

***Endless Chain* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Shenandoah Community Church Wednesday Morning Quilting Bee and Social Gathering—August 6th

The meeting was called to order at 9am in the quilter's beehive. Helen Henry suggested (once again) that we change the name of our group to SCC Bee and be done with it. She insists that reading the heading of the minutes takes most of our business session. To please Helen, who lacks patience, we agreed to drop "Morning" from the written notes, beginning next week.

Cathy Adams brought a quilt top for show and tell in the Chinese Coin pattern, using oriental prints. (Peony Greenway noted politely that Cathy paid too much for them.) We will begin quilting the top after Labor Day when we hope to be finished with a lap quilt of appliqued Autumn Leaves which will be a gift for Martha Wisner.

Helen agreed to stay after the bee and help Cathy square up her quilt top so that the finished product won't look like it was quilted by "drunken sailors." Please note the quotation marks. I am only the scribe.

Kate Brogan brought her two youngest children as guests. After Rory jumped on Cathy's quilt top, Chinese Coins will need all the help Helen can give it. The meeting was adjourned soon after and those bag lunches that survived Rory's karate demonstrations were shared among the quilters who remained.

Sincerely,

Dovey K. Lanning, recording secretary

"So . . ." Anna Mayhew looked up from one of her tiny, even stitches and wiggled her eyebrows to signal what was to come. "I hear Chris-tine Flet-cher—"she punched all the syllables—"is coming for the fundraiser tonight. What do you suppose she'll wear to the party?"

"The heck with what she wears," Dovey Lanning said, "let's talk about where she's going to sleep."

"There is a child under the quilt frame." For the life of her Helen Henry couldn't figure out why she had to remind the others. At the moment little Rory Brogan was banging the floor at her feet with a picture book of talking bunnies that his mother had given him to read. Kate Brogan was nothing, if not an optimist.

"Rory!" Kate, an attractive thirty-something brunette, vacated her chair and dragged her son out from under the frame. "Go outside and play on the slide. Now."

Rory protested. "I was killing germs. There are a million germs under there!"

"He just learned about germs in preschool camp," Kate apologized. "Knowledge is a dangerous thing."

"These were ninja germs!" Rory insisted.

"I believe I saw those very same ninja germs escaping into the play yard," Anna told him. "And if you don't stop them there, they might get all the way to the road."

Rory's eyes brightened. He had shiny dark hair and eyes that matched. He was a wiry child, one part willfulness, two parts energy, three parts resolve. Today he was wearing a white "gi" and the yellow belt he had earned last week in his Tai Kwon-do class.

Helen didn't like children, of course. But she had to admit that this one had spunk.

The silence thrummed once Rory had left for his search and destroy mission, and everyone inhaled it gratefully. In the hour since their short business meeting, there had been precious little silence. The "beehive" in the walkout basement was cramped. Once it had been the nursery, before the church's expanding baby population had been moved into a brand new wing. Several months ago the quilters had commandeered the tiny room for their own use. It was just wide enough for a quilting frame and several comfortable pieces of furniture along the wall, but it was filled with light from windows overlooking a fenced-in play yard and an expansive parking lot. And it was all theirs.

"I could just stay home," Kate volunteered when they'd all recovered a little. "Until Rory's in school full time."

"Don't you dare." Cathy Adams patted Kate's shoulder. She was a warm hearted grandmotherly woman, a former insurance agent who was now reaping the benefits of an excellent 401K. Cathy was the least accomplished quilter among them, but she was learning fast.

Peony Greenway cleared her throat. Peony's job in the group and in the church in general was to smooth out trouble spots. "Rory adds something to the mixture." She paused for effect. "And by the way, on that 'other' subject, I know for a fact Christine will be sleeping at the Inn at Narrow Passage. She has a room reserved through the weekend."

"You called to check?" Dovey asked.

"Of course not!" Peony realized Dovey was teasing and relaxed her spine a millimeter. "Reverend Kinkade mentioned it, that's all. He asked if the inn was a good place for Miss Fletcher to stay."

"So Sam wanted the word to go out that they aren't sleeping together, in case any of us have narrow little minds," Cathy said.

Almost nobody but Peony called the Shenandoah Community Church's present minister Reverend Kinkade. It was hard to imagine their jeans and T-shirt clad pastor with a title that formal.

"Narrow minds, narrow passage. . ." Dovey inclined her head toward the door, which was propped open so Rory and his younger sister Bridget—who was napping in an overstuffed armchair in the corner--could run in and out at will. "Narrowing window of opportunity for gossip."

In the fenced-in play yard Rory could be heard screeching. Soon he'd be back inside to make a full report.

"Sam and Christine have been engaged for years," said Anna, ever the amateur psychologist. "To me, this signals major conflicts in their relationship. Why hasn't he married her?"

Helen thought Anna's logic was mostly wishful thinking. Sam was a charismatic charmer who attracted females the way the trumpet vine against her barn attracted hummingbirds. At forty four Anna was at least ten years too old to be a contender, but she still had a crush on the minister. Sometimes Helen wondered if Sam's "engagement" was merely a tool to keep young women in the congregation at arm's length.

"He hasn't married Christine because she doesn't like the country, and she doesn't like us." Dovey leaned over the quilt, stretched taut on a wooden frame, and squinted at a row of stitches.

Satisfied she looked up. "Christine Fletcher is a hothouse gardenia and we're a wilted bunch of black-eyed Susans. That's a fact."

"As if this church isn't filled with government retirees who have seen most of the world up close and personal." Cathy fumbled under her chair for the water bottle she always carried and uncapped it for a big swig.

"Maybe so, but those folks came here for the country life and took right to it. Look at you and that husband of yours. Keeping bees, goats. . . whatever else do you have?"

"Last I heard Alf was looking for a couple of alpacas." Cathy capped her water bottle. "Pretty soon I'll be scared to go out my own door."

"Was a time not so many years ago in these parts that farming was deadly serious." Helen looked up from her perfect line of stitches. "And nobody was from anywhere else."

"Must have been pretty boring," Cathy said.

Helen humphed, but she supposed not all the changes in Toms Brook, Virginia, were bad ones.

"Back . . . to . . . Chris-tine!" Dovey shook her head in disgust. "I swear this group leaves a subject faster than a hawk swoops off a tree limb."

Peony glared at her. "What else do you want us to say?"

"Is Sam going to make an honest woman out of Christine or not? And if he ever does, will the two of them be leaving for the big city? Because I don't think Miss Chris-tine Flet-cher sees herself as a country pastor's wife."

"Can you see Miss Christine Fletcher playing the organ or teaching Sunday School?" Anna laughed.

"Well, we need a new sexton," Dovey said. "There's dust everywhere. Maybe she scrubs floors?"

Rory chose that moment to streak through the doorway and into the room, skidding to a halt at his mother's side. The accompanying war whoops woke Bridget, whose whimpers escalated with his shouts.

"Ninjas!" He grabbed Kate's arm and tugged. "Ninjas! I saw 'em!"

Kate disengaged herself, then turned and put her hands on her son's shoulders. "You woke up your sister, Rory. How many times have I told you not to shout?"

"Ninjas!" To his credit, the excited little boy tried to lower his voice, but he danced from foot to foot. "A whole truck of Ninjas. Two trucks. All dressed in black. They're coming back!"

"The trucks were dressed in black? Or the Ninjas?" Cathy teased.

Rory's excitement gave way to a frown. "I don't think I can fight 'em all."

"Just take them one at a time," Helen advised. "Tell the others to wait their turn."

That seemed to make sense to the little boy. He wriggled out of his mother's grasp and turned back to the play yard. In an instant he had disappeared again.

"When he wins the Academy Award, we'll all say we knew him when," Cathy said.

"At least he's never bored." Kate got up to rescue Bridget, who stopped whimpering immediately and rested her curly head against her mother's shoulder. "Maybe I'd

better call it a day. I'm not going to get anything else accomplished. Maybe I can get a sitter next week and stay longer."

Helen rose and stretched a moment. At eighty-three she was too old to sit in one position for long without turning to stone. "Quilt's almost done. Martha will like it. Darn shame her mind is going, but at least she still remembers most of us."

The lap quilt, with appliqued leaves in autumn colors, was to be a gift for Martha Wisner, who had been the church secretary for many years. She had moved into an assisted living facility several years before and was now in the nursing home wing. Martha's memory was slipping fast but whatever form of dementia she suffered, she did not seem unhappy. She was always glad to see visitors, whether she remembered them or not. The quilters had chosen the pattern because Martha had loved fall in their Shenandoah Valley. Helen had hand appliqued the top as a reminder of better times.

"If we stay another hour we can get it finished, then Helen can take it home and bind it," Anna said. "Unless you want me to do that?"

Helen shook her head. Everybody knew Anna had no color sense. Her stitches were even, points matched perfectly, blocks were square. But Anna's fabric choices were legendary. Helen was afraid if Anna picked out a binding, the earth-toned leaves would forever be rimmed in shocking pink.

"No, I'll do it," she said. "You're planning to go to that silly Mexican fiesta tonight, aren't you? I've got nothing but time these days."

"Ninjas!"

This time everybody turned to stare at Rory, who was jumping up and down in the doorway. Before Kate could shush him there was a crash from the front of the church. The women looked at each, then, as one, they hurried to the windows overlooking the broad expanse of parking lot that led to Old Miller Road in front of the church.

Teenagers were pouring out of two pickups that were parked within inches of each other. One of the trucks was nose first against an ancient sycamore that anchored the lot. Helen hoped the trucks had collided with each other and not with the tree. As she watched a group of three boys, dressed in dark jeans and dark T-shirts started toward the new sign the congregation had erected and blessed that very Sunday, a sign that had already caused it's share of controversy within the church community.

One of the boys took a playful swing at the other, dodging and feinting with apparent good spirits. But high spirits or not Helen didn't think they were up to any good. They were quickly joined by a fourth boy. That one was carrying a sledgehammer.

"We'd better stop them," she said. She turned and found her path blocked by a small athletic body.

"Nin-jas!" Rory sing-songed. "I-told-you!"