

# **The Dark Winter**

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**PURPLE HAND PRESS**

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Trade Paperback Edition  
ISBN-13 978-1-953195-06-7  
Kindle Edition  
ISBN-13 978-1-953195-07-4  
ePub Edition  
ISBN-13 978-1-953195-08-1

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Editor: Elaine Mattern

07.14.2021

## Chapter 1

Before she opened her eyes, Olivia Enright knew that her bedroom was filled with pellucid, golden light. She'd forgotten to close the blinds again, although it only required a few taps on her phone. Last night, when she was being undressed by an excited lover, she didn't care where her phone landed, but looking for it now would only wake the woman sleeping against her shoulder.

The sun teased up the red highlights in Sam's chestnut hair. The sparse grays, that she liked to complain and brag about, shone like they'd been polished. "Good morning, my dear girl," Olivia murmured, glad that she was sound asleep and wouldn't protest. Whenever Olivia used that term of endearment, Sam reminded her that she hadn't been a girl for decades. Lately, she'd been emphasizing the point by adding that her sixtieth birthday was only a few weeks away. Were the casual mentions a sign of anxiety about a milestone birthday or a hint to plan a celebration? She doubted that Sam, who was basically shy, was hoping for a party, but Olivia had been secretly planning a gathering of their closest friends.

Carefully turning her head, Olivia glanced at the clock. As tempting as it might be to wake Sam with lovemaking, she had to get up. Her appointment with Mother Lucy began at eight, and Olivia despised being late. She hated it so much that she'd been known to exile people from company meetings for tardiness. That was before her son's trading scandal, when she was still the chair of the Enright Fund. When she became the town manager, she tried using that trick in meetings, but the laid-back Mainers were unimpressed. She'd since learned to live with them straggling in whenever they pleased.

Olivia finally eased her arm out from under the sleeping woman. As Sam turned away from the sunlight, Olivia admired her long, elegant neck. Sam might tramp in dirt from her construction projects, but everything about her was refined, from her patrician features to

her long-fingered, graceful hands.

“Later, you,” Olivia whispered, kissing her softly. Sam’s eyes, the warm brown of strong tea, briefly opened. A moment later, she was asleep again. Olivia took Sam’s deep sleep as a sign that their lovemaking had been satisfying. The bed smelled of female sex, briny, like the salt marsh after the tide went out.

Olivia found her pants under the bed. Fortunately, her phone was still in the pocket. She keyed in the command to activate the motorized blinds before closing the bedroom door.

While she waited for the coffee to brew, she browsed *Bloomberg*. Since giving up her controlling interest in the Enright Fund, she no longer needed market intelligence to guide its investments, but reading the financial news was an ingrained habit. Besides, the article on the inversion in the bond markets was a welcome distraction from the morning’s real business—preparing for the video meeting with her granddaughters.

She hadn’t seen the girls in years. Fortunately, Amanda had sent some photographs. “They’ve changed so much. I don’t want you to be shocked when you see them.” Olivia had been known on Wall Street as having a heart of steel, but when she saw the pictures, she burst into tears. Since then, she’d looked at the photos many times, studying their young eyes for signs of damage from their father’s sexual abuse. Amanda had said they were at a delicate stage in their therapy, which was why Olivia was so glad that Lucille Bartlett, rector of St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church, had agreed to act as an intermediary.

Olivia’s lawyers had worked out the arrangement. She’d been shocked at first that her daughter-in-law was willing to speak to her after years of silence and helping her son shield his assets during the divorce. But there was money involved, a lot of money. What a greedy thing Amanda was! She’d taken Jason for everything she could in the settlement. The child support payments he’d had to pay were beyond ridiculous. Protecting his money from Amanda was

Jason's motivation for putting the title to the Hobbs house in his mother's name. A smart move, as it turned out, especially after the Feds started poking around in his trading practices.

Olivia took out the cream for her coffee and discovered it was a few days past the best-buy date. Olivia sniffed it to make sure it was still good. She ignored the few clots that floated on the top of the dark liquid. As she was about to put the cup to her lips, tanned arms came around her waist and gave her a hug.

"Morning," Sam murmured into her skin and nibbled it. Olivia gently swatted her away.

"I'm too old for hickeys in visible places."

"How about in invisible places?" Sam asked with a chuckle. "Thought you can sneak off like that?"

"I tried to be so quiet, but you have sharp ears."

"Thank you for letting me sleep, but Liz and I have a project going over at Erika's."

Olivia put down her coffee and turned into Sam's arms. "Can't you even stay for a cup of coffee?"

"Not really. I'm already late. Can I take some with me?"

"Of course." Olivia pulled Sam closer. "Will you come back for dinner?"

"Probably not tonight. I've been here for days. I need some time at home."

"Sam..."

"I'm not promising." Sam opened a cabinet and took down an L. L. Bean thermal cup from the top shelf. Olivia often envied her height and long arms. Olivia needed to stand on a stool to get things from the topmost shelf. After preparing her coffee, Sam bent to kiss her. Playfully, she added a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Olivia knew it was sentimental, but she followed Sam to the front door and waved as she drove away.

After Sam left, Olivia finished reading the article on bond inversion while her bath filled. As she settled into the tub, she realized

how much she treasured it, not only because she loved a hot bath, but because it had brought Sam to her door.

The scene replayed in Olivia's mind like a movie. She'd been expecting a man when Sam had replied to her inquiry about a bathroom renovation, but a tall, attractive woman appeared for the appointment. Her business card showed her full name: Samantha McKinnon, followed by a long string of initials, including the coveted fellowship in the American Institute of Architects. Looking back, Olivia couldn't decide which had impressed her more, the long list of credentials or Sam's well-developed biceps. They'd gotten off on the wrong foot with an argument about wearing masks, but under Sam's attitude of forced patience, Olivia had detected a spark of sexual interest. She couldn't help but fan it until it burst into flames. It had taken time, but it had been worth it.

She turned off the spigot and gingerly descended into the bath. The hot water was delicious, but she usually cut herself off at fifteen minutes, which she timed on the clock on the wall. "You're the only person I know who has a clock in the bathroom," Sam had said when she'd taken it down to prepare for the renovation project.

Olivia put on a full complement of makeup. There were very few people Olivia would allow to see her bare face. She had a good rapport with Lucy, so she might be one of them, but the rector always looked put together, a holdover, Olivia assumed, from when she was an opera singer.

The bathroom clock indicated Olivia had enough time for another cup of coffee, maybe even some breakfast. She brought her Scandinavian yogurt topped with blueberries and sliced almonds to her office. When her Mac woke up, a string of email notices popped up from overseas financial agencies. Olivia tapped them away because it was Saturday and didn't really matter. She managed to finish her yogurt before Facetime rang for her meeting with Lucy.

That smile! Lucy was wearing a deep-red lipstick that instantly drew the eye to her radiant smile. Anyone seeing it felt warmly

welcomed. She was wearing her red hair back today, which put the focus on her features. Even in her late fifties, the woman was stunning. Lucy modestly wrote it off to good genes. Her mother had been a model.

“Good morning, Lucy! I see you’re in your rectory office.”

“I had to get out of the house. I can’t hear myself think. Erika has Sam and Liz working on some project. She says I have too much junk, and we need more storage, so they’re finishing the loft in the garage.”

“You can never have too much storage.”

“But don’t you think it’s insulting to call my stuff, junk?”

Olivia laughed. “As a marriage counselor, you should know that couples often value things differently.” Olivia’s eyes swept Lucy’s image in the box on the screen. “No collar today?”

“I’m experimenting. The collar is so formal, especially when I meet with young people.”

“I like the formality. I’m not sure I approve,” said Olivia.

Lucy looked surprised. “Do I need your approval?”

“Well, maybe. I am a member of your vestry. I prefer the collar but, I do like your scarf, and that sweater. Green is your color, Lucy. Matches your eyes.”

“Thank you, Olivia. You look pretty good yourself today. Beautiful cardigan.”

“All right then,” said Olivia, getting down to business. “Enough preening for the camera. Before we talk about the meeting with the girls, has Abbie passed along the proposal for the endowment?”

“Yes, and I gave it to Tom to review.” Lucy frowned slightly. “Olivia, are you sure you want to give us all that money? You’ve already been so generous to St. Margaret’s.”

“Yes, I do. An historic building like St. Margaret’s costs money to maintain. You should have an endowment for it like you do the summer chapel. I don’t approve of you and Tom taking salary cuts to keep the place going.”

“You don’t need to worry. The bishop put a stop to it.”

“And so he should. You both more than earn your keep. No, I am determined to get the endowment in place before Amanda tries to get her claws into my money.”

Lucy’s face remained neutral, but Olivia could detect the faint disapproval in her green eyes. Few people would even have noticed, but Olivia had learned to read facial expressions from many years of business negotiations.

“You didn’t like that comment, Lucy.”

“I wish you would keep an open mind about Amanda.”

Olivia affected a contrite expression. “All right, Mother Lucy. I’ll try.”

“Please just call me, ‘Lucy.’”

“Really? I thought you liked that title.”

“I do, but I’ve spent the last few days at a conference of female priests, and the subject of what people call us keeps coming up. Using “Mother” is associated with Roman Catholic nuns. Most of the other women use only ‘Reverend’ or their first names.”

“Well, I’ll say it again. I don’t approve of all this informality, especially where children are concerned. They should be brought up to respect their elders. Why has it never bothered you before?”

Lucy shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess because I was brought up Catholic, and we always called our priests, ‘Father.’ It seemed right to claim ‘Mother’ for female priests, but maybe not.”

“I like the idea of calling you ‘Mother.’ You are a mother to your flock, Lucy, and you do it well.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry, I’d love to continue this conversation, but I have another meeting at ten, so let’s figure out the logistics for this call.”

They agreed that Olivia would listen in without video while Lucy opened the meeting and drew out the girls’ feelings about seeing their grandmother again.

“Amanda will also be able to observe the entire meeting,” Lucy



said. “That was a condition of allowing it.”

“I understand,” said Olivia. “I would probably insist on it too.”

“I think Amanda is a good mother,” Lucy said. “I don’t know her well enough to say for sure, but let’s give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“What’s that old saying? The best defense is a good offense. I’ve always lived by that.”

Once again, Olivia saw the subtle look of disapproval in Lucy’s green eyes.

“Olivia, you’ve made so much progress. Every human relationship doesn’t have to be transactional. Your son loved Amanda enough to marry her. Let’s look for the good in her.”

Olivia’s experience of Amanda didn’t incline her to tolerance, but she decided not to argue with Lucy because she could never win. Not only did Lucy’s instincts about human nature always give her the advantage, she also had the Almighty on her side.