

***The Color of Light* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Analiese Wagner needed to breathe. She was fairly certain she hadn't inhaled even once during the past hour. Now her head felt three sizes too large, and she was perilously close to her first-ever panic attack. She needed to find a place where she could stand unobserved and fill her lungs and bloodstream with oxygen. Maybe afterwards she would be calm enough to get behind the wheel of her Accord and risk life and limb in Asheville's rush hour traffic, but not yet.

The church sanctuary was too far away and probably in use. The closest rest room was public. She saw the door to the sexton's supply closet, opened it, slipped in and closed it behind her. The moment she did the small room, maybe three feet by five, went dark, but she didn't care. The air smelled, not unpleasantly, of pine and chlorine.

And she was blessedly alone.

Analiese stood very still, eyes closed, and filled her lungs, releasing the air slowly, and then repeating. She was well acquainted with prayer and meditation, but right now she needed oxygen and silence more.

When her head stopped swimming she rested her face in her hands. Her ministry had come to this. Escaping into the sexton's closet to inhale poisonous chemicals rather than face even one more member of her staff or congregation.

Long ago the man who had encouraged her to enter seminary had told her there would be moments when she wanted to hang up her clerical collar. He hadn't told her that she would face most of them alone, and that sometimes God, who was supposed to walk beside her, would wander off, too.

But Isaiah must have known. Who faced loneliness more often than a Catholic priest?

A long moment passed before she straightened, took one more deep breath, and opened the door. No one was in the hall, which made for the best moment of her day. She started quickly through the hall to the front door of the parish house. She was inches from escaping when a familiar voice sounded behind her.

"You'll be gone for the rest of the day?"

Myra Hudson had been the church administrator longer than Analiese had ministered to it, and she had the gray hair and pursed lips to prove it. The rest of the staff had already gone home, but obviously Myra was soldiering on.

Analiese managed one small smile as she faced her. "Trust me, Myra, my absence will be a gift."

The other woman's scowl eased just a fraction. She was twenty years older than Analiese's thirty-nine, and twenty years more experienced in getting what she wanted. "You have three phone calls to return and a mountain of correspondence. You told me to remind you."

"A moment of weakness." Myra didn't budge, and Analiese lifted her hands in defeat. "I'll make the calls tonight from home. The mountain can wait until tomorrow."

"I hope wherever you're going you plan to walk?"

"And the reason?"

"Because when I looked outside a few minutes ago, a van and a forklift were parked right behind your car."