

A Common Life -1st Chapter

The Proposal

Father Timothy Kavanagh stood at the stone wall on the ridge above Mitford, watching the deepening blush of a late June sunset.

He conceded that it wasn't the worst way to celebrate a birthday, though he'd secretly hoped to celebrate it with Cynthia. For years, he'd tried to fool himself that his birthday meant very little or nothing, and so, if no cards appeared, or cake or presents, that would be fine.

Indeed, there had been no card from Cynthia, though he'd received a stack from his parishioners, and certainly she'd given no promise of cake or candles that definitively pronounced, This is it, Timothy, the day you appeared on earth, and though I know you don't really care about such things, we're going to celebrate, anyway, because you're important to me. He was deeply ashamed to admit that he'd waited for this from her; in truth, had expected it, hoped for it.

He'd known suffering in his thirty-eight years in the priesthood, though nearly always because of someone else's grief or affliction. Now he suffered for himself, for his maddening inability to let his walls down with her, to cast off his armor and simply and utterly love her. He had pled with God to consume his longing and his love, to cast it out as ashes and let nothing interfere with the fulfillment of the vows he'd made years ago as an ordinand. Why should such a flame as this beat up in him now? He was sixty-two years old, he was beyond loving in the flesh! And yet, as desperately as he'd prayed for his longing to be removed, he craved for it to be satisfied.

He remembered the times she had shut herself away from him, guarding her heart. The loss of her ravishing openness had left him cold as a stone, as if a great cloud had gone over the sun.

What if she were to shut herself away from him once and for all? He paced beside the low stone wall, forgetting the sunset over the valley.

He'd never understood much about his feelings toward Cynthia, but he knew and understood this: He didn't want to keep teetering on the edge, afraid to step forward, terrified to turn back.

The weight on his chest was palpable; he'd felt it often since she moved next door and into his life. Yet it wasn't there because he loved her, it was there because he was afraid to love her completely.

Perhaps he would always have such a weight; perhaps there was no true liberation in love. And certainly he could not ask her to accept him as he was-flawed and frightened, not knowing.

He sank to his knees by the stone wall, and looked up and opened his mouth to speak, but instead caught his breath sharply.

A great flow of crimson and gold was spilling across the sky like lava, running molten from west to east. He watched, awestruck, as the pyre consumed the blue haze of the firmament and bathed the heavens with a glory that shook and moved him to his very depths.

"Please!" he whispered.

It was then that he felt a sensation of warmth welling in him, a kind of liquid infilling he'd never experienced before. Something in his soul lifted up, as startling as a covey of quail breaking from the underbrush, and his heart acknowledged, suddenly and finally, that his love for her could not, would not be extinguished. He knew at last that no amount of effort, no amount of pleading with God would enable him to sustain any longer the desperate, wounding battle he had launched against loving her.

In a way he couldn't explain, and in the space of the merest instant, he knew he'd come fully awake for the first time in his life.

He also knew that he wanted nothing more than to be with her, at her side, and that after all the wasted months, he couldn't afford to waste another moment. But what if he'd waited too long, come to his senses too late?

He sprang to his feet, as relieved as if he'd shaken off an approaching illness; then, animated by a power not his own, he found himself running. "There comes a time," his cousin Walter had said, "when there's no turning back."

He felt the motion of his legs and the breeze on his skin and the hammering in his temples, as if he might somehow implode, all of it combusting into a sharp inner flame, a durable fire, a thousand hosannas.

Streaming with sweat, he raced down Old Church Lane and into the cool green enclosure of Baxter Park, his body as weightless as a glider borne on wings of ether, though his heart was heavy with dread. She could have gone away as she'd done before . . . and this time, she might never come back.

The dark silhouette of the hedge separating the park from Cynthia's house and the rectory appeared far away, another country, a landmark he might never reach.

As he drew closer, he saw that her house was dark, but his own was aglow with light in every window, as if some wonderful thing might be happening.

He bounded through the hedge; she was standing on his stoop. She held the door open, and the light from the kitchen gleamed behind her.

She stood there as if she'd known the very moment he turned into the park and, sensing the urgency of his heart, felt her own compelled to greet it.

He ran up the steps, his chest heaving, as she stepped back and smiled at him. "Happy birthday!" she said.

"I love you, Cynthia!" His lungs seemed to force the declaration onto the night air as if by their own will. He stood with his mouth open, marveling, while she raised her hand to her cheek in a way that made her appear dubious, somehow, or amused.

Did she think him mad? He felt mad, riotous, he wanted to climb on the roof, baying and whooping—a sixtysomething bachelor priest, mad with love for his next-door neighbor.

He didn't consider the consequences of this wild skidding out of control; it was now or never.

As she backed into the kitchen, he followed. He saw the cake on the breakfast table and the card propped against a vase of flowers, and he fell to one knee beside the table and gathered her hands in his.

"Will you?" he croaked, looking up at her.

"Will I what, dearest?"

"You know."

"No, I don't know."

He knew that she knew; why wouldn't she help him with this thing? He was perfectly willing to bring the other knee down if only she would help him.

And why was he crouching here on the linoleum, sweating like a prizefighter, when he might have been dressed in his best suit and doing this in the study, or in the Lord's Chapel garden by the French roses?

He tried to scramble to his feet and run upstairs, where he would take a shower and brush his teeth and get dressed and do this the right way, but his strength failed and he found he couldn't move; he might have been glued to the linoleum, one knee up and one knee down, frozen as a herring.

"Hurry, Timothy!" she said, whispering.

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes! A thousand times yes!"

She was helping him to his feet, and then he was kissing her and she was kissing him back. She drew away and looked at him with a kind of awe; he found her radiance dumbfounding.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said.

It was done. He had jumped over the barbed wire.

He buried his face in her hair and held her close and bawled like a baby.

He was a muddle of happiness and confusion, as if his brain had been stirred like so much porridge. He was unable to think straight or put one thought logically after another; he felt the magnitude of the thing he'd done, and knew he should do something to carry through, though he wasn't sure what.

They had sat on his sofa, talking until three in the morning, but not once had they mentioned what they would do today; they had talked only about how they felt and how mindlessly happy and grateful they were that this astonishing benediction should come to them, as a wild bird might come to their outstretched palms.

"To have and to hold," she had murmured.

"Til death do us part," he had said, nuzzling her hair.

"And no organizing of church suppers or ironing of fair linens, and positively nothing to do with the annual Bane and Blessing."

"Right," he said.

"Ever!" she said.

He hadn't a single rule or regulation to foist upon her; he was chopped liver, he was cooked macaroni; he was dragged into the undertow of the great tsunami of love he'd so long held back.

They had prayed together, at last, and fallen asleep on the sofa, her head on his shoulder, his head against hers, bookends, then waked at five and scrambled to the back door, where Cynthia kissed him and darted through the hedge, devoutly hoping not to be seen.

He'd bounded up the stairs to his room with a vigor that amazed him, murmuring aloud a quote from Wordsworth:

"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!"

Bliss, yes, as if he'd suddenly become lighter than air, as if the stone were at last rolled away from the tomb. He thought he might spring upward like a jack-in-the-box. Was any of this familiar to him, had he ever felt it before? Never! Nothing in his supposed love for Peggy Cramer, all those years ago, had prepared him for this.

In a misting summer rain, he headed for the church office at nine o'clock with Barnabas on the red leash.

He should tell Emma, he supposed, who had served him faithfully for nearly thirteen years. And Puny, the best house help a man could ever have, Puny would want to know.

He could see them both, Emma wincing and frowning, then socking him on the arm with approval, and Puny-she would jump up and down and hoot and shout, and great tears would stream down her freckled cheeks. Then she'd go at once and bake a cake of cornbread from which he, due to his blasted diabetes, might have one unbuttered, albeit large, slice.

Aha! And there was Miss Sadie, of course! Wouldn't her eyes sparkle and gleam, and wouldn't she hug his neck for a fare-thee-well?

And wouldn't Louella break out a coconut cake or a chess pie and wouldn't they have a party right there in the kitchen at Fernbank?

On the other hand, wasn't Cynthia supposed to be along when he broke the news to everybody?

He sighed. He was in the very business of life's milestones, including the occasional overseeing of engagements, yet he seemed to have forgotten everything he ever knew- if, indeed, he ever knew anything.

Besides, he wasn't sure he was up for hooting and hollering and being punched in the arm or any of the other stuff that usually came with such tidings.

Then there was J.C. And Mule. And Percy.

Good Lord, he dreaded that encounter like a toothache. All that backslapping and winking and cackling, and the word spreading through the Grill like so much wildfire, and spilling out the door and up Main Street and around the monument to Lew Boyd's Exxon. . . .

He felt his stomach do a kind of dive, as it always did when he took off or landed in a plane. If Barnabas hadn't suddenly jerked the leash, he would have walked straight into a telephone pole outside the Oxford Antique Shop.

Bottom line, he decided, Dooley Barlowe should be the first to know. And it was clearly right that they tell Dooley together. He was frankly relieved that Dooley had spent the night at Tommy's and hadn't been there to see him skid through the back door and drop to his knee. Not a pretty sight, he was sure of it.

He could just see the face of his thirteen-year-old charge when he heard the news. The boy would flush with embarrassment or relief, or both, then laugh like a hyena. He would very likely exclaim, Cool! then race upstairs with a joy that he dare not freely display.

Still, telling anyone at all seemed hotheaded and premature. This was between Cynthia and himself; it was their secret. It was somehow marvelous that it was yet unknown to anyone else in the world.

At the corner, he stopped at a hemlock to let Barnabas lift his leg, and suddenly knew he couldn't contain the secret any longer, he was full to bursting with it.

"Make it snappy," he said to his dog. "I have something to tell you."

Barnabas did as he was told, and when they crossed the street, the rector of the Chapel of our Lord and Savior paused in front of the church office and said under his breath, "I've just decided . . . that is, Cynthia and I are going to get . . ."

His throat tickled. He coughed. A car passed, and he tried again to tell his dog the good news.

But he couldn't say it.

He couldn't say the m word, no matter how hard he tried.

As he opened the office door, he realized with complete clarity where he should begin.

His bishop. Of course. How could he have forgotten he had a bishop, and that such a thing as this thing he was going to do would be of utmost importance to Stuart Cullen?

But, of course, he couldn't call Stuart this morning, because Emma Newland would be sitting at her desk cheek-by-jowl with his own.

He greeted his longtime, part-time secretary as Barnabas collapsed with a sigh onto his rug in the corner.

Desperate to avoid eye contact, he sat down at once and began to scribble something, he knew not what, into his sermon notebook.

Emma stared at him over her half-glasses.

He put his left elbow on the desk and held his head in his hand, as if deeply thoughtful, feeling her hot stare covering him like a cloak.

Blast, he couldn't bear that look. She might have been examining his tonsils or readying him for colon surgery.

"For heaven's sake," he said, swiveling around in his squeaking chair to face the bookcases.

"I'd leave heaven out of this if I were you," she said, sniffing.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, I can't imagine heaven wantin' anything to do with you this morning."

Church secretaries had been fired for less, much less, he thought, grinding his teeth. The office was suddenly doing that bizarre thing it sometimes did-it was growing rapidly and infinitely smaller; it was, in fact, becoming the size of a shoe box.

He bolted to his feet and half stood behind his desk, trying to get a deep breath.

"Your collar's too tight," she said.

"How do you know?"

"Your face is red as a beet."

"It's possible that I'm having a heart attack," he snapped.

"I'm telling you it's your collar. Are you wearin' one of those Velcro deals?"

"Yes."

"Let it out a little."

Dadgummit, she was right. He realized he was nearly choking to death. He adjusted the Velcro, disgusted with himself and everybody else.

What had happened to the soft, circumcised heart God had given him only last night? Where had the lighter-than-air spirit of this morning fled? Why was he grumping and grouching when he ought to be leaping and shouting?

Barnabas yawned and rolled on his side.

"I'm getting married!" he blurted uncontrollably. Then he sat down, hard, in his chair.

He would never be able to explain the mysteries surrounding love, only one of which surfaced when he confessed his news to Emma.

By the involuntary utterance of those three amazing words, his frozen Arctic tundra had been transformed into a warm tropical lake. Something in him had actually melted.

In the space of a few moments, he had become jelly. Or possibly custard. Then a foolish smile spread across his face, which seemed destined to remain there for the rest of his life.

When Emma left for the post office, vowing not to say a word to anyone, he prayed at his desk, went to the toilet and did a glucometer check, then positively swaggered to the phone to call his bishop.

Stuart's secretary said he was either in the loo or in a meeting, she wasn't sure which, but she would find out and have him call back.

He slumped in the chair, disappointed.

But wait. Walter! Of course, he must call Walter and Katherine at once.

The names of those with special interest in his good fortune were being revealed to him, one by one, in the way some are given inspiration for their Christmas card list.

Since Cynthia had never met Walter, his first cousin and only known living relative, he supposed he was on his own for spilling the beans to New Jersey.

"Walter!"

"Cousin! We haven't heard from you in the proverbial coon's age."

"Which phone are you on?" asked the rector.

"The kitchen. Why?"

"Is Katherine there?"

"Just blew in from the nursing home, she's teaching them to finger paint. What's up, old fellow?"

"Tell her to get on the phone in the study."

"Katherine!" bellowed Walter. "Pick up in the study! It's clergy!"

"Lo, Teds, darling, is that really you?" He could see the tall, thin-as-a-stick Katherine draped over the plaid chaise, with the cordless in one hand and her eternal glass of ginger ale in the other.

"Katherine, Walter," he said. "Are you sitting down?"

"Good heavens, what is it?" asked Walter, clearly alarmed.

"Teds . . . those tests you were going to have weeks ago . . . is it . . . ?"

"Dooley, is it Dooley?" asked Walter. "Or Barnabas? We know how you feel about-"

"I'm getting married," he said.

There! Twice in a row, and already it was getting easier.

The other end of the line erupted into a deafening whoop that could have filled Yankee Stadium. He held the receiver away from his ear, laughing for the first time this morning, as Barnabas leapt from the rug and stood barking furiously at the clamor pouring forth from New Jersey.

When Stuart hadn't called back in twenty minutes, he phoned again and was put through to the bishop's office.

"Stuart? Tim Kavanagh here. Are you sitting down?" He was truly concerned that no one go crashing to the floor in a faint.

"For the first time today, actually! What's up?"

"Remember the woman I once brought to visit you and Martha?" That wasn't what he wanted to say. "When we, ah, gave you the bushel of corn? Cynthia! You remember. . . ."

"I remember very well, indeed!"

"Well, you see, it's like this. . . ." He swallowed.

He heard his bishop chuckling. "Like what, Timothy?"

"Like . . ."

He was momentarily frozen again, then the custard triumphed.

". . . we're getting married!"

"Alleluia!" shouted his bishop. "Alleluia!"

Tears sprang suddenly to his eyes. He had been friends with his bishop since seminary, had confided his heart to him for years. And now came this greatest confidence, this best and most extraordinary of tidings.

"Martha will be thrilled!" said Stuart, sounding as youthful as a curate. "We'll have you for dinner, we'll have you for tea . . . we'll do it up right! This is the best news I've heard in an eon. Good heavens, man, I thought you'd never screw up your courage. How on earth did it happen?"

"It just came to me that . . . well . . ."

"What came to you?"

"That I didn't want to go on without her, that I couldn't."

"Bingo!" said his bishop.

"I, ah, went down on one knee, couldn't help myself."

"You should have done the full kneel, Timothy, she's a prize, a gem, a pearl above price! You dog, you don't deserve such a one!"

"Amen!" He said it the old Baptist way, with a long a, the way he was raised to say it.

"Well, now, thanks be to God, what about a date?" asked Stuart.

"We're thinking September, I know that's a busy month for you, but . . ."

"Let's see, I have my calendar right here." Deep sigh, pondering. "Alas, alack." Stuart's fingers drumming on his desktop. "Good heavens, I'd forgotten about that. Hmmm. Ahh." Tuneless, unconscious humming. "No, certainly not then."

If Stuart couldn't do it, they'd get it done somehow, they were definitely not waiting 'til October. . . .

"Oh, yes, look here! I've got September seventh, how's that? Otherwise, I can squeeze you in on-

"I'm not much on being squeezed in," said the rector.

"Of course not! Will the seventh work for you, then?"

"We're willing to take whatever you have open."

"Then it's done!"

"Perfect!" said the rector.

"Now," said Stuart, "hang up so I can call Martha."