

CHAPTER 1

Abbess Justina

The community as a whole shall choose its abbess based on her goodness and not on her rank. May God forbid the community should elect a woman only because she conspires to perpetuate its evil ways.

– *The Rule of the Order of the Handmaids of St Lucy*

The bell rang for Matins in the middle of a dream, as it often did. Just as she would enter deep sleep – the scientists had a name for it, she could never recall what – Abbess Justina of Monkbury Abbey would be awakened by the bell. This was seldom a welcome interruption, for Abbess Justina was given to pleasant dreams, more often now dreams of her childhood and young girlhood, dreams in which she would be re united with her family.

It was just before the hour of four a.m. in June, *millennium Domini* three.

She rose from her narrow bed and dressed by candlelight, first sluicing cold water over her face. Long habit made short work of putting on her habit. It was a costume whose basic design had not changed much over the centuries: atop her sleep shift of unbleached muslin came a black tunic that fell to the tops of her feet, tied at the waist by a cord, and over that was worn a scapular of deep purple – an apron of sorts that draped from the shoulders, front and back, falling to below the knees. The fabric at her wrists was smocked in a pretty

diamond design halfway to the elbow, to keep the voluminous sleeves in check. For all its antique quirks, it was a practical garment, suitable for work and contemplation, the fabric handwoven on-site of wool from abbey sheep. On ceremonial occasions and in chapter meetings, she would carry her staff of office with its little bell as a symbol of her authority and her right to lead. Otherwise her garb was identical to that of the women in her care.

Nothing in her costume was made of leather, not even her sandals, just as nothing in her diet came from the flesh of four-footed animals. In summer, out of doors, she wore wooden clogs. Meat was forbidden except in cases of illness, when the Rule of the Order of the Handmaids of St Lucy allowed it for those recuperating.

The abbess still marveled at herself, at times – that she, such a clotheshorse in civilian life, such a devourer of women's style magazines, given to obsessing over the latest hair products and adornments, had adapted so readily to the habit. Coco Chanel would probably have said the classics never go out of style.

Well, it was difficult to say what Coco might have made of the clogs.

Now Abbess Justina's hair was cut straight across the nape; every few months or so she would wield the scissors herself, chopping away without the aid of a mirror. She wrapped her shorn head tightly in a linen coif, pinned at the crown, a bit like Katharine Hepburn's in *A Lion in Winter*. Over that was draped a black veil, held in place by a narrow woven circlet meant to represent a crown of thorns. She tied a linen wimple like a baby's bib around her neck. Pinning the coif and attaching the veil took some minutes, the pins stubborn in her swollen fingers. The headgear was worn back from the forehead to allow half an inch of hair to frame the face, the single concession the order had made to modernity. In medieval times a wide starched headband would have sat atop

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the coif fitted so tightly around face and neck. Truth be told, in those days the headdress might have been adorned with pearls and gemstones, for the nuns of yore had on occasion had a little trouble keeping to their vows of poverty, not to mention chastity and obedience.

Abbess Iris, who had ruled just before Justina, had been the one to decide on the need for a change of habit, modifying the traditional style. The color of the scapular was the major innovation – the deep blue-purple of the iris, as it happened. Of course it all had to be done with the bishop's approval. The poor man had been absolutely flummoxed at having to pronounce on women's fashion. He was shown several sketches, like a magazine editor being presented with the new fall line, and vaguely pronounced any of them suitable. The deep purple he thought a slightly racy departure from the centuries of black but he did not demur.

Dear Abbess Iris. A flamboyant but wise character. Now long gone and buried in the cemetery of Monkbury Abbey.

Pity, thought Abbess Justina, she'd done away with the style that covered much of the head, for it would have hidden the gray hair and jowly neckline that had come as one of the booby prizes of late middle age. But at least the coif and veil still prevented one from looking like a Persian cat as the gray hair gained its ruthless hold, like kudzu. If they'd had to change anything, she thought they might have shortened the skirt length, for she still had strong, shapely legs, the product of a youth spent climbing the Welsh mountains like a billy goat. Nun or no nun, one liked to present a pleasing and vigorous appearance to the world.

Following timeless ritual, Abbess Justina reverently kissed a large wooden cross before draping it round her neck to lie flat against her chest. Around her shoulders she now buttoned a hooded mantle. In choir she would pull the hood over her head, for warmth, and for privacy. It also was wonderful for hiding the expression. A strategic bend of the neck and tuck

of the chin and one could be as private as a turtle pulling in its head. These little things, these momentary escapes into solitude, were what made living in a community possible.

Learning how to put all this on without the use of a mirror was one of the biggest challenges of the life. She had yet to see a novice who didn't need extra time in the morning to get all the bits and bobs attached in the right order.

That and mastering the Great Silence. And learning to loosen family ties. And any other number of things that made people wonder why they bothered, these crazy women who chose to live in the middle of nowhere, working and singing and praying. There was no answer to that, but the single-word answer that could be given was Joy. We do it for Joy.

Sometimes she caught a glimpse of herself in the plate-glass window in the kitchen: she liked taking a turn at kitchen duty now and again, even though she was exempt from chores because of her position. It kept her humble. It also gave her access to the thrum of what was really going on in the convent. Interplays and tensions and little personality conflicts that could grow into internecine warfare if not closely watched. Lately there had been undercurrents, of that she was certain. They seemed to date to the time of the earthquake, she thought, registering the irony. That had been a year ago, almost to the day, and measuring just over five on the Richter scale, it had rocked the abbey from side to side in the most terrifying way. For who in England was used to earthquakes?

But the 'emotional' undercurrents seemed to be connected with the appointment of the new cellaress, an unpopular choice in some quarters, she knew. The sisters had formed an attachment to Dame Meredith in that role, but of course there was no question of her being able in her weakened condition to carry on that heavy responsibility. And of course forming attachments of any sort had to be discouraged.

There was also some tension surrounding the new novice, although whether she was the cause or the result wasn't

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clear. She was not adjusting well to the religious life, which was never a completely easy transition for anyone. Post-traumatic stress disorder they called it now. PTSD. And no wonder, given Sister Rose's history. The new postulant, as well – Abbess Justina had serious reservations about the new postulant, Mary Benton. Vocations were so rare nowadays. She supposed it was possible they had, unwittingly, lowered the standards somewhat, allowing Mary to sneak past.

Still, what was clear was this: There was great change afoot at Monkbury Abbey. What was uncertain in Abbess Justina's mind was whether all that change would prove to be for the good.

PART II

Lauds

CHAPTER 2

Max Tudor

Most willingly and in all humility shall the followers of St Lucy heed the voice of authority, avoiding disobedience, which leads to sloth and chaos.

– *The Rule of the Order of the Handmaids of St Lucy*

A few weeks after Abbess Justina's reluctant awakening, as the days stretched lazily toward the time of the summer solstice, Max Tudor, the vicar of St Edwold's Church in Nether Monkslip, also woke early. To be sure it was not nearly so early as the ordained rising time of the abbess and the other nuns at Monkbury Abbey, but Max was still bleary-eyed from last night's tryouts and rehearsals for the Christmas ensemble band, and to him it felt like the crack of dawn. To say the least, the tryouts had not gone well, becoming an occasion for umbrage, hurt feelings, and the occasional stifled snuffle. Max knew he had no one to blame but himself – in the bulletin enlisting participants he had, in a moment of typical good-hearted optimism, specifically stated that all ages and skill levels were welcome to participate.

The results were predictably appalling, but there had been moments of a sort of goofy charm, especially for the parents who had invested heavily in some expensive instrument or other for their offspring. Who knew there were so many nascent trombone players in the small world of Nether Monkslip? Or that cymbals were making such a comeback? Die-hard

music lovers found excuses to leave early, but Max was duty-bound to stay, an expression of astonished delight pasted onto his face. Even he, being somewhat tone-deaf, grasped intuitively that this was not the sort of music designed to soothe the savage breast.

Still wondering how he might diplomatically break the news that there might not after all be room for everyone who wished to participate in the band, Max dressed quickly, discovering in the process that his best cassock had not come back from the dry cleaner's, leaving him with a choice between a torn cassock and one with yesterday's egg down the front. As he was to learn later, his housekeeper Mrs Hooser had forgotten to hand in his order when Fred Farnstable came by to collect the dry cleaning. Fortunately the vestments he wore for the service would cover the spillage, but he'd have to return to the vicarage to change into civilian clothes before starting his morning rounds. He had promised to drop in on Mrs Arthur at the urging of a social worker from the school in Monkship-super-Mare, who suspected Mr Arthur had begun using the children's lunch money to finance his rounds at the local pub.

He made toast and carefully boiled an egg in the vicarage's archaic, stone-floored kitchen. After a quick glance at the headlines (a Shiite group calling itself the 'League of the Righteous' was operating in Iraq; one had to admire the staggering humility in the choice of a *nom de guerre*), he set off along Church Street to take the early service. The day was warm and sunny, with flowers spilling from window boxes wherever he looked, the weather nicely cooperating to lift his mood.

But the morning was not done with him yet. He and the acolyte looked high and low in the St Edwold's vestry but could not find the gluten-free wafers. Mrs Penwhistle was allergic to gluten, and as she was a regular at the early service Max always made this concession for her. Finally, Elka Garth

at the Cavalier had to be prevailed upon to provide a small loaf of gluten-free bread for Max to bless.

On his return to the vicarage an hour later, he found a note on his desk in Mrs Hooser's scrawling hand: 'Call your Bishop.'

Oh, fine, thought Max. The bishop seldom rang unless he had a bone to pick. In fact, he rarely telephoned at all. Which is what made this sudden directive rather alarming. Max considered asking Mrs Hooser if she knew what the man wanted but was stopped by the utter futility of the idea. Mrs Hooser's weakness – her refuge, in fact – was that she lived in a state of blissful unawareness: she simply did not notice much of anything that went on around her.

He put the note aside for the moment, in favor of the even more dreaded task of going over the accounting books for St Edwold's and the two other churches in his care. There was an unexplained spike in expenditures under the 'Misc' column. He saw it was for antibacterial wipes and realized it was for the OCD family group that had started meeting at St Cuthburga's in Middle Monkslip. There were the normal expenses for facial tissues for the Al-Anon meetings, where a certain amount of tearful sentiment was to be expected. Max had always thought it interesting the AA meetings, by way of contrast, went through far fewer tissues.

This minor sort of expense was meant to be offset by donations from the group members themselves, but times were hard and the donations voluntary, so Max had become adept at shoving money from one fund to another to cover the cost. He also had been known to dip into his own pocket when all else failed. He couldn't allow a few pounds to keep anyone from getting the help they needed.

Having exhausted all diversions, and knowing it couldn't be delayed forever, he reached for his phone to call the Bishop of Monkslip.

* * *

A few steps away from the vicarage, Elka Garth worked behind the counter of the Cavalier Tea Room and Garden. Her cotton sweater was smeared with flour and blueberries, and it was buttoned crookedly, possibly because the top button was missing, anyway. She had tied back her hair in a bright paisley scarf to keep it out of her eyes as she worked, and she had made a rare experiment with makeup. With her eyelids dusted with lavender to go with the purples and reds in her scarf, she looked, thought her friend Suzanna, lounging over her second cup of coffee, rather pretty, if in a hectic sort of way. Almost as if she were planning a night on the tiles – which was out of the question, if one knew Elka.

It was too bad she led such a difficult life, keeping the shop and her son alive single-handedly, but the beauty of the woman was that she seldom complained. She just created her glorious pies and biscuits and her marzipan creatures – the tiny owls and geese and hedgehogs and mice lovingly crafted and generally sold online, to be shipped off in their little individual nests of glittery paper – and somehow in this endeavor reality seemed to get pushed aside, to be dealt with on another day. Her current passion was for perfecting a shortbread recipe that incorporated dried lavender flowers.

Elka's young assistant Flora was either contributing to or mitigating the chaos in the kitchen, it was difficult to say. But in any event Flora's apron, unlike her employer's, always was pristine, devoid of flour or batter.

Elka seemed to have a talent for surrounding herself with young people who did not like pulling their own weight, thought Miss Agnes Pitchford, watching the scene with her gimlet-eyed stare. Miss Pitchford, long retired after terrorizing generations of youth in the village school, sat near a window of the shop, reading that day's news and maintaining a running commentary on the inbred foolhardiness of Britain's elected leaders. Miss Pitchford was an anachronism, a throwback to the era of the sedan chair – a living testament

to a time when elderly spinsters were borne about in boxes to attend missionary teas and strew their visiting cards about the village. They might make the occasional brief stop to administer relief to the ungrateful poor of the village, but more often their aim was to attend a private Bible exposition or violin solo or some similarly gay and carefree pastime. That they did all this dressed head to toe in draperies and scarves and hats with feathers and netting and hatpins and other impediments to comfort, regardless of the season, was probably a testament to their inner and outer fortitude. England was built upon the steely backbone of such stalwarts as Miss Pitchford and her kind.

Much else in the village had not changed – had refused to change. The Nether Monkslip Parish Council, in particular, was fearless in standing in the way of progress. Much of the struggle against modernity was to no avail. But that didn't prevent the villagers from fighting the good fight, at home and in the trenches.

Suzanna Winship, sister of the local doctor, shared a table with Miss Pitchford in surprising peace and equanimity, for two personalities more diametrically opposed would be difficult to imagine. Suzanna, outrageously gorgeous and sexy Suzanna, had been one of Max Tudor's most ardent admirers in the days before Max and Awena had so clearly staked their claims to each other.

Max's arrival in the village some years before had electrified the female population of Nether Monkslip, for Father Max Tudor was everything they could have wished for: kind and decent (basic requirements, of course, for a vicar), handsome and youngish (both huge bonuses), rumored to be a former MI5 agent (so daring and mysterious!), and most of all, unattached and, to all appearances, available. A lamb ripe for sacrifice on the marital altar.

The women got busy, either throwing themselves at his feet or pushing their nieces, daughters, and best friends at his

feet. Church attendance skyrocketed, along with volunteerism for the little chores that needed doing around the church – cleaning the brass and silver, preparing the vessels for the Eucharistic services – that might bring them into closer proximity with Max.

But Max remained steadfastly uninterested. Oddly oblivious to the frenzy of self-sacrifice and do-goodery he had unleashed. Perhaps he thought it mere coincidence that the St Edwold's Altar Guild suddenly had more helpers than it could accommodate, all of them female, and all of them jostling for a slot in the rotation. The church flower rota became a free-for-all, with the altar bouquets growing more grandiose and extravagant with each passing week.

Max remained clueless to all the passionate storms of hope and speculation. And just when the women's bafflement and frustration at his cluelessness reached a fever pitch (particularly in the case of the village's anointed vixen, Suzanna Winship), it was noticed that Max was to be seen more and more often having dinner at the home of Awena Owen, the owner of Goddessspell. Or seen having dinner with her in one of the handful of restaurants in Nether Monkslip. These occasions became so frequent, no branch of the village grapevine could for long accept the 'maybe they're just friends' theory that was tentatively bruited about. Finally at Awena's winter solstice party, it became glaringly apparent that Max and Awena could not keep their eyes off each other. When Awena's pregnancy began to show a few months later, it became apparent they could not keep their hands off each other, either.

The village phone wires lit up. It was a *cause célèbre*, of course, and a bit of a scandal, but that it did not become fodder for malicious gossip was a testament to the high esteem in which both parties were held. The villagers loved both Max and Awena (by now dubbed 'Maxena') and could only wish them well. The villagers even managed to conduct

a rare conspiracy of silence, for Max's bishop had so far been spared the news that his most charismatic priest was in a now-permanent relationship with the village's only neo-pagan. What the bishop might have done had he known, no one could guess, but no one, not even the scandalized Miss Pitchford, was going to help the man out with a 'thought-you-should-know' telephone call. Adopting an atypical transcendent detachment, the villagers decided as one to let the fates handle it.

Elka Garth of the Cavalier Tea Room and Garden had been much surprised at Suzanna's easy capitulation to the situation. It was not as if the High Street of Nether Monkslip was littered with highly eligible bachelors.

'It's nice of you to be so gracious about it,' Elka had said after Awe's winter solstice party, when the attraction between Max and Awena had been evident to the most obtuse observer.

'Why are you surprised?' Suzanna had demanded. 'I can be gracious. I can out-gracious the Queen when I feel like it. Goddammit.'

Alrighty, then. A little more work on the self-awareness front and Suzanna might be good to go, thought Elka. But she did seem to have recovered from the 'loss' of Max, whom she had never in fact stood a chance of winning over. The arrival of Umberto Grimaldi in the village to open the White Bean restaurant with his brother had created a much-needed diversion. Fortunately Suzanna's interest in Umberto seemed to be reciprocated, even though the late hours he necessarily kept at the restaurant were a frequent source of complaint.

Miss Pitchford had at this point in her reading reached the lines describing the less-than-altruistic activities of a peer known frequently – too frequently, it was felt – to darken the doorway of the House of Lords.

'Lord Lislelivet,' she said, 'certainly is a mover and a shaker; I'll say that much for him. I knew his mother. Lovely woman. Breeding tells. I am not certain *he* is all that he could be in the

scrupulousness department, however.’ Her voice trilled the vowels in ‘scrupulousness,’ like an opera singer going for the high notes. ‘But that I suppose is too much to ask these days. The noble families are all going to rot. Why, in my day . . .’

But no one paid her any mind. The name Lislelivet only had meaning for people like Miss Pitchford, who read her Debrett’s the way she read her Bible. ‘How do you say “jack-ass” in French?’ Suzanna was asking Adam Birch, owner of The Onlie Begetter bookshop, who sat beside her. They had been talking of a recent resident of Nether Monkship, a man with a flawless French accent, now sadly deceased, although whether sadness was called for in this particular man’s case remained a point of debate.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Adam, turning to Mme Lucie Cuthbert, who squared the table where they sat. ‘*Comment dit-on “jackass” en français?*’

‘I think it’s just “jackass”, but you should wave your hands about as you say it, holding a Gitane.’

‘Ah.’

Elka, from behind the counter, paused long enough in her trek to and from the kitchen to ask, ‘Has anyone seen Awena today? I wanted to ask her about food for the ceremony.’

‘I saw her working in her garden on my way over here,’ said Suzanna. ‘She said she’d probably join us for elevenses.’

‘You’re talking about the . . .’ Miss Pitchford stopped on a deep breath, finding it difficult to go on. ‘The public union of Max Tudor and Awena Owen, of course?’ She was not at all certain how she felt about these loosey-goosey, New Agey goings-on, and would in fact have roundly condemned them as a travesty had she not been as fond of both Max and Awena as she was. The whole situation was a scandal that would not have been tolerated in her day. A travesty up with which no self-respecting Anglican bishop should put. But it was, she had to concede, a new day.

Elka nodded, smiling as she dried her hands on a linen

dishtowel worn through to near transparency. ‘The handfasting ceremony. I wouldn’t miss being there for the world.’

‘People will come from miles around,’ Suzanna agreed. ‘Umberto is taking me – I managed to get him to agree to one day away from the restaurant. Besides, he’s donating some of the food.’

Miss Pitchford sniffed loudly and went back to her reading. The duke of York was rumored to be getting remarried, and the duchess was at long last to be given the old heave-ho from the marital home. As a scandal, The Situation between Max and Awena simply paled by comparison.

‘I thought you had decided never to trust a man with beachy waves in his hair,’ said Elka. Suzanna had expressed certain doubts over whether Umberto really was spending all his free time in the White Bean.

‘I came to realize that was natural. Can he really help it if he has better hair than I do? Besides, that was all just a misunderstanding.’

‘I am so glad to have lived to see the day,’ said Adam. ‘Max and Awena. Such a perfect couple. And with a baby on the way!’

A sound between a sniThand a snort erupted from Miss Pitchford. This situation with the baby was too much for her, and she looked sternly over the top of her newspaper to indicate that a change of topic would be *quite* in order.

‘At least there is one thing we can be sure of: she’s not after his money. Vicars don’t make any money,’ said Suzanna.

‘I shouldn’t think that was the primary consideration on either side,’ said Elka. ‘It’s obviously a true love match.’ And she sighed, releasing a little cloud of organic coconut flour into the air.

Five minutes later, they looked up as one as Awena Owen came gliding in. She did not waddle, noted Suzanna, the way most women in the advanced stages of pregnancy would waddle. Due in September, now mere weeks away, she moved

like a train on a track, her long skirts hiding her locution. Or like a tugboat pulling an invisible ship into harbor. That she managed to look both womanly and, yes, sexy in this inflated condition was completely galling to Suzanna, who admitted no competition in the sexy department.

Still, it was Awena, and even Suzanna found it hard to hold a grudge where the much-beloved neo-pagan was concerned.

‘May I have a glass of kale juice, Elka – if it’s not too much trouble?’

Elka had begun offering fresh-squeezed juices like kale, cucumber, spinach, celery, and carrot. After some initial reluctance (‘I don’t eat anything green that doesn’t come with dressing,’ Suzanna had said, speaking for many), most of the villagers had been won over. While Elka’s pastries would never be resistible, the sales of healthier choices were gaining ground. Elka herself had lost a stone, most of it around her middle. Just the week before she had introduced shots of fresh ginger, wheat grass, and acai juices. Awena was her best customer in the wholesome juices department.

Nothing about her delicate condition had slowed Awena down – in fact, she was busier than ever, sought after by the BBC and by publishers wanting her to write a tie-in cookbook. But Awena, rather than reading the contracts on offer, had spent much of the past several days harvesting chamomile flowers and raspberries to dry for the tea she shared with Max and sold in her shop.

She’d spent the evening before blessing and packing a collection of oils and botanical bath salts, the blessing meant to revive any plant spirits dampened during processing. Nothing shipped out of Goddessspell without an earnest Goddessspeed from its owner. It was rather as if she cracked open a bottle of organic champagne against the side of all her offerings to the public.

In May, Awena had held a special candlelight ‘Pray for Peace’ ceremony in the room at the back of her shop, an observance in

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honor of Vesak, more commonly known as Buddha's Birthday. Awena had on several occasions lured a young Buddhist monk to make the journey to Nether Monkship to lead a meditation class. In the beginning, he had caused a genteel commotion on the steam engine train from Staincross Minster in his orange robes, his demeanor unruffled as he was transported in silent dignity, his eyes closed, but now the regular passengers were used to him and asked after him to the conductor if he didn't make an appearance on a given Saturday.

Recently, Awena had been helping Tara Raine prepare for a weekend of rest and rejuvenation at the meditation retreat being hosted by Goddessspell at a nearby seaside resort. They would be offering heart-centered yoga asanas, deep relaxation via yoga nidra or 'yogi sleep,' blissful harmony of One-Being using the chants of nada yoga, peaceful integration of the soul through guided imagery, healthful walks along the sunlit shore in honor of the goddess Shakti Vahini, and wholesome balanced meals. 'A regular Tie-Died Hippie Granola Bliss-out,' as Suzanna had described it to her brother. A feature at the retreat would be a healing session using the techniques of energy medicine of the Peruvian Andes, along with a session of rune healing as practiced by the ancient Norse people.

Suzanna felt this was rather a scattershot approach to healing: If you threw enough runes at a problem something was bound to stick. But she had come to a grudging acceptance of the power of spirituality that seemed to permeate Nether Monkship via the medium of Awena. And, as Suzanna often said, she was willing to try anything once. She was always rather hoping Awena would offer Tantric sessions at Goddessspell, but so far no luck.

While loudly maintaining her complete indifference and skepticism, Suzanna had been among the first to sign up for the weekend. Knowing that absence made the heart grow fonder, she thought it was time to put a little distance between herself and Grimaldi the Elder and his beachy waves.

But as she told her brother, 'If I should return home wearing a knitted headband, a cockleshell bracelet, bells on my toes, butterflies in my hair, and bleating about my Spirit Master, please know that you have my advance permission to have me committed.'

At least it was all grist for the mill of Suzanna's new position as magazine editor of the *St Edwold's Parish News*, which she had renamed the *St Edwold's Herald*, insisting that it gave the enterprise a more global reach. It was a position of enormous power but one she was determined, she said, not to exploit.

'There will be no phone tapping on my watch,' she had solemnly assured Max.

Max hesitated. After all, this was Suzanna. Suzanna who had bribed four-year-old Matt Nathall to vote for her entry in the St Edwold's Crumpet Bakeoff.

'You do realize,' Max had said, 'it is a simple matter of announcing local weddings and baptisms and the church flower rota and times for services. There's nothing global about it, Suzanna.'

'Oh, but it can be so much more,' Suzanna had replied, eyes aglow with the spirit of tattling pioneers like Pulitzer and Hearst. Her background in journalism made Suzanna a natural for the job, and she looked forward to shining a light on village doings.

Max, fearing an outbreak of yellow journalism of the worst sort, had emphasized that the position was temporary. It was, in fact, a task he enjoyed doing himself when time permitted, but his other duties continued to encroach. Not to mention his continually being drawn into murder investigations. Not to mention the approaching demands of fatherhood.

Fortunately for everyone noteworthy in the village, Suzanna, also head of the Women's Institute, had additional fish to fry. Her planning for the Christmas Fayre was already well underway, spawning deadly strife typical of preparations for the Harvest Fayre, although with nothing to match the

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lethal animosity of previous years. Unlike her predecessor in the role, Suzanna ruled with a firm but benevolent hand.

She was just putting the finishing touches to an org chart when Tara Raine went by the Cavalier on her bicycle, headed to teach a class at Goddessspell, a yoga mat tilted at a rakish angle in the bike's basket. She rang the bike bell as she passed.

'I should get back,' said Awena, declining Adam's offer of a chair. 'I've spent the morning gathering plants from near the Sacred Spring on Hawk Crest. Next to the monastery, it's the most peaceful spot in the village. I left an offering for Sul.'

'Okay, I'll bite,' said Suzanna. 'Sul?'

'She's a goddess of fertility and healing. The Celts worshipped her.'

Suzanna eyed Awena's stomach.

'It certainly seems to be working. I'll stay well clear, thanks for the warning.'

Awena smiled. 'Just don't drink too much of the spring water. It's very rich in minerals and needs to be diluted with ordinary water.'

'No worries.'