

## Preface

I have worked in ministry for over twenty years. This book's story started when I was driving to the church one Sunday and feeling particularly burned out. "Fly Away" by Lenny Kravitz came on the radio and a funny thing happened: I started seeing my drive as the opening scenes of a movie. Some days later I was wondering what would happen if, by a quirk of fate, I got my wish. What if one of my film scripts got optioned or one of my books became a best seller? Would I leave the church? Would I stay?

That scene and those questions became the basis for a film script called HEART SOUL & ROCK 'N' ROLL. Writing the script was cathartic. I explored life in ministry and what happens when one's calling is re-defined, doing it all through the eyes of my principle character, Lindsay Mitchell. Like me, Lins interprets the events in her life through a theological lens. What happens to her, though, does not resemble my life: I have never fallen in love with an agnostic, slacker-like rocker, nor have I sung with a band. However, I will admit to having gone through a singer-songwriter phase back in my early twenties. How did it go, you ask? Let's put it this way, I was on stage once or twice.

The characters and events, particularly at the church, have their roots in reality – their roots, but not their fullness. I took quirks and qualities that I liked or found fun in friends and acquaintances to build my characters. I even used things that actually happened to me. The scene closest to reality is Lindsay's fortieth birthday party. My own fortieth was a dead ringer, with the exception that the pastor never read a committal service over me. But he did wear the funeral robe.

A couple of years after I wrote the script I decided to novelize it. What an enjoyable experience! It was as fun to write as the script, but this time, I really was able to delve into the characters, the story, and paint pictures of the Jersey Shore and life in a church. Besides being a love story between two people, HEART SOUL & ROCK 'N' ROLL is also my love story with the church and my state.

So relax and enjoy the ride. You even might want to put on a little Springsteen.

# Chapter 1

Who knew turning forty would be such a big deal? I never really thought much about age. Oh, I was aware that my thirties were flying by, but it was all good because my life was good. For ten years I had served the Church of the Epiphany as its assistant minister. Even though I wasn't ordained, the salary was all right and I even had managed to save enough to buy a little condo. I was doing what I was called to do: ministry in a parish. Things were good.

Drew Palmer, the senior minister, and I had instituted some exciting changes, including a cross-generational gathering that met at 9:30 each Sunday. Imagine: all generations laughing, playing, singing, learning, and praying together. It was inspiring.

I was busy with youth group, confirmation, choir, a preteen group, conversation and study groups, Family Vacation Bible Camp, and even a "Movies under the Stars" event for eight weeks every Friday during the summer.

Not bad for a shy girl from Parsippany, New Jersey.

I had some good friends, especially Patti and Sue. And then there was Dale, my brother, who lived in California with his wife and two boys. We sent texts, called each other regularly, and managed to visit a couple times a year.

About now you're probably wondering: where's the boyfriend? Let me be straight with you: there was no boyfriend, no significant other. But it wasn't a problem. I had learned to be happy with who I was. In fact, I was even getting used to the idea that I would never have kids.

Then I hit the big four-oh.

Maybe it was the headstone-shaped birthday cake that Sue DeLucca had made for me. Or maybe it was the bunch of black balloons that Patti Campbell had strung up in the church parlor. Maybe it was Drew showing up for the party wearing his funereal black robe and then saying a prayer of committal over me.

But I think it happened when Drew said, "Welcome to the club."

The club of what, I had wondered. Old age? Drew may have been pushing 60, but I was only on the edge of my middle years, for crying out loud! So who was old? Not me. No way. "Welcome to the club..."

Yes, something definitely clicked that day, something that changed everything. It started with feeling vaguely dissatisfied and not knowing why. It grew into remembering the rock band I played with back in college and then became a sad feeling because I had given the band up. I wondered if there was not something missing, something more, something that I needed. The trouble was I just couldn't put my finger on it. So it simmered for two months until one Sunday in early August.

On that particular morning, I was not looking forward to my Sunday routine. It normally consisted of trying to prepare for my ministerial duties and being continuously interrupted. I had developed a habit of getting in early to do the things I needed to do first so I could be available to deal with the questions and problems that arose once parishioners started arriving. The routine required some juggling but it worked.

I suspect most people think pastors are supposed to be all spiritual and tuned in to God on the Sabbath. But regular people don't know how hard that is to do. They also don't know that there are days when you don't even want to show up. But pastors do it anyway, because they're

called and because they know things might change for the better at any point. And that change usually is a gift of grace. And grace is both amazing and unpredictable.

That day I drove along, radio tuned to WDHA, my favorite station. A great metal ballad came on and I belted the thing out. It gave me a shot of enthusiasm. But that enthusiasm dissipated when I pulled into the church lot, turned off the radio, entered the empty building, and braced myself to face the whirlwind that is Sunday morning.

First I went into Fellowship Hall to set up the creative response area for the cross-generational worship service. The plan that day was to re-build the walls of Jerusalem with large, cardboard building blocks. The sexton already had set up the tables and chairs. Katie, our music director, and Lane, our organist/pianist, entered and we exchanged good mornings. As they went over the music, I got the screen, projector, and computer ready for the songs and responses.

Once I finished those tasks, I scurried out, intent on my next job. As I was passing through the kitchen I waved at Mrs. Carroll, a lovely, cheerful, chubby lady. Instead of waving back, she looked imploringly at me and asked the words that always stopped me cold: "Lindsay, do you know where we keep the coffee urn?"

Allow me to explain. The presence of the coffee urn was an absolute necessity for the fellowship hours that followed each service. However, the coffee urn's location always seemed to be a mystery, especially to the people who were supposed to make the coffee. I never could figure out why that was. In fact, I don't even think God knows why that was.

Used to the pleas for help, I smiled and showed Mrs. Carroll the urn's location. As I was pulling it out of its secret cupboard, the lock of which could only be opened by a secret key that was kept in another secret location, she smiled at me again. "Can you help me set up? Believe it or not, I've never done coffee hour before."

I glanced at the clock. It was 9:15. We were cutting it close. But I smiled encouragingly. "Sure. First, we have to fill the urn to forty cups..."

Ten minutes later I skidded into the church office. Drew was already waiting for me. He gave me a copy of the order of worship and the two of us leaned on the secretary's desk, as he said, "So you're going to do the call to worship, lead sharing time, and read the lesson this week. Right?"

I nodded and circled my parts on the outline. Then off we went to oversee a time of freewheeling, multi-generational worship and learning.

After that, I hurried upstairs to do a quick half-hour Bible study with our 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders. This morning was no different from any other. I entered the room to a hail of wadded paper balls and raucous laughter. I tried to say hello over the racket, but they continued to have ten different conversations, despite the fact that only eight kids were present. "Hey!" I shouted. "Good morning!"

They all stopped and blinked at me.

"A little courtesy, okay, guys? I mean, you wanted to do this and we hardly have any time."

"We want to read something in the Old Testament," Artie said.

"But we're not through the Gospel of Mark yet," I replied.

"How come we never read the Old Testament?"

"Because this group has only been together for a month and you said you wanted to read Mark."

"I never said I wanted to read Mark," Rosa Abbey revealed.

"That's because you were sick that day." I cast my eyes heavenward. "Come on, guys cut me a break."

There was a long silence. Then, as one, the Abbey sisters – Harriet, Rosa, and Lena – broke from the pack and swallowed me up in a group hug. It was their M.O. – a sign of affection that they thought screamingly funny. “We love you, Lins,” they chorused.

That, of course, melted me into a puddle. “Aw,” I sighed, “I love you, too.”

A half hour later I was on my way to the office to go over the 11:30 worship service with Drew, when I spotted Carolyn, a young thirty-something parishioner, in the hall. She looked terrible. I stopped to ask her what was wrong and when I did her eyes filled with tears. She told me that her younger sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer and it was stage three and she was terrified.

Time and duties took a back seat. I hugged Carolyn and let her cry on my shoulder. I don’t know how long we stood there, but eventually, I asked if she would like to pray. She nodded and we stood in the middle of the hall while I asked God to be with Carolyn and with her sister and the rest of her family. I asked that the doctors be granted wisdom and skill and that all those involved with Carolyn’s sister find strength and peace. Then we hugged some more, as curious and caring parishioners looked on. When I left, they moved in and gently began to take care of Carolyn.

By now I had missed the final run-through with the choir. And, with five minutes to spare, I raced into the office, threw open the closet door, and shrugged into my clerical robe. As I turned around, Drew asked if I would like to do the prayer of confession and words of assurance, the Epistle reading, and the offertory prayer. I circled everything on the bulletin and off we went.

Our “traditional” service was comprised of inspiring prayers, stirring hymns and music, a moving sermon, a dynamic choir, and a phenomenal pipe organ played by our equally phenomenal organist, Lane. Afterward, we had a time of fellowship – with more coffee (unfortunately decaf) and cookies – more greeting, listening and talking.

You’d think I would be done for the day. But the thing about ministry is just when you think you’re done, you’re not. In the hallway I ran into Eric, a skinny twenty-something dude with tattoos and piercings. He was pushing a cart upon which sat the dreaded coffee urn. “Hey, Lins,” he called. “Can you give me a hand with this thing? I got no clue how to clean it.” What could I do, but follow him to the kitchen and show him how to clean and store my arch nemesis?

Fifteen minutes later, and with aching feet, I made it into the church office. I flopped down onto my swivel chair and heaved a gigantic sigh just as Patti Campbell walked in. Carrying a briefcase in one hand, she announced, “Well, we finally managed to get the ‘take’ counted correctly.”

I rolled my eyes. “For crying out loud, Patti, it’s the offering, not the take. You should know that by now.”

“Take, offering, it’s all money.” She hadn’t changed one bit since we had been college roommates.

“Who’s doing the deposit?”

“Ralph.”

“Yikes! I hope he can find the bank.”

“Exactly. That’s why it took us so long getting things to balance.” She opened a closet door and stowed away the counters’ briefcase with its many forms and deposit slips.

Our church secretary, Sue DeLuca, flew in next. Grabbing a piece of paper and a pen, she scribbled furiously and slapped the note down on her desk. Focused and organized, Sue also had a short fuse – which she miraculously managed to keep until she was alone or with people she trusted (like me). Today was no exception.

“Why do they do this?” she sputtered “Why do people always insist on telling me stuff on Sunday morning? They never write it down! They just tell me to my face and expect me to remember it! Why??”

“You’re the church secretary, that’s why, ” Patti replied.

“Really?” Sue squeaked. “Do they see a notebook in my hand? A pen? You’re lucky you’re a volunteer, Patti!”

“Oh, yes, so lucky, Sue. Counting the offering is a thrill ride.”

Their bantering was fraying my already worn nerves. “Will you two cut it out?”

“Why?” Patti asked. “It’s our après-church routine. Some people go to brunch, we gripe. You know that, Lins.”

Shutting my eyes, I leaned back in my chair and prayed for quiet. “I have a headache.”

“What brought that on?”

I opened my eyes. “I’m a little tired.”

“Really?” Sue observed. “You’ve been a little tired ever since your birthday. What’s up with that?”

Sue was right. She was always right. But that day I didn’t want to hear it. Okay, if truth be told, maybe I didn’t want to hear it most days. That still didn’t stop her from being right, and that was really annoying. “I’d rather not talk about my birthday.”

Patti pulled up a swivel chair and scooted toward me. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lindsay, you’re only forty. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Yeah? Well, what’s it mean when I keep wondering if the next fifteen years of my life are going to be the same?”

“The same as what?”

“You know. The same old same old. And why can’t I stop thinking about our college band?”

The college band had been fun. It had also been real work, but well worth the effort because we had rocked hard. I played rhythm guitar, sang lead, and wrote a lot of our music. Patti was on bass. Two other girls, Ginny and Carla, rounded the group out on keyboards and drums. We called ourselves the Poison Pen Society. I don’t know why or how we came up with that name. But we were good, name notwithstanding. I had been happy back then. I loved what I was doing. I used to love working in a church. I wondered if I still did.

Patti watched me with her intense brown eyes. “Frankly, I never did understand why you gave the band up.”

“I started theological school, that’s why.”

“Oh, yes. I forgot. Christians don’t rock.”

I rubbed my hands over my face. My skin felt greasy. I was stressed. “That’s not why. I still love rock. It’s all energy and fun. But somehow it doesn’t fit with parish ministry.”

“Because it’s energy and fun?” Sue was looking at me as if I had a screw loose.

“No! Rock and parish ministry just feel like oil and water. Rock is too – I don’t know – dark sometimes? Secular?”

“There’s always Christian rock,” Sue suggested.

My gut knotted up reflexively. “The only people who listen to that are the ones who already believe.”

“So you want to use rock to convert non-believers?”

“No,” I howled and blurted, “I just want to rock one more time before I die! Is that a crime?”

Patti meanwhile had found her purse and was touching up her makeup. “Sounds like you’re in a rut, my dear.” She paused to run berry-colored lipstick expertly over her mouth (she never

used a mirror). Snapping the cap back on the tube, she said, “What you need is a change of pace.”

I braced myself. Patti had always been a peer version of Auntie Mame to me, so I was pretty confident that she was going to suggest something like sky diving or taking a solo stroll in the dark around the haunted Eastern State Penitentiary. “Such as?”

“Such as, you need to spend your vacation at my Point Pleasant shore house.”

Now that was a surprise. It actually sounded enjoyable – and something that wouldn’t require shots or therapy afterward. “Wow, I’d love to, but I can’t take all three weeks at once.”

Sue rose and walked to the large calendar mounted on the wall. On it was scrawled all the church’s activities. She quickly reviewed the current month. “Actually, Lins, it looks like all the big summer stuff is over for you – Family Vacation Bible Camp, the youth mission trip.”

“What about Movies under the Stars?”

Sue smiled. “Easy fix. I can lead that for the last two weeks. When are you going to the shore, Patti?”

“Tuesday.”

“Looks like you’re in the clear, Lins.”

I was getting a funny feeling. Like things were going to change big time if I went with Patti. She’d probably get me down to Point and make me go bar-hopping with her or something equally uncomfortable. And those were the least intimidating of possibilities.

Drew walked into the office just as I began to back pedal. “Listen, I can’t just go off to the Shore for three whole weeks.” Looking at my senior pastor for support, I added, “Isn’t that right, Drew?”

He kept right on unlocking the door to his office. “As long as there are no conflicts, I have no problem.”

“But Labor Day is just around the corner –”

“In four weeks,” Sue interrupted.

“We have to plan for fall,” I countered.

Drew paused in the doorway. “We’ve already done that. Go have some fun.” And with that, he disappeared into his office.

Sue folded her arms triumphantly across her ample bosom. “Done! No excuses, sister!”

It was a *fait accompli*.