

HEAVEN'S DELIGHT

a novel by

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Chapter One

Six days, four couples, loads of problems, thought Beth.

Before leaving Heaven, she wanted to make sure she could do her job as efficiently as possible, so she requested a top-of-the-range high-tech watch with email access, telecommunication facilities, hidden camera with 4gb of storage, invisibility rays and defence shield. She was given an Etch-a-Sketch, which cost under ten pounds at most toy shops. Draw a picture, wipe it off. Nothing else. God may be the most powerful person on earth, but he was also economical. Before God had a chance to explain anything else, Beth insisted she get these ridiculous good deeds over and done with and be sent back to Earth straight away.

Beth was out of her angel uniform of clean white wings, each one eight feet in length, and wearing her three-quarter length suede coat, expensive yet impractical trainers, designer jeans, V-neck jumper and a white pearl necklace. She found herself in a spacious living-room. It could have been anywhere, but judging by the carpeted floor, flowery wallpaper, souvenir picture of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip on the mantelpiece and a picture of the local cricket team, Beth realised she had landed in a middle-class house in suburban England.

Beth wondered around and sniffed curiously. Smells like an old people's home, she reckoned, before stumbling across pictures of sixty-six-year-old Norman and sixty-five-year-old Esther. As Beth's eyes scanned the photographs, she noticed in every single one, they were happy, from simple black and white photos of their marriage to coloured gold-framed photographs of their children and grandchildren.

'They're already in love, what I am supposed to do?'

She squinted closer at the photographs, hoping for more clues. Could their son be an international spy and she had to hunt him down through six continents before making passionate love in his muscular arms and hot embrace? Mmm. Better make that five continents. She hated the cold.

Esther was larger than life, big-boned and exuded positive energy. Her hairstyle changed in every photo from a short bob, to long ginger hair, to an eighties mullet. Her smile was disarming and her presence was enormous. She also wore loads of make-up, which looked better than it sounded.

Norman wore smart ties and suits. He was slim, shy, not naturally smiley, but had distinguished grey hair and appeared identical in each photo, apart from less grey in his earlier years. He allowed his wife to shine in the limelight, but remained close to her in all the pictures.

Nope. Beth was still confused. She knew nothing about relationships. If she did, she'd be in one. Or maybe it was because she knew about relationships that she chose not to experience the frustration of being in one.

When her friends met blokes they thought were "the one" it always put a dent in their sisterhood bond, as they slowly spent more time with their new beau and less time with Beth... until they broke up (always the man's fault) and friendship became strong again. Beth never understood why this happened. Sure, sex was important, but wasn't friendship worth more than men?

Beth had hundreds of acquaintances, but only a few *genuine* friends. Being very protective towards them, she learned to gauge men and discovered they had two faces.

The “job interview” façade which gave great first impressions - dinner, drinks and fun-fun-fun, then there was the “every day work” façade, where you saw the real person you had to spent time with, that couldn’t hide behind the carefully prepared questions and answers of the first meeting. Beth knew her friends deserved men with better qualifications so decided to interview them herself. Only the best would suffice for her nearest and dearest. It seemed like a smart idea at the time, however, she would later die alone in her small overpriced one-bedroom London flat like a fading rock star, except she left no wonderful memories behind.

Beth wandered upstairs into Esther and Norman’s room, which had a king-sized bed, a dressing-table full of make-up and hair accessories, a leather-backed chair and large wardrobe. Glancing out the window, she noticed identikit houses with Jeeps, hatchbacks, CRVs and seven-seaters parked in driveways. Everything appeared normal until a shuddering scream was heard.

Beth turned around and noticed Esther, who had dropped her folded clothes onto the floor.

‘Who are you?’ asked Esther, startled rather than scared by a stranger’s presence in her house.

Beth was confused. ‘You can see me?’

‘Of course I can see you!’ replied Esther sharply.

‘You’re not meant to see me. Okay, I just came here for one thing. Maybe you can tell me what it is then I’ll be out of your face.’

Esther picked up her clothes and rushed out of the room.

Without even thinking about her task ahead, Beth started wondering about her current position. Did God send her here to make her more decisive? After all, her life was a series of contradictions.

1. She didn't believe in love and refused to let any man hurt her, yet deep down inside, she yearned to have someone to share her life with.

2. She had a flatish stomach; "flat" because she sit-ups every morning, "ish" because she had two croissants for breakfast. Who got filled up with one croissant, unless it was full of ham and cheese? Okay, now she was hungry and confused.

3. Beth believed family was the most important thing in the world, but she had not spoken to her mother for eight years; her mother was not dominating, forcing her to get married or insist setting her up with inappropriate men. If anything, she was the perfect mother, yet all ties had been severed.

4. She blamed much of her behaviour on being a Gemini. She had a good side (marched against war in Iraq, bought *The Big Issue* every week) and a bad side (a yearly snort of cocaine with her bosses at Christmas).

5. She wanted her staff at work to admire her, respect her and be her friend, but she behaved ruthlessly towards them if they gave anything less than one hundred percent. She was often told she should star a female version of *The Office*, taking it as a compliment, as opposed to the intended insult.

6. Six was her lucky number and she often made decisions based on the sixth choice. Visiting six shoe shops before finding the right pair; sleeping with six men before deciding which one to date; six lattes to endure her twelve-hour day at work (five lattes was not enough. Seven, well, that's just neurotic).

Beth looked in the dressing-table mirror. She wished her hair was longer, her lips fuller, her waist smaller. Plastic surgery was only a phone call away. It was certainly better than torturing herself in the gym and giving up the fresh tiramisu from her local M&S, strawberry trifle from Tesco and fresh cream buns from ASDA. If a supermarket had a pleasurable dessert, Beth knew it, tasted it and could review it. She thought of starting up her own desserts blog at the weekends, however, hunger and cravings took over. Beth preferred the undiluted joy of eating as opposed to writing about it.

Her attention was distracted by the reflection in the mirror of Esther charging into the room, gripping a large cricket bat. Beth jumped out the way and Esther smashed the mirror into pieces with a momentous ferocity.

Beth looked out the window and shouted to God, 'Exterminate her! Liquidate her! Beam me up!' before diving behind the chair. A large whoosh was heard as Esther swung the bat again and knocked the chair over.

'If you've taken anything from this house, you put it right down,' Esther demanded.

'I'm not here to harm you,' insisted Beth, who had now jumped onto the bed and held her hands up high for surrender. 'If I wanted to hurt you, I'd have a knife or a gun!' she added.

Esther wasn't buying her story. 'A burglar with reason. How unreasonable!'

'We can talk through this sensibly. After all, women are more intelligent than men,' said Beth hopefully.

Refusing to listen, she swung again, catching Beth's jacket, almost smashing her in the hip. Beth was terrified of getting hurt. She didn't believe in violence.

Beth studied judo as a kid, but remained a white belt after five years on account that she was unbelievably naff.

Esther held her bat high, but her hand was shaking. This is not something she did on a daily basis. In fact, she didn't have a violent bone in her body, except once when she smacked a mugger across the ear for daring to grab her purse on the way back from the train station.

'Give me a sign, God. Anything!' Beth shouted at the ceiling.

Writing appeared on her Etch-a-Sketch. She glanced at it hopefully. It simply said: "RUN."

Beth lifted up the duvet and threw it over Esther's head. With Esther distracted, Beth leaped off the bed, leaving her Etch-a-Sketch behind, sprinted down the stairs with pumping arms and pulled open the front door. Immediately the door vibrated as it was locked by a gold chain. Loud thundering footsteps were heard as Esther approached with fury. Beth panicked, her hands shaking, her face sweating, her breath panting as she barely removed the chain and opened the wooden door. Esther swung the bat so hard it removed a small chip of the wood. Beth ran like she was competing in the Olympics, amazed at how fast she moved.

Beth had been on earth for only five minutes and she was almost beaten to a pulp. How on earth am I going to survive the next five days, twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes? she thought.