Sunday morning after all that -late--July rain.

"Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?" I asked her.

"I do."

"Do you intend to follow him all the days of your life?"

"I do," she said again.

I cradled the back of her head with my left hand and held her clasped fingers like the handles of a shopping bag with my right, and then leaned her backward beneath the surface of the cold, -mountain--fed waters, baptizing her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

There.

Like Christ, she had been buried and reborn. She had risen, been resurrected. The symbolism is unmistakable, as clear as any metaphor in the Bible. I wondered when I baptized Alice why so few members of the congregation chose immersion. The wetness means more than the words.

HER HUSBAND, GEORGE, hadn't set foot inside the church in at least four or five years, and he had not come to his wife's baptism. Later I would ask myself whether it would have made a difference if he had seen his wife baptized. I would see in my mind the deep, -eggplant--colored bruises from his thumbs on her neck, as well as the marks on his face where she had gouged out whole chunks of his cheeks with her fingernails. (I had expected that the right side of his face would have been completely obliterated, but it wasn't. A little swollen, a little distorted, but not nearly the ruin I had imagined. We could all see the scratch marks there.) Alice may have walked into the water with resignation that Sunday morning, but she had fought hard for her life that Sunday night—if only reflexively. If only because she thought of her daughter and experienced one last, fierce pang of maternal protectiveness. If only because the way that he killed her was brutal and she couldn't help but battle back against the pain. And so the question of whether George's attendance at the spectacle (and, trust me, immersion *is* spectacle) would have saved Alice's life dogged me. That question, as well as the myriad others that followed it -relentlessly like the rhythms of a sermon—would he have been -trans-formed by his wife's faith? would he have given therapy a chance? would he have stopped pulling fistfuls of Alice's hair like black rope? would he have stopped yanking back her head like a church bell? would they both be alive today?—bobbed amid the waves of images that roll behind all of our eyes.

I followed Alice from the water, my own blue jeans heavy around my hips because they had sponged up so much of the Brookners' pond. Some of my fellow pastors, especially my peers in the South, wear weighted black robes that allow them to wade into the water without fear that the robe will float about them like algae. Not me. Weighting a robe in my mind transformed meaningful ritual into pretentious theatrics. Besides, I liked wearing blue jeans into the water, I liked the way they represented the ordinariness of our daily lives as we presented ourselves to God. And the fact is, I actually performed very few baptisms by immersion. This is Vermont. Our church, a union of the old Baptist and Congregational fellowships that had thrived in the nineteenth century when the community had been larger, didn't even have a baptismal tank, and Alice was the only person I baptized that summer by immersion, the sole parishioner to join the church in that manner.

"That was so powerful," Ginny said to her friend. "Aren't you glad you did it?" When they pulled apart, the front of Ginny's shirt was almost as damp as Alice's.

"I am," Alice said, and I saw that she'd begun to cry. Katie noticed, too, and did what she probably did often when she saw her mother's eyes fill with tears. She patted her on the back as if she were their family's springer spaniel, Lula, offering gentle taps that were about as close as a -fifteen--year--old with a stud in her nose gets to an embrace in public with her mother.

The Brookners, the family whose pond we used, were summer people, a wealthy family who came north to Haverill from a suburb of Manhattan sometime around Memorial Day weekend and lived at the top of one of the hills that surrounded the village. Michelle Brookner and the three children did, anyway. Michelle's husband, Gordon, was an attorney who would drive up for weekends and a two-week vacation in August. From the Brookners' pond, it was impossible to see the town itself, not even the church steeple, but we could see the verdant hollow in which the village sat, as well as the cemetery at the top of the distant ridge. I looked that way to avert my eyes from Alice's tears.

Members of the Women's Circle gathered around Ginny and Alice, embracing Alice as Ginny had, and I found George's absence conspicuous in ways that it wasn't at a routine Sunday-morning service. I wondered briefly whether I should have visited him prior to the baptism and asked him to come. Convinced him. Later, of course, I would blame myself for not insisting that he attend, just as I would blame myself for not understanding the meaning of the ritual in Alice's mind—for denying in my head what I must have known in my heart.

When the medical examiner did the autopsies on the Haywards, he reported that Alice's rear end and her back were flecked with fresh contusions, which meant that George had beaten her the Friday or Saturday night before she was baptized and none of us knew. At least I didn't. Her kidneys were so badly bruised that she might very well have peed blood before she'd come to church that morning.

Nevertheless, I don't think it was that finding that set me off, because I wouldn't learn that particular detail until much later. In my mind at least, I was gone from the church the moment Ginny had called me the day after the baptism, that Monday morning, sobbing uncontrollably, with the news that George and Alice were dead and it looked like he had killed them both. In the midst of Ginny's wails—and she really was wailing, this was indeed a lament of biblical proportions—I somehow heard in my head the last word that Alice had addressed solely to me, that single word *there*, and the seeds of my estrangement from my calling had been sown.

There.

I'd nodded when Alice had said it; I'd echoed her word. I'd known exactly what she'd meant. She wasn't referring to Romans or Colossians, to the letters of Peter or Paul. She wasn't thinking of any of the passages in the Bible explaining baptism that we'd discussed at a table outside my church office or in the living room of her house as her immersion approached.

She was thinking of John, and of Christ's three words at the end of his torment on the cross; she was imagining that precise moment when he bows his head and gives up his spirit.

It is finished, said Christ. There.

And Alice Hayward was ready to die.