

Summer People

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Kneeling on the deck, Liz Stolz carefully planed the beveled edge. Her boat had been out of winter storage for months, but she was only now getting to the work it needed. Since March, she'd spent every free weekend giving COVID shots in an old racetrack converted into a mass-vaccination clinic. When the call went out to the medical community, Liz had been one of the first to volunteer. She never minded giving up her free time for a cause she supported, and she was glad to be away from home while her ex-wife finished packing her things.

The divorce had been settled quickly, but it seemed to take forever for Maggie to locate the possessions accumulated over their seven-year marriage and the six-decade lifetime that had preceded it. Maggie kept things because she needed physical anchors for her memories—watercolor paintings of Acadia National Park, her daughters' report cards, playbills from long-ago productions, jars of sea glass and pretty shells.

Liz had let Maggie take everything she wanted rather than haggle, but she'd asked for time to scan the photographs from their college days. Liz had burned all her mementos from that time. Maggie had kept hers in a lidded box, transported from home to home, carefully stored wherever she'd landed. Among its treasures was the perfect pink rose that young Liz had given Maggie after an argument. When Liz tried to lift the dried flower out of the box, its fragile petals crumbled.

You can't go back, only forward.

While she'd been thinking about Maggie, Liz had removed too much wood from the back of the board. The gap annoyed her. She liked precision in everything she did, but the hatch cover only needed to be tight enough to keep out a downpour or a direct hit by a wave.

"Am I the first one here?" asked a familiar voice. Whether she was speaking or singing, Lucy Bartlett's soprano was distinctive. "Where is everyone?" she asked, clutching her sundress for modesty while she climbed aboard.

“They’re coming later. I wanted some time alone with you.” Liz put down her plane and brushed the fine shavings off her jeans.

“Don’t get up,” Lucy said, leaning on Liz’s shoulder. “I can see you’re busy.” She held onto the wide brim of her sun hat as she bent for a kiss. To Liz’s surprise, Lucy’s lips landed on hers. Since that kiss last summer, they’d mostly avoided kissing on the mouth. Liz wondered what had changed while Lucy was in New York.

“What are you making?” asked Lucy, taking off her sunglasses to see better. “That wood is beautiful.”

“It’s mahogany left over from that armoire Sam and I built for Olivia. It resists decay, so it’s good for boat parts. I’m making a new hatch cover.” Liz held the boards together to show the fit. “The boards are beveled on the edges to fit snugly and keep out the rain.” Lucy ran her finger along the glass-smooth edge. “Careful, it’s sharp!”

Lucy picked up the tool Liz had been using. “What is this thing?”

“A block plane, one of many I have in my tool chest. I have literally thousands of dollars invested in tools I will never use.”

“Looks like you’re using it now, or am I missing something?”

“Such a smart ass.”

“Hey, is that any way to talk to someone you haven’t seen for weeks?”

“No, it’s not,” Liz admitted. “I really missed you.”

Lucy trailed her fingertips down Liz’s cheek. “I missed you too.” She planted another soft kiss on Liz’s lips.

When Liz stopped smiling like a fool, she asked, “Is it official now?”

“Yes! The dissertation committee approved my proposal, and Spangler will be my advisor. My comps are scheduled for next month, and they accepted all my theology credits from my master’s program. That could end up saving me almost a year of coursework.” Lucy combed her fingers through her red hair before repositioning her hat and tightening the cinch cord to secure it against the wind. “I never knew it would be this hard when I signed up, but Erika kept saying I should.”

“And she was right.”

"I really want to write this book and having those extra letters after my name will give it more credibility."

"Well, maybe. How often will you have to go down to the city?" Liz, who'd grown up in the nearby suburbs, still called New York, "the city," as if it were the only one. Lucy understood, having lived in Manhattan when she'd studied at Juilliard and during her opera career.

"It depends on the class," Lucy explained. "Some classes will be completely remote. I'll probably have to appear in person at least one week every semester, maybe more. I have to go back at the end of June to turn in all my papers and sit for orals. Until then, I need to study like a fiend."

"Not like you don't have anything else to do," said Liz, getting up to open a sling chair, so Lucy could sit down. "It's a good thing you have Tom as backup."

"It's a good thing I have Tom, period. Without an associate rector with his experience, I never would have considered going back to school." Lucy took a tube of sunscreen out of her canvas tote bag and squirted a thick, white snake down each arm.

"Good girl," said Liz, watching Lucy rub in the cream. "I don't want to remove any more pre-cancerous lesions from your skin. Put some on your face too."

"My makeup has the highest-level sunblock they make, and it covers my freckles too. What more could I ask for?"

"Someone to do a full-body inspection on a regular basis."

"My doctor does that now."

"She would do it more often if you'd let her." Liz wiggled her eyebrows to emphasize the lewd suggestion.

The smile in Lucy's green eyes went flat, instantly wilting Liz's grin. "And you were being so good," Lucy said in a disappointed tone.

"Old habits are hard to break."

"Liz, my love for you is not a joke," said Lucy sternly. "I take it very seriously, and I hope you do too."

"Of course, I do!"

Lucy reached out to touch her shoulder. “Oh, Liz. I hate to be a scold. I hate it as a priest. I hate it as a mother, and you can be darn sure, I hate it in my love life! Please, don’t put me in that position.”

Lucy’s continued stare made Liz uncomfortable, so she picked up another board and inspected the edge. “If you love me, why are you making me wait?” she mumbled.

“I’m not *making* you, Liz. We talked about it, and you agreed...willingly, I might add. We’re *both* waiting, and you know why. It’s only been five months since Erika died. You don’t just snap back from losing a spouse. Grief takes time.”

“How much time?” Liz asked, knowing Lucy’s answer would be vague.

“Everyone’s different. Some people in my bereavement group still show up years after the death of a spouse.”

“They’re probably lonely and come for the social interaction.”

“I try to weed those people out and ask them to move on. Otherwise, the group gets too big. If they stay more than a year, I usually send them for individual therapy.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ve been seeing Gloria Parrish.”

“That shrink who talked Maggie into leaving me?”

“Please don’t call her a ‘shrink,’ Liz. It’s disrespectful. And, yes, she’s the same therapist Maggie was seeing, but we don’t talk anyone into doing anything. We listen and ask questions and help people decide for themselves.” Lucy sighed. “You’re mourning your own losses—your marriage, your mother’s death, losing your best friend. You’d probably benefit from seeing someone.”

“No,” replied Liz bluntly. “*No* shrinks.” She could read Lucy’s frustration in her eyes and the furrow between her auburn brows. The permanent frown lines were the only wrinkles in her otherwise youthful face. They’d grown noticeably deeper since her wife’s death.

“Liz, you play the stock market,” said Lucy. “Think of waiting as an investment. If we rush things now, before we’re ready, it could ruin our future. Look what happened when you rushed into marrying Maggie.”

“You should talk. You rushed into marrying Erika.”

Lucy gazed into the harbor. “Good thing too. Turns out we had no time to lose.”

“You didn’t know about the aneurysm when you married her. You thought you’d spend the rest of your lives together.”

“And we did.... The rest of Erika’s life. Our time together was a gift.”

“I guess it helps to be religious and think everything happens for a reason.”

Lucy stared at her. “You know that’s not what I think. Liz, what’s with you today? You sound out of sorts.”

While Liz thought about the question, she made a big show of taking apart the plane to blow out the swarf and reset the blade.

“Liz?” Lucy prodded. She reached out and lifted Liz’s face by the chin. “Look at me.”

“It’s not fair. Erika was only sixty-two. She was a decent, generous person. She didn’t have an easy start in life growing up in East Germany, but she worked her way up to be the best in her field. Her students loved her. Her friends loved her...I loved her. She didn’t deserve to die so young.”

“It has nothing to do with what we deserve, Liz. You’re a doctor. You know better. It wasn’t punishment. It’s just what happened.”

“Don’t you get angry with God? I would...if I believed in Him.”

“Her,” Lucy corrected.

“Whatever,” said Liz in a sullen tone. She felt Lucy’s eyes on her, so she deflected. “Put sunscreen on your legs and feet too.”

“I did already,” said Lucy. “You weren’t paying attention. Why are you so cranky today?”

Liz looked up. “I’m sorry. Do I seem cranky?”

“Yes.”

Liz thought about it for a moment. “I’m frustrated. I missed you so much while you were away. I couldn’t wait for you to come back. I wanted to call every day, but you’d asked me not to.”

Lucy sighed. “I know, Liz. But you need to give me time. Please. I love

you. Please be patient.” She reached out her hand. Liz eyed it for a moment before taking it. “Let’s enjoy this beautiful day with our friends,” said Lucy. “All right?”

“Yes, fine,” Liz agreed, but her tone was still surly. She wondered why she allowed Lucy to win every argument when she would debate anyone else to the death. That was the definition of a compelling argument, as Erika had frequently reminded her. “An argument so powerful and well-reasoned that one either believes it or drops dead. Of course, that’s not original to me. Rorty said it first. People were always saying outrageous things in those days.” Liz smiled. Sometimes, she heard Erika’s voice in her head as if she were sitting right beside her instead of lying in the churchyard at St. Margaret’s.

And you were one of those people saying outrageous things, Liz thought. Remember the time you told off Peter Unger? That was priceless!

And very satisfying, to be sure!

“Liz, is there anything I can do to help you get ready?” Lucy asked, interrupting Liz’s mental conversation with Erika.

“Not really. I staged the drinks and snacks in the cabin. It’s too windy up here. If you want wine, there’s an open bottle of sauvignon blanc in the fridge downstairs.”

“I’ll wait for the others. Who’s coming?”

“Olivia and Sam. Tom and Jeff. Cherie and Brenda are going hiking today. They discovered a new trail that’s supposedly Hobbs’ best kept secret.” Liz added in a dramatic Greta Garbo imitation: “They want to be alone.”

“Well, they’re newlyweds. What do you expect?”

“It’s black-bear season. I hope they don’t get a surprise while they’re humping in the woods...or come back full of ticks I have to extract.”

Lucy laughed. “I doubt the Hobbs police chief is so desperate she needs to have sex in the woods.”

“Sometimes it’s fun to have a change of venue.”

Lucy nudged Liz with her sandaled foot, her bright-red toenails

instantly getting Liz's attention. "I'll have to remember you said that." Liz didn't respond, so Lucy nudged her again.

"Cut it out, Lucy. I'm trying to behave, so I don't get yelled at again."

"Who's yelling? What did I miss?" said a hearty male voice. Tom Simmons' gray head popped up over the deck rail. He climbed into the boat, followed by a tall, slender man with a shaved head. Tom was wearing sandals and shorts, despite the cool temperature. Jeff White, Tom's partner, was more sensibly dressed in jeans and a windbreaker.

"Aren't you pushing it a little, Thomas?" asked Liz, glancing at his sturdy legs covered with wiry, white hair. "It's not even Memorial Day, and you're in shorts already?"

Tom glanced down at his shorts and wiggled his toes in his sandals. "Liz, you're the one who told me the men up here wear shorts all year."

"They do. That doesn't mean you need to be as stupid as the rest of them. It's going to be cold out on the water today. There's quite a wind."

Tom held a canvas bag aloft. "A change of clothes."

"Stow your bags below and help yourself to drinks while you're at it."

"No COVID shots today?" Tom asked, setting down his bag.

"Demand is slowing, so they asked most of the volunteers to stop coming. Rumor has it they'll close down the clinic soon." Liz slipped her plane into its leather case and put it into her tool bag. "I think this project will have to wait for another time."

Jeff stuck his head out of the cabin. "Can I bring up drinks for anyone? There's an open bottle of sauvignon blanc on the door. Is that for something special?"

"That's Lucy's wine," said Liz.

"Oh, Mother Lucy," said Tom, bowing, his hands prayerfully pressed together, "may I have a glass too?"

"Of course. It's not my personal wine. Anyone can have it. Right, Liz?"

"Right, and there's more where that came from. If someone wants to be helpful, he can open another bottle and put it in the fridge." Liz swept up where she'd been working and threw the shavings over the side.

“You throw your dirt into the harbor?” scolded Tom.

“It’s just wood shavings. Biodegradable.” Liz stowed the broom and dust pan. “It’s time to get this party underway. The boat, too, if Sam and Olivia will ever get here. I told them I’m leaving at two, with or without them.”

Tom pulled his phone out of his pocket. “They have five minutes to spare. Give them time.”

“They’re probably home in bed fucking their brains out,” said Liz.

“Liz!” said Lucy, raising a brow.

“Oh, Lucy, it’s a losing battle,” Tom said. “I’ve known Liz for over forty years. She’s always had a potty mouth. You’ll never reform her. Believe me. Everyone’s tried.”

Liz turned to Tom’s partner for sympathy. “Jeff, please remind me never to invite these priests aboard *The Wet Lady* again.”

Jeff laughed. “Tom is my ticket, so I guess you’ll have to invite him if you want me to come along.”

“But I don’t have to invite the redhead. She’s nothing but trouble.” Lucy offered a radiant smile in response, which Liz ignored. “I should warm up the engine. It’s probably still a little sluggish after all those months in storage.” She made a little bow. “Thank you all for coming out on *The Wet Lady*’s maiden voyage of the season. Hopefully, we don’t get stuck out there.”

“You’re not really worried, are you?” asked Tom anxiously.

“Nah. They gave it a tune-up and replaced the plugs.” The engine put out a little smoke but turned over on the first try. The entire deck rumbled briefly before the engine fell into its rhythm and idled smoothly.

“Don’t leave without us!” Olivia called dramatically as she climbed up the ladder. “I brought food and wine!” Tom reached down to help her with her bags. “There’s more,” said Olivia. “Samantha is right behind me.”

Jeff reached down and brought up more bags. “Whatever you have in here, it smells good...really good.”

“That’s my chicken satay. I hope you like it, Jeff.”

“Peanut sauce?”

“You bet.”

A tall woman with short brown hair put her long legs over the rail. She waved to the others.

“Sam, about time you got here,” said Liz. “Can you help me cast off?”

“Sure thing. I’ll take the back.”

“You mean, the stern.”

“Yes, the stern. You can always tell new boaters,” Sam said, rolling her eyes. “They have to show off to impress people.”

“Thanks, Sam. I thought you were my friend.”

“I am your friend,” Sam said with a grin. “Liz, it’s your day off. Relax.” She patted the air for emphasis.