

The Rector's Wedding

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Lucy Bartlett watched the early morning joggers pound Central Park's winding paths. The late winter colors of the landscape below were dark and dull. The naked trees were gray. The roadways had been treated with salt and looked like the ashes Liz raked out of the wood stove in the morning. Here and there, a few patches of sooty snow relieved the bleak scene.

The view from the sixteenth floor of the Plaza Hotel was certainly different from the one Lucy usually saw in the morning. The blaze of brilliant colors in the sky made it worth getting up early. Even on cloudy days, the ocean was mysterious and beautiful.

Lucy loved living in Maine, but traveling the world as an opera singer had left her with cosmopolitan tastes. She'd missed New York's round-the-clock energy, its avant-garde restaurants, and the music, especially the music. Tomorrow night, they would hear one of her favorite operas, Verdi's *Don Carlos* at the Met. She could hardly wait, although it occasionally saddened her to sit in the opera house she'd once called her musical home, but only because it hadn't been her choice to leave.

"Taking in the view?" asked Liz, slipping on her jacket. She looked elegant in a stylish suit and high heels, so different from her usual casual appearance. She stood beside Lucy at the window. "Not much to see at this time of year. The city in winter looks so desolate."

"Manhattan has its own beauty." Lucy gazed at the orange reflection of the rising sun on the windows of the buildings surrounding the park. "I'm glad we're staying the weekend."

"I reserved this room for our honeymoon. The view from here isn't as good as when I proposed."

Lucy nudged Liz with her hip. "I proposed."

"I gave you the ring. You said the words."

"So, let's say that we proposed to each other."

"I like my version better," insisted Liz.

"Of course, you do, because it fits your narrative about yourself."

Liz frowned, looking unsure what to think about that statement, but Lucy had no intention of explaining it on such a busy morning. She took a teardrop-shaped, leather case out of her bag.

"Here. I could use your help. I can't keep my hands from shaking."

"That's hard to believe. You're always so confident." Liz located the latch and snapped open the box. She studied the collection of white clerical collars and the gold and silver studs neatly arranged in compartments. "Linen, because it's a formal occasion. Right?"

"One of the biggest days of my life. I wasn't even this nervous before my Met debut."

"That's probably because you didn't have time to think about it. An understudy might hope to step into a starring role and become a big success, but who actually lives the dream?"

"People say I've lived a charmed life. God always shows me the way."

Liz pointedly cleared her throat. She had limited patience for God talk. She fished in the collar box and chose the studs she'd given Lucy as a birthday gift. They were solid gold, shipped at great expense from England. Liz had ordered three pairs to justify paying the exorbitant postage.

Lucy's mind drifted back to that perfect summer evening. Maggie had made an extravagant dinner and baked a fancy cake. They'd ended up drinking too much wine and singing Broadway duets in full voice. Good thing Liz had no close neighbors.

Another time. Another life. Before Erika. Before the dark winter.

"I'm surprised you haven't lost these yet," said Liz in a mildly scolding tone, separating the back from the stud. Lucy had to admit the little dig was deserved. She usually took off her collar the minute she went off duty, which meant she lost her collar pins almost as often as she lost earring backs. Sometimes, the errant jewelry turned up under the bed or in the washing machine. But Lucy always carefully replaced the gold studs in their holder because they were from Liz.

Liz studied the mechanics of the collar trying to figure out how it attached. Lucy decided not to interfere, trusting Liz's uncanny ability to assemble and disassemble things in her mind. "The front stud goes in first. Right?" Liz asked.

"Yes, through the hole in the inner band. Then through here." Lucy pointed to the double buttonholes in the collar of her black blouse.

"You must really be nervous. Don't you do this every day?" Liz asked, inserting the stud.

"Yes, but it's not every day I defend my doctoral dissertation, which we both know will be controversial."

"Sex and religion are a volatile mix. But you've got your mentor there to support you, and your own cheering section. Tom is coming, and Emily. And you really know your stuff. You'll be fine." Liz got the front of the collar fastened and went around to the back. Lucy was wearing her red hair up today, so it should be easy for Liz to find the buttonhole where the collar fastened in the back. "There, that should do it," said Liz with satisfaction.

Lucy felt the warm press of lips on her neck. She closed her eyes to savor the delicious sensation. "Sweetheart, that feels really good, but we don't have time now."

"I know, but I couldn't resist. I love your freckles." Liz handed back the collar box.

"Thank you again for ironing the linen collars. You do it perfectly, just like Erika."

"It's that Teutonic attention to detail. My grandmother taught me how to iron. I practiced on my father's shirts. I even had to iron his cotton boxers. But don't get used to it. I only did it for you because it's a special occasion."

"Liz, I know some people take advantage of you. But I don't love you for what you can do for me. I love you for being you."

Liz still looked skeptical, so Lucy took Liz's face in her hands and pulled her down into a kiss. She kept it brief to avoid smearing her lipstick. When their lips parted, Liz's blue eyes looked dreamy. She leaned down, obviously

hoping for more, but Lucy held her back by the shoulders. "When we're alone later, I promise to kiss you until you beg me to stop." She glanced suggestively at Liz's crotch and raised an auburn brow.

"You know I'll hold you to that promise." Liz picked up Lucy's black suit jacket and carefully brushed off the shoulders. She held it up so Lucy could slip her arms into the sleeves. "Ready?" Liz slung the strap of Lucy's laptop case over her shoulder. "Onward, Christian soldiers!" It was one of Lucy's least favorite hymns, but the tune inserted itself into her mind and continued playing annoyingly while they waited for the elevator.

After the elevator door shut, Liz reached out for Lucy's hand. "You know how you always try to bless me whenever we get into an elevator? Today, I feel I should bless you."

"Well, you can. I might be ordained, but that doesn't necessarily make my blessings count more than yours. Blessings are a wish for God to grant someone grace. Of course, God gives us grace without being asked, but it feels good for us humans to think we have influence."

"Spoken like a true theologian." Liz turned to engage Lucy's eyes. "But what if I don't believe in God?"

Lucy moved closer. "Liz, you don't have to pretend with me anymore," she said in a whisper.

"Pretend what?"

"About being an atheist. I know your secret."

"No, you don't. Even I don't know what I believe."

Lucy patted Liz's arm. "You're a smart person. You'll figure it out."

The elevator door opened onto the lobby. "Do you mind if we take a cab uptown?" Liz asked. "That way, we won't have to wait for the valet, and I won't have to worry about finding parking."

Lucy made a little bow. "I put myself in your capable hands, Dr. Stolz."

When they went outside, there was a taxi waiting in the queue. Liz gave the driver the address of the seminary. When he made the turn to go through Central Park, she glowered into his rear-view mirror. Lucy knew what she was thinking. The Henry Hudson Parkway would have been faster.

“Don’t worry. We have plenty of time,” she said, as much to soothe her own nerves as to reassure Liz, who pulled back her sleeve to look at her watch. When she wore the gold Cartier that Yale had given her on her retirement with hiking clothes, it seemed out of place. At least today it went with her outfit.

Lucy hummed softly while the cab made its way uptown. Music always relaxed her. Fortunately, the traffic was light, and they were making good time.

“It’s a shame Erika’s not here,” said Liz. “She put you up to this adventure. She would have been so proud of you today.”

Lucy sighed and embraced Erika in her mind, feeling that little ache she always felt when she thought of her. She blinked away the tears that started to form. Today was a day for joy and triumph, not sadness.

“I’m sure Erika will be sitting right beside you,” said Lucy.

“Of course, she will, and we’ll discuss the quality of your arguments.”

“And find them lacking, I’m sure.”

“No, you’ve learned to stay on point. Just answer the question, and only the question. Like when we were testifying in the adoption hearing for Brenda and Cherie. Remember what Melissa said. Don’t elaborate unless specifically asked to. Otherwise, you’ll be tempted to go off on one of your tangents.”

“Any other unsolicited advice, Dr. Stolz?” asked Lucy, pinching Liz’s thigh.

“No, I think that’s enough. I don’t want to erode your confidence.”

“Nice of you to think of it now, after the damage is done.” Lucy smiled to take the sting out of the criticism.

“Do you want me to pull right up to the front door?” asked the cabbie as they approached the campus.

“You can let us off across the street instead of making a U-turn,” Liz replied.

Hastings Hall came into view. “I always feel strange coming here,” said Lucy, admiring the elaborate tower, “as if I don’t really belong. Like I’m an imposter.”

“For years after I became chief of surgery at Yale, I felt the same. Girls aren’t supposed to do what we do, or at least not when we were growing up.”

“It took so long to get my divinity degree, I thought I’d never be ordained. I couldn’t go full time because I was still trying to revive my career. I was overseas too much and had to drop courses, sometimes in the middle of the semester. Susan took notes for me, but it wasn’t enough. In those days, you had to show up for class.”

“Susan. I wonder how she’s doing. Have you heard from her?”

“Yes, we talked on the phone the other day. She said she’s tired of the long winters in South Dakota and wants to come back to New England.”

Liz’s left brow went up slightly. She was skeptical. Probably she didn’t approve, but she wouldn’t say it outright. “How do you feel about her coming back?”

“I want her to be happy and fulfill her God-given potential, and she’s been working hard to get herself together. She’s been faithfully attending AA meetings, and she’s been in therapy to reconcile her sexual identity with her beliefs. She says she’s changed.”

Lucy saw the frank worry in Liz’s blue eyes. “She made a lot of trouble for you last summer. She tried to break us up. Are you sure you want her around?”

“No, but I don’t think she poses as much danger as you seem to think.” Lucy turned away to avoid Liz’s steady gaze. “She congratulated me when I told her we were engaged.”

“That’s what she’s supposed to say, but did she really mean it?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to talk about it now. I’m anxious enough.”

Liz opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it. “Okay. We can talk about it later.”

Lucy didn’t want to talk about it later or any time. The subject of Susan was controversial, no matter how much Liz pretended to be understanding.

The driver pulled up to the curb, and Liz dropped her credit card into the little tilting drawer in the partition.

After the taxi drove off, Lucy said, “You don’t have to pay for everything.”
“I know, but I’m used to it.”

“That’s because you always beat me to it. I’m not Maggie, and I’m not into role play.”

“If you say so,” said Liz with a shrug.

“I’m not kidding. We’re equals in this relationship or nothing.” She gave Liz a stern look for emphasis.

When they entered Hastings Hall, Lucy felt the same feeling of awe as the first time she’d accompanied Susan on a campus visit. The echo in the rotunda still sounded like booming notes in the voice of God.

Apparently, Liz was impressed too. “Do you know where we’re going?” she asked in a reverential whisper.

“Yes. It’s in one of the big conference rooms. Follow me.” Lucy realized Liz was still carrying her laptop bag. “Give me that,” she said, tugging on the strap. “People will think you’re my porter.”

“Well, it’s true,” said Liz, but she handed over the bag. Their footsteps on the highly polished floors echoed against the neo-Gothic walls as they headed down the hall. Lucy knew she was in the right place when she saw a knot of men in black suits and clerical collars gathered outside the door. She recognized them as the examiners and her advisor, Jerry Spangler.

“Do you want me to disappear while you schmooze with the enemy?” Liz asked, eyeing them with a frown.

“No, of course not. I’m going to introduce you as my fiancée.”

Lucy watched Liz slip into what she’d come to recognize as her professional persona. Unfortunately, that, combined with her exceptional height, could make her seem forbidding. When they approached, the men stopped talking and stared at Liz.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Lucy said with a brilliant smile. She saw it instantly mirrored on their faces.

“Good morning, Rev. Bartlett,” replied Professor Hernandez, the chief examiner. Liz liked to call him “the Grand Inquisitor,” and his strong Spanish accent made the irreverent name even more apt. He’d been a

Catholic priest in South America, but he'd left the priesthood to marry a nun. Although his writings showed a wholehearted commitment to "liberation theology," he was conservative on doctrine related to sexuality. Lucy dreaded the questions he might ask.

"We are very much looking forward to discussing your paper," he said, reaching for Lucy's hand. "It is so unusual to have a dissertation that has already been accepted by a publisher. Does this mean we cannot make any recommendations?"

"My editor and I are still working through the manuscript. So, yes, you can recommend changes. I look forward to hearing your suggestions."

Out of the corner of her eye, Lucy saw Liz nod in approval at her diplomatic response.

Professor Spangler came forward and reached out his hand to Liz. "Dr. Stolz, how nice to see you again. Lucy, do you mind if I introduce your fiancée to my colleagues or would you like to do the honors?"

Lucy recognized the offer to lead her through this academic gauntlet. "Thank you, Jerry. Please go ahead."

"Gentlemen, meet Lucy's intended, formerly head of surgery at Yale New Haven, Dr. Elizabeth Stolz. Dr. Stolz now runs a family practice in the Maine town where Lucy is rector."

"I have heard of you, Dr. Stolz," said Dr. Hernandez, coming forward. "Did you not give a presentation here on compassionate choices for the dying?"

"Years ago. I was on a panel while I was teaching at NYU. I'm an advocate for death with dignity. We have a law in Maine protecting that right now."

"Yes, but there are many aspects to consider on this subject. It's not as simple as some people think."

"Nothing is as simple as people think," said Liz, raising her chin. Lucy was mildly anxious that Hernandez would presume to lecture her, which could be dangerous. Liz was especially knowledgeable about bioethics and could quote primary sources from memory. With the spotlight focused

away from her, Lucy saw an opportunity to escape from the examiners. She managed to catch Liz's eye before she ducked into the conference room.

At the front table sat the one female examiner on the panel. Professor Lewis was a distinguished black theologian, who had also written a book on the theology of sex. Although it had been meticulously documented, it had remained obscure and mostly unread. Lucy was delighted when she'd discovered it in her research. Not surprisingly, Professor Lewis was sitting alone while the men gossiped outside. She nodded when Lucy offered a discreet wave on her way to the candidate's table. Lucy knew she was on her side because they'd corresponded but guessed that as one of the examiners, Professor Lewis needed to maintain her distance.

As Lucy turned, she ran headlong into an extremely tall, red-headed woman.

"Mom," said Emily, clamping Lucy into an awkward, mechanical hug. Lucy had no doubt that it was sincerely meant, but her daughter was on the spectrum and didn't do affection well.

"Hello, sweetheart," said Lucy, squeezing her tight. "Thanks so much for coming."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for anything. And I expect you to show up when I defend my thesis." Emily grinned an authentic, emotionally felt grin. Since she'd been studying at Yale and practicing social behavior, she was getting much better at expressing emotion.

"That's a promise," said Lucy. "But I don't understand your theorem, so I'll probably just sit there and smile."

"That's okay. That's what mothers are supposed to do. But I'll explain it to you ahead of time, so you don't feel stupid."

"Thanks. Between you and Liz, I always feel stupid."

Emily frowned. "You're not stupid, Mom. You're smart in a different way."

"Thanks, sweetie. I needed to hear that today."

"Are you nervous?"

"Yes."

"Don't be. I know you'll do great. I really liked your paper, even if I didn't understand it all. Denise explained some things. That helped."

Lucy saw Tom waving from the back. "Are you sitting with Father Tom?"

"Yes. We were waiting for you and Aunt Liz to get here."

"Can you stay the night?" Lucy asked hopefully. "There's an extra bed in our suite."

"I can stay for dinner, but I need to get the last train back to New Haven. I have a class tomorrow." Emily looked over her mother's head toward the examiners' table. "Mom, it looks like they're getting started. I'd better get back to my seat. Good luck. I love you." Emily enfolded her in another suffocating hug. Fortunately, she didn't crush her collar.

Lucy watched the tall redhead retreat to the back of the room. She turned around and saw the examiners taking their seats at the front table. On her way to sit with Tom and Emily, Liz stopped to give Lucy's shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "Your dissertation is brilliant. You are well-prepared, and you've got this," she whispered into her ear. When her warm breath moved away, Lucy felt a chill. She closed her eyes and sent a quick plea to heaven.

Tom Simmons stroked his meticulously manicured white beard. "About time you got here," he said, his blue eyes merry as Liz sat down beside him.

"Lucy thought arriving early would make her look too anxious," explained Liz. "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, not long. I drove because I didn't have time to play around with trains and risk being late."

"Who's holding down the fort?"

"Our new deacon. The assistant priest at St. Anne's is on call in case Reshma gets into trouble."

"So, I guess that means you have to get back tonight."

"Unfortunately, I do."

“How about dinner?”

“Maybe if we eat early and I can take a nap this afternoon. It’s a long drive back to Maine.”

“Lucy says they closed the guest rooms here during the pandemic, but we have an extra room in our suite. We’ll be gone all afternoon. Take a nap while we’re at the Neue Galerie. Grab some lunch in the hotel coffee shop and charge it to my room.”

“I’m sure that suite in the Plaza is already costing you a fortune.”

“Oh, it is, but I figure I should start spending my money. Can’t take it with me.”

Tom grinned. “You could leave it to me.”

Liz smacked his knee. “Fat chance. You have plenty of money. Besides, you have a multi-millionaire boyfriend. When are you going to make it official?”

“We’re looking at this fall. I don’t want to upstage my boss, never mind you. You’d never forgive me. Which reminds me. I have something to tell you later. Don’t let me forget.”

A loud thump made Liz flinch—Professor Hernandez was testing the microphone. “Could everyone please take your seats? We are about to begin.” The volume of conversation in the room gradually subsided until there was silence. “Thank you,” he said. His accent gave his voice an exotic quality. “Welcome to the thesis defense of *Divine Eros: Rediscovering Human Sexuality as a Mirror of God’s Love* by the Rev. Lucille Bartlett. The author will have five minutes to summarize her arguments to provide the context for our discussion. Please hold your questions for Rev. Bartlett until the end. We will announce when the floor is open.” He nodded in Lucy’s direction. “Rev. Bartlett, you may begin.”

On her way to the podium, Lucy glanced toward the back where her “cheerleaders” sat. Liz gave her an exaggerated, double thumbs up.

“Good morning, everyone, and thank you for coming today. Many people have asked me why I chose to write my dissertation about sex. Obviously, it’s a controversial subject. People have widely differing opinions

about what is normal and permissible, and what is not. Faith traditions have had a lot to say on sexual morality, not all of it positive or helpful, especially not where women are concerned. Yet our sexuality is part of God's creation and touches all our lives. It is how all of us came to be. One of the reasons I chose to explore this subject is my personal experience of sexual violence. In my former career, I was raped by a colleague I trusted." There was a murmur in the crowd. Lucy paused to let the gravity of her words sink in.

Liz glanced at Emily to see her reaction. Whatever she was thinking didn't show on her face, but Liz was glad that Lucy had finally told her daughter about the circumstances of her conception.

"This incident could have ruined my sexual relationships forever," Lucy continued, "but God had other plans. In an unconventional sexual relationship, one that was forbidden by the Church at the time, I recovered from my trauma and found my self-esteem again. Through love and intimacy, I was healed and inspired to become a priest. That's my story, but all the best stories come from experience. And mine was to experience God's love through human love. Consequently, I was inspired to give careful thought to why religion has often regarded sex and its expression so negatively. This dissertation is the result of that exploration.

"First, I examine how Greek philosophy and apocalyptic expectations influenced the early Church. The Greek idealists held that spirit was superior to our physical nature. The first generation of Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, so they had no use for sex or procreation. Unfortunately, contempt for sexuality and women persisted, along with unrealistic expectations of virtue and purity. To this day, it causes great harm. In my book, I offer a platform on which to build a new attitude toward Christian sexual ethics, one that honors established norms but interprets them in a compassionate and positive way. As an Episcopalian, I use reason and science along with scripture and tradition to support my arguments. I hope you will find them convincing." Lucy nodded in the direction of the examiners. "Thank you."

Liz was tempted to jump up and clap as Lucy headed back to her seat. “She did well,” Tom whispered into Liz’s ear. “A perfect introduction. Short and sweet, but she hit all her main points.”

Professor Hernandez smiled at Lucy. “Thank you for such a succinct summary, Rev. Bartlett. We will allow your mentor, Professor Spangler, the honor of asking the first question.”

Liz wondered if Spangler, who was obviously fond of Lucy, would lob her a softball question, but he didn’t. “Rev. Bartlett, you discuss Jesus as a sexual being, an idea that has become part of public imagination since speculative fiction like *The DaVinci Code* created a pseudo-historical context for it. Why do you raise this when there is no scriptural mention of Jesus being married or having a sexual relationship?”

“That’s a good question. There is no mention in canonically accepted scripture, but there are hints in the Gnostic Gospels and other early Christian documents. However, the main argument for it would be anthropological. It would be considered odd for a Jewish man in the first century C.E. not to be married. In that culture, it was considered a duty to take a wife. According to the Gospels, Jesus was intent on fulfilling the law, so he would have been unlikely to reject such a deeply embedded cultural norm.”

“Score one for mom,” Emily murmured.

“Rev. Bartlett, you adhere closely to Professor Spangler’s materialism in your chapter on the body,” said Dr. Lewis. “Can you explain how his work has influenced you?”

Liz tensed, knowing that Lucy had confided in Dr. Lewis that Spangler had warned her to distance herself from his work to avoid an accusation of plagiarism. When Lucy cleared her throat to buy time, the microphone unnaturally magnified the sound.

“I think calling Professor Spangler’s theories ‘materialism’ is a narrow reading of his theology. Professor Spangler never denies the existence of the spiritual realm, but sees it as being fused with the physical world. He points out that the central ritual of our worship is the consecration of earthly food into the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist anchors the

Christian religious experience squarely in the physical world. I agree with that point of view.”

“Rev. Bartlett, on the subject of the Eucharist,” Hernandez began, “you say that physical love between committed persons is sacred and liken it to Holy Communion. Obviously, you mean this as a metaphor, but can you explain?”

Liz could see how tense Lucy was in the way she held her shoulders. This was one of the most controversial sections of her book. “In my faith tradition, we don’t consider matrimony a sacrament, but others do. I think it is not the ceremony blessing the union that should be a sacrament, but the spiritual and physical love expressed between the partners. The giving of the body during sex is a mirror of Christ giving his body to merge with ours in Communion. The physical bread and wine literally become part of us and sanctify our bodies. In likening sex to Communion, I am speaking metaphorically, but also pointing to something mystical.”

“So, sex is always sacred?”

“No, certainly not. People have sex for many reasons—they are consumed by lust, or they want to conceive a child. Maybe they’re tense or bored. Some sexual acts like rape, sexual abuse, or sex trafficking for exploitation, are the opposite of sacred, which is why they are considered sinful and, in many cases, criminal.”

Tom leaned over to whisper into Liz’s ear. “She’s Teflon. Did you prep her?”

“Only minimally. Lucy knows her material inside out, and she’s a smart woman. Hopefully, this experience will give her more confidence in her intelligence.” Someone in the front row turned around and glared at them for talking.

The next examiner was a small, elderly man. “Rev. Bartlett, you spend an entire chapter on St. Paul, especially his negative views on women and sexuality. As a trained therapist yourself, were you ever tempted to psychoanalyze him as some of his critics have?”

Lucy laughed softly. “Of course, I was tempted. Some people say Paul

suffered from Geschwind syndrome. Paul does hit many of the marks of frontal lobe epilepsy, but that would amount to diagnosing someone who lived two millennia ago on few facts. Because he had such a profound influence on early Christianity, his misogyny and anti-sex attitudes have found a permanent home in Christian thinking. While I acknowledge Paul's contributions to our tradition, it's my duty to see faith through twenty-first-century eyes."

"Well said!" murmured Tom.

Most of the pointed questions came in the beginning. Lucy skillfully parried them. As Liz had anticipated, the longest discussion was about sex outside of marriage. It got bogged down in what Liz considered theological minutiae. To Lucy's face, she would have plainly called it bullshit.

Lucy remained calm and patiently answered the examiners' questions. After two hours, they ran out of things to ask. Professor Hernandez asked if any of the examiners had suggestions for revision, but they all shook their heads. "And now, I will ask each of the examiners to vote on whether or not to pass this dissertation. Professor Spangler, as Rev. Bartlett's advisor, you may go first."

"Pass," said Spangler.

Hernandez went down the row, first to his right and then to his left. Every vote was to pass. Finally, it was the chief examiner's turn to cast the deciding vote. "Pass. Congratulations, Rev. Bartlett. Your dissertation is accepted by this committee in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. We wish you every success with its publication. Now, are there any questions from the audience?"

A young man in the front row raised his hand. "May we applaud now?"

Professor Hernandez laughed. "Yes, of course."

Emily jumped to her feet and clapped enthusiastically. Liz and Tom got up too. After the applause died down, there were a few curious questions. Finally, Hernandez ended the session by thanking the examiners and the audience. "And special thanks to Rev. Bartlett for writing such a thought-provoking dissertation."

Well-wishers instantly crowded Lucy, offering their congratulations.

"Let's give her a chance to mingle and meet her in the hall," Liz suggested, and Tom agreed it would be a good idea.

Emily excused herself to use the ladies' room. While they were waiting, Liz located the card to access her hotel room and gave it to Tom. "I hope the bed in the spare room is as comfortable as the one we're sleeping on."

"Thanks, but I'm so tired I could sleep standing up. I had to get up ridiculously early to make it here in time."

"Before you go, you wanted me to remind you to tell me something."

"Oh, right," said Tom, his smile instantly fading. "Two matters of importance. One is happy news. Jeff bought a condo in Key West. The idea is that we will winter there after we get married."

"Lucky you," said Liz, frowning. "But doesn't that mean you'll need to resign as associate rector?"

Tom sighed and glanced away. "Yes, and I hate to leave Lucy in the lurch, but church attendance falls dramatically in the winter. Now that Lucy has Reshma to help her, I don't feel quite as bad about leaving for a few months. I'll be back in Hobbs by April, in plenty of time to help with the summer chapel. I'm hoping the vestry will agree to keeping me on as a part-time priest. Honestly, that was really all I was looking for when I moved to Maine."

"Tom, you've been a tremendous help to Lucy, especially after Erika's death. I'm sure she'll understand, but why are you telling me about it instead of talking to her?"

"I wanted to run it by you first. Maybe you can think of a good time to break the news. I didn't want to cause her more stress while she was preparing for her thesis defense."

"That was considerate. But there's never a good time with Lucy. She always has something going on."

"So it seems, but there's something else that's more problematic." He paused to scrutinize Liz's face. "Susan Gedney called the other day to ask if the curate's studio she occupied last summer is still available."

“What?” asked Liz, unable to stop herself from looking shocked.

“I know. It’s pretty bold, especially presuming that she’d be welcome after all the trouble she caused.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth. That the curate’s studios are being used by our music director and our new deacon, and I’m living in the rector’s apartment. I told her I would do what I could to help find her a place to stay.”

“Why? We all went out of our way for her. Lucy tried to involve her in ministry, gave her a place to stay. When we found out she’s an alcoholic, I pulled strings to get her into rehab. Brenda and Lucy personally escorted her to the airport for extradition.”

Tom assumed a patient expression. “Lucy cares for Susan. Helping her is a kindness to both of them.”

Liz scowled, but she knew Tom was right. “What do you propose?”

“Well, we could play musical homes. I could move in with Jeff, which would leave the rector’s apartment vacant. Or Lucy could let Susan stay in the beach house.”

“That won’t work. She doesn’t want any official moves until the wedding. Besides, Sam wants to start work on turning Lucy’s garage into an apartment. A tenant will only be in the way.”

Tom grinned. “You have lots of space, Liz. You could always invite her to stay with you.”

Liz made big eyes to show her opposition to the suggestion. Tom laughed heartily. “I didn’t think that idea would appeal to you.”

“I wonder what Lucy will think about all this,” said Liz, speaking her thoughts aloud.

“Me too. That’s why I didn’t make any promises.”

Lucy came into the hall, looking for them. Liz swept her up into a hug. “Congratulations! You were brilliant!”

Lucy was all smiles from the adulation. “Did I seem nervous? I was.”

“Not a bit,” Liz replied. “You looked cool and confident. You absolutely killed it.”

"Congratulations, dear." Tom bent to hug Lucy.

"Thanks, Tom, for being my most sympathetic critic. You anticipated their questions perfectly." She looked around. "Where's Emily?"

"Potty break," Liz explained. "She'll be right back, and we can go to lunch. Luce, I invited Tom to join us for dinner, but he says he needs a nap before driving back to Maine. I offered him the extra room in our suite. If Emily decides to stay, they can make up the bed again."

People were streaming into the hall. Professor Spangler came out and waved to Lucy to return to the conference room. After she left, Liz said near Tom's ear: "I'd hold off on making any moves before talking to Lucy. I'd be surprised if she'd be happy to have Susan that close to home."

"Me too, but I didn't dare to presume. It's a tricky situation for me."

"For all of us," Liz said. She spotted Emily searching for them in the crowd and waved to her.

Emily seemed unusually quiet at dinner. While Liz and Tom did a postmortem on the thesis defense, Lucy kept an eye on her daughter. Emily's upbringing in the strict, religious home of her adoptive parents had deprived her brilliant mind of stimulation. For that reason, her attention would usually be riveted on any intellectual conversation, but not tonight.

Liz was mocking Hernandez as "the Grand Inquisitor." "You know he's a character in the opera we're seeing tomorrow night," she said. "That scene between him and King Phillip is one of the most dramatic in the entire repertoire. Too bad it is seldom sung by basses of equal talent."

The comment got Lucy's attention because Liz was a fanatical opera fan and always had strong opinions. Usually, Emily would have something to contribute when the topic turned to music, but Lucy saw that she had completely left the conversation.

After dinner, Liz offered to walk Tom to the parking garage. Emily looked even more distant than before. "What's bothering you sweetie?" Lucy finally asked.

It took a long time for Emily to formulate her words. "I don't know why, but I didn't expect you to talk about the rape today."

Lucy moved her hand closer to Emily's, but let it rest on the table. Emily didn't always like to be touched. "I'm sorry, Emily. Did mentioning the rape upset you?"

"Not exactly, but I haven't thought much about it since we had that big talk."

"That's understandable. Who likes to think about such a sad subject?" Lucy took Emily's hand but held it lightly to make the affection less threatening. "Tell me what you were thinking."

"I was wondering if it hurt."

"You mean the act itself? Have you had sex with a man?"

Emily shook her head. "I would have told you, Mom." Lucy wasn't sure that was true. Lacking the usual filters, Emily occasionally blurted out details of her life that most people kept private. Other things she kept to herself until she was finished processing them.

"Intercourse isn't usually painful," said Lucy gently increasing the pressure on Emily's hand, "but if a woman isn't receptive and aroused, it can be, especially if the man is aggressive."

"Was he?"

"Are you sure you want an honest answer?"

"Yes, Mom. I need to know." Emily's blue eyes implored earnestly.

"Yes, it hurt, but not only physically. I was attacked by someone I trusted. Everyone noticed the bruises, but no one said a word. I felt like a ghost."

Emily's eyes began to fill. "Oh, Mom, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you report him?"

"I did. Afterward, he claimed it was consensual, and I was lying to get back at him. He was powerful at the Met. The management brushed off my complaints."

"You should have gone to the police."

"I know. I tried to work inside the Met organization to avoid a scandal, and only to prevent it from happening to other women. That's when I discovered it already had. By that time, it was too late to involve the police."

Emily looked thoughtful. "I used to be sad that he died before I could meet him. Now, I don't think I missed anything."

"Like most people, he was a mixture of good and bad. In the beginning, he was very kind to me, which is why I thought we were friends. I didn't suspect he was only being helpful so he could get me into bed."

"That was really shitty."

"Yes, it was."

Lucy studied Emily's young face. Most of the time, it was like looking in the mirror. Emily's face was covered with pale freckles. Their delicate features were the same, but Lucy could also see Emily's likeness to Alex. "You have his height...and his blue eyes."

Emily frowned. "Is it ever hard to look at me because I look like him?"

"Oh, no, darling, never!" said Lucy, gripping her daughter's hand more tightly. "You resemble me too."

"Everyone says how alike we look. I'm glad, because you're beautiful."

"And so are you." Lucy felt Emily's hand squirm in hers, so she let it go.

"Did you give me up for adoption because I came from the rape?"

"Oh, no, sweetheart! I had to work. I couldn't go back to the Met because I was blacklisted. I had to go overseas and travel for engagements. I couldn't drag an infant all over the world. I wanted you to be well taken care of and loved."

"The Cunninghams did take good care of me. I'll give them that. I think they did love me."

"Do you miss them?" Lucy asked, gently probing.

"Sometimes. When I was little, they were the only parents I knew. Except for them wanting me to quit school and become a house cleaner, I would have stayed with them."

"Would you like to see them again?"

Emily frowned as she considered the idea. "Maybe. Let me think about that."

"Emily, it was very hard to give you up. After I held you and looked into your eyes, I never wanted to let you go, but I thought I was doing the right thing."

“Are you sure you didn’t want to get rid of me because of the rape?”

The question cut deep, but Lucy knew that even a moment’s hesitation would cause more doubt. “I am absolutely sure. I didn’t want Alex to know about you because he was so controlling. He would have insisted on being involved, and I couldn’t have that.”

“I’m sorry I was so much trouble, Mom.”

“Oh, baby. You weren’t trouble. You were a beautiful child, and I so much wanted to keep you, but I had to make some quick decisions. Are you angry that I gave you away?”

Emily shook her head. “No, I’m sad, but I think I understand.”

“Oh, sweetie, this is exactly why I didn’t tell you sooner. I never want you to doubt yourself. You had nothing to do with your conception. You were a beautiful, innocent child, and I am so grateful to have you in my life.” Lucy’s heart hurt for her daughter as she watched her try to process her feelings with her limited emotional tools. She debated for a long moment before she said, “There’s something I haven’t told you. It will prove that I chose you out of love, even though I gave you up for adoption.”

Emily deliberately focused on Lucy’s eyes to show she was paying attention. Because of her Asperger’s, it took an act of will for her to make direct eye contact. Lucy could see how uneasy she was and almost changed her mind. She decided to risk it because they were being so truthful. “When I found out I was pregnant, I was going to have an abortion.” Emily’s eyes grew large. “At the time, it seemed to be the simplest, quickest solution, but when I got to the clinic, I just couldn’t go through with it. You were my child, not an inconvenience to be dealt with quickly. While I carried you inside me, I began to love you. I sang to you every morning and every night.”

Tears formed in Emily’s eyes. “Maybe that’s why I love music.”

“Maybe,” Lucy agreed. She looked up and saw Liz walking through the dining room. The rest of this conversation would have to wait.

When Liz arrived at the table, she put her hand on Emily’s shoulder. Lucy was surprised her daughter didn’t flinch away as she sometimes did,

but Emily seemed comfortable with Liz. "Em, we should get you a cab to Penn Station. What time is your train?"

"The nine-sixteen will get me to New Haven around eleven."

"So, we can't convince you to stay the night? I can call the desk to have housekeeping make up the bed in the spare room."

"Thanks, Aunt Liz, but I can't miss this class. He's my thesis advisor."

Liz glanced at her watch. "How about I ride with you to the station and give your mother some downtime? She's had a long day."

Emily studied her mother. "You do look tired, Mom."

"Oh, but I want to have your company as long as I can."

"I know, but the semester will be over before you know it, and I'll be coming home to help with the wedding."

Lucy beamed with pleasure. "Does that mean you'll be spending the summer in Maine?"

"If it's all right with you and Aunt Liz."

"You know you're always welcome," said Liz, helping Emily into her coat.

Lucy got up to hug Emily goodbye. "You be careful when you get to New Haven."

"I have a friend coming to pick me up at the station. I'll be okay." Emily bent stiffly to allow her mother to kiss her.

Watching Liz leave with Emily, Lucy felt torn between accompanying them and some much needed privacy. She'd been "on" since they'd arrived at the seminary that morning. She was grateful that Liz, who could sometimes be insensitive, had intuited her need for some time alone.

The grand-luxe suite had been tidied in their absence. The bed in the ancillary bedroom had been changed and remade since Tom had left. Lucy imagined Emily sleeping there and sighed. The king-sized bed in the main bedroom had been turned down. On the bedside table was a plate of premium dark chocolates, one of the small amenities that were costing Liz so much money.

Lucy unwound the colorful scarf she had worn all day to cover her

collar. She didn't want to take it off and spoil it after all of Liz's hard work or—God forbid—lose one of the precious, gold collar studs. The collar was still as pristine as when she had put it on that morning, so Lucy returned it to the case to wear on another occasion.

While her bath in the enormous bathroom filled, Lucy put her feet up and ate a tablet of dark chocolate. It tasted so good she couldn't resist eating all the others. Despite the delicious dinner, she felt depleted of energy. Now, the sugar jolt jangled her nerves. She hoped the hot bath would relax her. The bathtub had spa jets, but she was too tired to figure out how to turn them on. She settled into the steaming water and closed her eyes.

This day that she'd so dreaded and eagerly anticipated was finally behind her. In a few months, she would be addressed as "Reverend Doctor Lucille Bartlett." The idea gave her a little thrill—she, who had once been a star of the Metropolitan Opera and was now the rector of her own church! Why did the title mean so much, especially compared to her other accomplishments?

She suddenly remembered her father praising her for getting the highest grade in math class. Her mother had scoffed and advised her not to show up the boys with her smarts. After that, Lucy lost interest in math. She now regretted the self-effacing white lie she'd told Emily. She did know something about math and could follow some of the complex conversations between her daughter and her father-in-law, famous mathematician Stefan Bultmann.

Despite the noise of the hot water dribbling into the tub, Lucy heard the suite door open and close again. Liz was back. She knocked on the bathroom door. "It's just me."

"You can come in."

Liz opened the door a crack. "Don't you look comfy?"

"I am. When I heard the knock, I was hoping it was a sexy woman coming to share my bath."

Liz grinned and looked over her shoulder. "Should I leave and give you privacy? Maybe she'll show up."

"No, get undressed and join me."

"Okay, but you may need to let out some water to make room for me."

Lucy admired Liz's naked body as she descended into the water. Her skin sagged here and there, but her muscles were still clearly defined. Her breasts were full but firm. For a woman in her mid-sixties, she was in excellent condition. For all its objective appeal, this aging body belonged to the woman Lucy loved, so its minor imperfections didn't matter.

"You could turn on the jets," Liz suggested.

"I couldn't find the switch, and I've never really enjoyed rushing water pounding on me."

"I know what you mean. That's why I never installed a hot tub. Plus, a spa can be a breeding ground for bacteria unless it's scrupulously maintained."

Lucy studied Liz's frowning face. "Don't you ever take a break from being a doctor?"

"Sure. But not often. I block it out when I eat or drink bad stuff, like that single malt scotch you hate so much. Do you ever take a break from being a priest?"

"I try to have a personal life—some space I reserve for myself."

Liz's frown grew more pronounced.

"What? Don't you believe me?"

"No, I was just thinking it could get harder for you to have a personal life."

Lucy sat up and stared. "Why?"

"Well, Tom shared some information with me today. Maybe I should wait for him to tell you."

"Liz, now you're worrying me. Come on. Tell me what he said."

Liz shrugged and moved closer to Lucy until their bare thighs touched. She reached for Lucy's hand. "Jeff bought a condo in Key West. After they get married, they're going to be snowbirds and spend their winters there."

Lucy was too practiced as a therapist to show overt surprise, but she was hurt that Tom hadn't come to her first. She took a moment to digest the news before she said, "I'll miss Tom, but I wish him every happiness."

“He’ll be back by April. He’s hoping you’ll keep him on as a part-time priest to manage the summer chapel.”

“That’s up to the vestry.”

“I know, but you have a lot of say in the matter.” Liz stared at the surface of the water. “There’s something else.”

“What?”

“Susan Gedney called Tom to ask about the curate’s studio she occupied last summer.”

Unintentionally, Lucy’s mouth gaped a little. “That’s incredible. Our deacon is in that apartment.”

“Yes, I know. Tom offered to move in with Jeff to leave the rector’s apartment vacant. He had other suggestions, including having her move in with us.”

“No! Absolutely not.”

Liz smiled. Obviously, that was what she’d wanted to hear. “I know you hate triangulation, but that’s the story.”

“Of course, I wish Tom had come to me first.”

Liz nodded. “And I probably should have kept my mouth shut.”

“No, we shouldn’t be keeping secrets from one other,” said Lucy, distracted by trying to absorb the news. Tom leaving for Florida would have more impact, but Susan’s presumption was galling. With effort, Lucy concealed her irritation. Liz already resented Susan and needed no encouragement. “If Susan needs a base of operations while she interviews for new positions,” said Lucy, “I’ll ask around. Another parish may have room for her, but she’s not coming to mine.”

Liz slid down in the hot water until it was up to her chin. “Glad you’re not tempted to get sucked into her drama.” Liz picked up Lucy’s hand and inspected her fingers. “Your fingertips are like prunes. How long have you been in the water?”

“Since I came up to the room. I guess I should get out.” Lucy hauled herself out of the tub. She wrapped herself in one of the luxurious bath sheets and headed into the powder room while Liz finished washing.

Lucy put on one of her favorite lace nightgowns and got into bed. Although she desperately tried to stay awake, she began to doze.

"No, you don't," said Liz, getting into bed naked. She slipped Lucy's nightgown off her shoulder and began to tease her nipple with her tongue.

"Oh, Liz, it's been such a busy day. I'm not sure I have the energy."

"This morning you promised to kiss me until I begged you to stop."

"I did, didn't I?"

Liz leaned on her elbow and grinned. "Since you've had a hard day, you can be my pillow princess tonight. You won't have to do a thing. I'll take care of you." Liz's lips enclosed Lucy's nipple. Her hand crept up her nightgown, lightly grazing the inside of her thigh along the way.

"You're bad," said Lucy with a sigh. Liz's touch was arousing her.

"That's why I'm marrying a priest," said Liz, raising her head. "For redemption."

"You don't need to be redeemed. God loves you just the way you are... and so do I."

"That's good because I'm not changing."

"That's what you think," replied Lucy, smiling. She didn't resist when Liz gently nudged her legs apart with her knee and lowered her weight on her body.