

***A Truth for a Truth* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

The Reverend Godwin Dorchester claimed he wanted to die in the pulpit, hands lifted toward the heavens, gaze riveted on whatever parishioner needed his message the most. Godwin, better known as "Win" to his congregations, thought his last breath ought to be put to good use, seeing as none would follow, and his chance to change the world would be over with one dramatic flourish.

Personally I'm hoping to use my final exhalations to say goodbye to the people who love me, but then I'm not a minister. I'm only married to one. And my husband Ed, Win's successor to the ministry of the Consolidated Community Church of Emerald Springs, Ohio, is young enough that dying breaths aren't high on his list of things to worry about quite yet.

In fact right now my husband is worrying about Godwin Dorchester's memorial service. In half an hour Ed will raise his own hands and fasten his gaze on somebody in Win's honor. Because Win did not die in the pulpit. He died taking out the garbage. And according to Hildy, his wife of almost fifty years, the last thing Win said was "911," which was neither inspirational nor effective. Win was dead before he did a nose dive into the garbage can and found eternal rest on a biodegradable trash bag.

"Doesn't that strike you as some kind of divine retribution? Dying face down in a garbage can?" My good friend Lucy Jacobs stopped slathering hummus on slices of whole grain bread at my kitchen table, and pointed her knife toward heaven in emphasis.

Lucy was helping me put together a tray of sandwiches for the reception following Win's memorial service. She slathered, then I covered her handiwork with slices of cucumber, grated carrot and alfalfa sprouts. Assembly line cooperation come naturally to us because Lucy and I flip houses together. Compared to installing drywall, sandwiches are a cinch.

"First, Unitarians aren't big on divine retribution," I told her, though the fine points of theology are usually not part of our conversational repertoire. "So I'm not reading anything into the way Win died. But if I did believe in a God who points fingers and yells 'Zap,' I'd think he had it in for me. For the last week Hildy has told me every single detail of Win's final moments, over and over, including everything else in the garbage can."

"You have to learn not to listen so well."

"That's not the half of it. When she finishes and I'm trying to rid my mind of those images, I get these impromptu whispered conferences about how I can become a better minister's wife."

Lucy rolled her eyes. One of the things I love most about Luce is her complete lack of interest in joining our church. She's a nominal member of a Reform synagogue, but she thinks organized religion is an oxymoron. To Lucy, Aggie Sloan-Wilcox is just an unexpected bargain she happened upon in a long checkout line at Krogers several years ago.

She went back to work, plastering hummus with a vengeance. "Better minister's wife? Exactly what are your shortcomings?"

"Too numerous to mention."

"Try me."

I layered and sliced as I weeded the casual indictments—clutter on the kitchen counters and matted leaves in the flowerbeds—from the more serious.

I began as graciously as I could. really does believe she's helping."

"First, you have to understand Hildy

"Helping who?"

"She's hard to dislike."

"I'm having no problem so far."

"You haven't even met her."

"For which I am properly grateful."

I looked up. "Hildy and Win moved to Emerald Springs a month ago and rented a house for the next year to see if they wanted to spend retirement here. You might have met her if you'd been around more, Luce. Not off traveling to who knows where."

Lucy didn't look up. All I could see was a mop of red curls falling over high cheekbones and a long, graceful neck. "I told you where. I was in California. San Francisco, then Monterey."

"Where" was really unimportant. Lucy had been missing for almost ten days. I had my suspicions about "whom" she'd been with, but Lucy would tell me in her own good time if she and Kirkor Roussos, Emerald Springs' hottest police detective, were now an item.

And did I ever want to know!

"Well, it seems I'm not doing enough to enhance Ed's career," I said instead. "I've kind of, well, you know, made a name for myself in our fair city." "I'm guessing she's not

worried about you flipping houses." Lucy looked up. "Not that there's much to worry about along those lines."

In theory Lucy and I are still in business, but we recently completed picture perfect renovations on a house that we haven't been able to sell again. Any profit we've made on our flipping venture is draining away on those mortgage payments, due to a miserable economy. We're more or less in a holding pattern now. I hold the want ads looking for new employment opportunities. She holds copies of our bank statements and moans.

I shook my head. "Not the houses, no."

"Well, I suppose tracking down murderers is a bit outside the usual wifely duties," she said.

Of course Lucy had easily nailed the other thing I'm known for in Emerald Springs. For some reason little ol' minister's wife me is a homicide magnet.