

A photograph of a long, narrow wooden bridge with dark railings, stretching from the foreground into the distance. The bridge is flanked by a calm river. In the background, a dense forest of bare trees is visible under a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and slightly mysterious.

ELENA GRAF

THE
VANISHING
BRIDGE

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Chapter 1

“Sue, can you help this customer?” asked the manager. His tone was polite, but it was not a request.

“It’s Susan,” she muttered under her breath. “My name is *Susan*.” If she’d told him once, she’d told him a dozen times, but he never seemed to hear because he was always turned away, his hands busy, his eyes watching the associates. Maybe it was good that he took his job seriously. Nowadays, so few people did. She just wished he would remember her name. She hated to be called Sue.

Her shift was over, but she couldn’t leave until her replacement appeared. She knew she should have taken the day off, but she wasn’t the kind to call in sick when she wasn’t and never asked for personal time. After months of flipping burgers, she still hadn’t earned any vacation days.

Since the invitation to orientation for new teachers had landed in her inbox, she’d been planning how to get there on time. Her shift was scheduled to end thirty minutes before the meeting. She didn’t want to show up at the elementary school in a McDonald’s uniform, reeking of hamburger grease. That morning, she’d stuffed a change of clothes and dress shoes into her tiny locker. She had intended to duck into the staff bathroom and change right after clocking out. Now, her careful strategy was unraveling.

When she entered the keycode to open the register, her fingers trembled. To divert attention, she enthusiastically greeted the customer, an older mother with three young children. The woman glanced nervously at the long line of impatient people behind her. It was well past lunchtime, but the place was packed—the beach crowd coming in with the tide. The children couldn’t make up their minds. Frustrated, the mother finally ordered Happy Meals for each of them. The youngest whined, joined by a chorus of complaints from her older siblings. Too late now. The order had been entered.

Susan rushed to the fries table to fill four small bags. At this point, she could barely stand the sight of French fries, never mind eat them.

The smell alone could make her nauseous.

She assembled the colorful boxes and quickly filled them with the required items. The dessert was apple slices treated with citric acid to keep them from darkening. When her hand reached into the bin for a plastic action figure for boys, she found it empty. It was someone else's job to keep it filled, but like every business in town, they were short-handed. The other associates were either helping other customers or working in the kitchen, so there was no one to ask for help.

In the storeroom, Susan opened the cartons until she found the right one. She scooped up a generous armful of plastic dragons—a promotion for the *Game of Thrones* spinoff. When she returned, the Happy Meals boxes she'd been filling had been pushed aside. One had fallen off the counter. According to regulations, anything that hit the floor had to be discarded. She'd have to rebuild that meal from scratch. When she looked up at the wall clock, she saw the second hand greedily devouring the time left before the meeting.

"Sorry I'm late," said a sullen male voice.

Susan looked up into a young, tanned face. The boy's hair was wild and matted in the back, proof that he'd just crawled out of bed. An abundant crop of acne pimples scattered in the sparse stubble on his chin always made him look unappetizing. Susan hated to watch him handle food. Not following the hygiene procedure had stiff penalties, but the place was so understaffed that no one ever checked.

"I've got it," said Susan, rising to her feet. She disposed of the mess, assembled another box, and replaced the items. The youngest child was still whining when Susan brought the order to the counter.

"I'm leaving," she told her shift replacement with the force of a threat. She banged the keys of the register to log out and rushed to the back to enter her hours into the break-room computer. Her shift replacement was always late, and the overtime had been adding up. This week, she'd get at least three hours more pay. Every little bit helped. She'd been short for groceries last week. Now that it was July, her landlord had raised her rent to the summer rate.

She couldn't get the combination for her locker right. On the third try, it opened. She snatched her purse, shoes, and the dress out of the

cramped space. The door to the staff bathroom often locked accidentally and wouldn't open, so she joined the long line for the customer bathroom.

When a stall finally became free, she yanked the McDonald's polo shirt over her head and kicked off her sneakers, not bothering to untie the laces. She shook out the dress. The purposely crinkled fabric didn't show wrinkles and she'd rolled it to prevent hard creases. She stepped into her pumps and gathered up her work clothes.

She had to wait for a place at the sink and quickly ran a brush through her hair, hoping it didn't smell of grease. The odor of spent cooking oil stuck in her throat long after her shift ended and clung to everything. Since she'd been working at McDonald's, she'd started washing her hair every day.

The traffic on Route 1 was bumper to bumper in both directions. She despaired of ever getting out of the parking lot. Then a car stopped. Maine tags, of course. She waved her thanks. As she inched forward to the light, she tapped the steering wheel impatiently. Finally, she made the left turn into the elementary school driveway.

The school halls were dark. Sunblind, Susan tried to remember the location of the faculty room while her eyes adjusted. Her memory nudged her to the left.

Courtney Barnes, the acting principal, was speaking when Susan found the right door. "Susan! Come in!" the pretty blonde called with a longtime educator's enthusiasm. "We were just getting started."

"I'm sorry to be late. The traffic..."

"Oh, we all know how that is!" Courtney said, nodding. The other heads at the table bobbed in agreement. The principal gestured to an empty chair at the table. "Before you get too comfortable, there's iced tea in the fridge." After a long shift with barely a sip of water, Susan could practically taste the cold tea, but she decided to pass because she was late.

"Now that we're all here," Courtney began again and asked the attendees to introduce themselves. The new teachers were all women, two right out of college. To Susan, they looked like high school girls. The new ones looked younger every year. The others were seasoned

veterans like herself.

The principal turned on a projector. “Today, I’m going to show you how to navigate the intranet we use for internal communications. It’s where the state curriculum is posted for your reference. You’ll also find forms, and information about our policies. We’ll be reviewing these documents this afternoon.”

Susan took a pad out of her bag to jot down some notes. She noticed the younger teachers were using their tablets.

“Don’t worry,” said Courtney with a gentle smile directed at Susan. “This is a Power Point. I’ll send everyone the slides.”

At the end of the meeting, Courtney gave out the classroom assignments. Before everyone left, she took the new teachers on a tour of the school, ending in the large atrium at the entrance. The others headed out. Susan hung back to apologize for being late.

“I have another job,” she explained, her eyes modestly focused on the floor, a holdover from her convent training. “That’s why I couldn’t get here in time.”

“It’s okay,” said Courtney, touching Susan’s shoulder, which made her look up. “A lot of teachers need to work during the summer to make ends meet. You’re not the only one.” Her warm tone made Susan relax for the first time that afternoon. They’d met at a dinner party the summer before Susan had to return to South Dakota.

“I was so glad to get this position even though I applied late. I’m looking forward to getting a regular paycheck.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be until September. After you start, you can set up a schedule to spread out your salary payments over the entire year. You’ve been teaching a long time, so you probably already know that.”

Susan nodded. Of course, she knew.

“We feel lucky to get experienced teachers like you. Because of the shutdowns, the new ones had to do their classroom training virtually, and since the pandemic, there’s such a shortage of teachers.”

“My old district in South Dakota is asking veterans, who could have retired, to stay on.”

“I’m not surprised. I got a letter the other day from the Connecticut

teachers' union begging me to come back. Apparently, they didn't look at my records to see that I'd moved out of the state and gone into administration. Not that it matters."

"I belonged to teachers' unions in other states. They're all terrible at record keeping."

"I was surprised to see that you once taught in Catholic schools. I can't imagine surviving on the tiny salary they pay." In fact, Susan couldn't support herself working in Catholic schools, so she'd found a public school job in one of New York's worst neighborhoods. Between teaching and the scholarship from Union Theological Seminary, she'd scraped together enough to get her divinity degree.

Courtney seemed kind, so Susan decided to tell her. "Most of the time I was teaching in Catholic schools, I was a nun. The order took care of my housing and other expenses."

The principal's brown eyes grew wide. "Oh," was all she could say.

Susan smiled to show she wasn't offended by her surprise. "Some people have funny ideas about religion. I don't tell everyone that I'm a priest either, but now that I'm working at St. Margaret's, I'm sure I'll run into parents and students at church."

"Hobbs Elementary isn't a gossip school compared to some, but it's hard to keep secrets in a small town." Courtney reached out her hand. "Glad to have you on board, Susan. We like teachers with Catholic school backgrounds. Good classroom management." Susan heard the backhanded compliment. Teaching nuns' reputation for corporal punishment had never left the popular imagination. "If you wait a moment," said Courtney, "I'll walk out with you. Let me just get my things from the office."

The principal was showing her favor, and Susan had nowhere special to go. While she waited in the cool atrium, she closed her eyes to center herself after the rushed afternoon. She said a prayer of thanksgiving for getting to the meeting almost on time.

"I see my ride is out there," said Courtney, returning with her bags. Susan looked through bulletproof, reinforced glass entrance doors. After Sandy Hook, every school had become a fortress. A Subaru, much newer than Susan's, was waiting at the curb with a familiar driver at the

wheel.

“Gas is so expensive, we’ve been carpooling when we can,” Courtney explained. “You remember Melissa. Come out and say hello.”

Courtney opened the passenger door. Susan bent to look across the front seat. The intelligent face of the driver broke into a smile. She was a pretty woman in her forties with compelling blue eyes. A mass of curly hair flowed over the shoulders of her sundress.

They briefly caught up on how things had changed since they’d last seen one another. Melissa was carrying on about how much they loved living at the beach, when Courtney gently interrupted. “Honey, we have to pick up Kaylee from soccer practice.” She turned to Susan. “She’s trying out for the traveling team,” she explained proudly.

“I guess we won’t have time to check the water at Liz’s place. I’ll do it later,” said Melissa, starting the engine. “We promised to keep an eye on the garden while they’re in Europe.”

“I can check the water,” Susan said, “I don’t mind going that way.”

She regretted her spontaneous generosity as soon as she she hit the traffic on the Post Road. Liz Stolz’s house was north of town, which meant making a turn against traffic. Susan patiently waited for some kind motorist to take pity on her and let her merge. The only driver to stop had Maine tags.

Approaching the three-story house hidden from the road, Susan hoped Lucy wouldn’t suspect an ulterior motive if she found out she’d been in her yard. But unless Susan told her, how would she ever know?

Lucy slowly opened her eyes and looked across the aisle to where her daughter slept soundly, curled into her companion’s body like a sleek red cat. Their heads touched; their fingers intertwined tenderly. Gently nudging her wife, Lucy pointed in their direction.

Liz took out one earbud as if it would enable her to speak better. “I guess they’re sleeping together again. Ain’t young love grand?” She sighed theatrically.

“Liz! Don’t be such a cynic! You’re in love too.”

“Really?” Liz’s pretense of ignorance earned her a jab. She raised

her arm to block another blow. “We should put down the armrest. We’ll be landing soon.”

“You just want to get away from me,” said Lucy with an accusing stare.

“After being cooped up with you for hours, sure I do. Plus, your elbows are sharp.”

Lucy pressed the button to raise the seat back. While she’d been asleep, the blower nozzle blasting cold air on her face had numbed her cheek. One foot was pins and needles. She flexed it to restore the sensation and felt around with her toes. To pull on her shoe, she had to insert a finger in the heel because her feet had swelled during the flight.

The multiple discomforts reminded her why she’d come to hate air travel. For an opera singer, it was an occupational requirement. In the early days, when she’d needed the exposure, she’d jammed her calendar with engagements. But she shouldn’t complain. After thinking her career was over, she should be grateful for the opportunity to sing again, but she was glad she could be choosy about when and where. At her age, she couldn’t expect her body to tolerate the constant long-distance travel. Fortunately, the Festival of Lyric Arts at Aix-en-Provence paid its featured singers well. On this flight from Paris to Boston, they were traveling first class.

Lucy pulled herself up into a more comfortable position. She’d read that the airlines had been reducing the seating space. If she felt crowded, she couldn’t imagine how her much taller wife felt, but Liz, who’d replaced her earphones, looked content, if not comfortable.

“What are you listening to?” Lucy asked, nudging her to get her attention.

Liz pulled out an earbud. “Some of Denise’s early recordings. I can hear how much her voice has changed. You’ve done a great job with her.”

“While we were in Europe, she lined up three more performances on her own. That’s in addition to those Roger already booked for her.”

“That’s great.” Finally getting the idea that Lucy wanted to talk, Liz removed the earbuds and stowed them in their case. “Is Roger officially her agent now?”

“As a favor to me.”

“He doesn’t strike me as someone who does things for charity. He must see potential in her.”

“We all know she has potential. This is just the beginning. I bet she’s fully booked by the end of the year.”

“Congrats, Lucy, you made this happen.”

“I helped, but Denise made it happen. She worked hard, and having Roger on her side will ensure she gets the opportunity to prove herself.”

“He’s certainly persistent,” Liz said, making it clear it wasn’t a compliment. She frequently complained that Lucy’s agent was too pushy. Lucy didn’t enjoy being pressured by him either.

“He’s dragging his feet with Denise’s record company. They haven’t removed her dead name or her photos as a man from their album liners. I kind of get it. A countertenor who’s transitioned is a phenomenon. A talented female alto is just one of thousands.”

“What’s the record company’s excuse?”

“They claim it would be too expensive to recall all the CDs, reprint the liner notes, and reissue the albums.”

Lucy watched Liz adding up the expenses in her mind. “But how much could that cost? A few hundred dollars, at most.”

“I know, but the margin on classical music is low, and they say they can’t afford it. Roger says he’s working on it.”

“Glad he’s good for something.”

Lucy studied her wife, trying to determine the reason for her irritability. “What’s going on with you?”

Liz shifted in her seat and tried to sit up straight. She glowered at the low-hanging baggage compartment overhead. “I get stiff from sitting for a long time. I’m not as young as you are.” Lucy scrutinized her wife. Liz was one of those fit, active seniors who could be a model in an AARP ad. She almost never complained about getting older or mentioned the nine-year age gap between them, but she had a birthday coming up. “I never learned to sleep on planes. If I had a long-distance medical conference, I always booked a day ahead, especially if I was giving a paper.”

“I had to arrive a few days in advance for rehearsals, which took

care of the jet lag. Plus, the recirculated air on planes isn't great for the voice." Additional explanation to a rabid opera fan who also happened to be a doctor was unnecessary.

Liz lowered the armrest separating their seats and checked her watch. "Half an hour till we land," she said, answering Lucy's unspoken question. They'd only been married a month, but already Liz could read her mind.

"I can't wait to get home," said Lucy, although the time away had been like a mini vacation. The performance of [*Mahler's Second Symphony*](#) at the Aix Festival had been their reason for going to France, but they'd found time to take in the local sights and share intimate dinners while Emily and Denise went off on their own.

"Too bad we missed Fourth of July while we were away," said Liz. "I love watching the fireworks from the boat. I was thinking about taking The Wet Lady up to Bar Harbor for a few days."

"Then you'll have to go by yourself. When I get home, I need to work. Reshma and Tom have been holding down the fort, and he needs time off to finalize plans for his wedding."

"What about Susan?" Liz eyed Lucy with a little frown. "You're still not sold on her working at St. Margaret's."

"Do you trust people who lie to you?"

"Lucy, she was desperate. She only lied because she was afraid you wouldn't help her."

Lucy wondered why Liz was defending Susan, especially after she'd tried to come between them. "A lie of omission is still a lie."

"Susan just wants a chance to prove herself, and you should give it to her. People can earn back my trust if I see they're sincere and don't fuck up again. Sounds like you're expecting she will."

"You know that recidivism in newly recovering alcoholics is high. I won't have her wrecking my parish after I worked so hard to rebuild it."

"Lucy, you're not really worried about that, are you?"

"Well, no." Liz leaned forward to look into Lucy's eyes. "All right, I'll be honest. That lie really hurt. If Susan had told me she was running from the police in South Dakota, I still would have helped her."

"You did help her. We all did. Me. Brenda. You. But Susan also did

her part. She faced the charges in South Dakota, did her rehab, and she's in AA. Count it as a success." Lucy could feel Liz intensely studying the side of her face. "You know, Lucy, for someone who makes a living counseling people, you certainly have high expectations of human nature."

"I have high expectations of people I love and thought I could trust."

The expression in Liz's blue eyes softened. "You're angry with yourself because you didn't see the warning signs."

"And with the Church for sweeping her problems under the rug."

Liz chuckled. "For Catholic priests, alcoholism is practically a job requirement."

"If they'd let them marry, they wouldn't have so many problems. And look at the benefits they would get from the unpaid spouses of clergy."

"Like me?" Liz rolled her eyes. "I hate being a church lady!"

"I know, sweetie," said Lucy, stroking Liz's thigh, "but you make such a good one." That drew another eyeroll, so Lucy decided to change the subject. "How about spending the weekend at the beach house instead of boating up to Bar Harbor?"

"Oh, Lucy, you know how crowded Hobbs will be. I'd rather stay home."

"We can bring in food instead of fighting the summer people in the restaurants, and it would give Emily and Denise privacy. I'm not sure I like the idea of them spending the night in the rectory. That's how rumors get started."

Lucy glanced across the aisle. Gazing into her daughter's sleeping face was like seeing herself in a distant mirror, except her daughter's red hair was still bright. Lucy decided to wake Emily so she'd have some time to get her bearings before they landed. It was a long way from their arrival gate to the baggage claim. With all the clothes they'd needed for the performance and side trips, they'd be claiming a fleet of bags in Boston.

"Emily, sweetie, time to wake up," Lucy called softly.

Her daughter pulled back her unruly mane of red hair and sat up. "Are we there yet?" she asked, arching her back like a cat.

“Almost. You should wake Denise.”

“I kept her up late last night,” Emily explained shyly. “I’m sure she’s tired.”

So, they were sleeping together. Lucy wondered what Denise had done to help Emily overcome her aversion to sex, but that wasn’t something she could ask. Maybe when Denise needed advice, she’d confide in her again.

“Mom, do you have any mints?” asked Emily. “My mouth tastes disgusting.” The young woman’s scrunched face was a slightly defective representation of disgust, but for someone on the spectrum, she had come a long way.

Lucy rummaged in her bag for the mints she always carried. Emily woke the sleeping woman beside her and offered her the open tin. Denise, still groggy from sleep, looked across the aisle and mouthed the word, ‘thanks.’

“We’ll be landing soon,” Lucy said. The words were barely out of her mouth when the booming voice of the pilot announced their imminent arrival in Boston.

The cartons piled in the small room made it seem even more stifling. Susan wished she could turn on the air conditioner or even the window fan, but the electric bill would come after she moved out, and she already knew she couldn’t afford it.

September couldn’t come quickly enough with its promise of a regular paycheck. By then she would be living in the rectory, so she could save the money currently allotted to rent. She knew how lucky she was that the vestry had allowed this arrangement. She was only part time. Many parishes could no longer afford to provide housing even for full-time clergy.

With Tom Simmons moving out, Susan could take the largest apartment. She wondered why Lucy or Tom never seemed worried about scandal. Everyone knew the associate rector was living with his boyfriend. Now that they were engaged, Tom apparently felt free to move in with him officially. Not that anyone in the parish seemed to care.

Hobbs bordered on Webhanet, the unofficial gay capital of Maine. If the conservative parishioners had objections, they kept them to themselves.

Susan drew the shades for privacy. The houses on the barrier islands had been built on top of one another to make use of every inch of space. July was the busiest month for tourists. People were always passing right outside her window. Even when they kept their voices low out of courtesy, the sound echoed in the little apartment. The walls of the building were paper-thin. Susan could hear her next-door neighbors and the tenant above talking as clearly as if they were in the same room. She often switched on the TV, not to watch—she hated TV, except for British series and the news—but because the white noise disguised the specific words of conversations.

A drop of sweat broke away and ran down between her breasts. If she continued to sit in the sweltering room with the windows closed, she might pass out in this heat, or even die. She imagined the police finding her aging body slumped on the stained sofa, eyes staring lifelessly at the ceiling, her mouth gaping wide. Since her sister had died, Susan had no family. They might notify Lucy because of her job at the church. Her death would be reported in the police blotter weeks after it happened, but maybe not. The bad publicity of a forgotten woman dying alone might hurt the tourist business.

Susan dismissed the melodramatic fantasy as self-indulgent. Instead of being shut up in the heat, she could do something about it. She could have both privacy and air if she sat in the dark. After turning off the lights, she went into the bedroom and opened all the windows.

The alarm clock, which had come with the rental, clicked down a red numeral. It was much too early for bed, so she decided to listen to music. A boy at her last school had given her an obsolete iPod. Even if she weren't useless at technology, she could no longer update the operating system or add music. The student had shown her how to fill it with classical music, mostly Lucille Bartlett recordings. Tonight, Susan chose the Fauré *Pavane* over opera arias because the sound of Lucy's voice was too stimulating.

Another red numeral clicked down. Some of the pixels had burned out. Susan remembered how foolish she'd felt using a pen and paper to

take notes at the orientation meeting. Compared to the young teachers, she was as outmoded and derelict as the old clock. The things she'd learned to teach—cursive handwriting, diagramming sentences, grammar, punctuation, and spelling rules since superseded—were anachronisms now. But schools suddenly wanted them taught because what they'd been doing wasn't working. No surprise to Susan. Children needed structure and discipline along with knowledge. Not that anyone would dare to say such things aloud.

The red numerals now read 9:00. On her break, Susan had checked the schedule from Charles De Gaulle into Logan. The last flight would have landed that afternoon around four. Even with customs and rush hour traffic, and maybe a stop for dinner, Lucy should be home by now. Jet lagged and tired from travel, they might already be in bed. Susan imagined Lucy in one of those delicate lace nightgowns that made each of her lovely breasts look like a blushing bride.

The first time Susan had stayed the night in Lucy's Manhattan apartment, she felt shabby in a simple nightgown like they'd worn in the convent. Lucy explained that she wore feminine things to feel attractive after the rape had left her torn and ugly. Pretty nightgowns and underwear were her secret weapon against the man who'd tried to steal from her what she didn't want to give.

That night, they did nothing except spoon each another in Lucy's double bed. It took several such visits before Lucy finally let her kiss her and fondle those creamy breasts. In the convent, Susan had only "touched above the waist," which was considered less sinful. That was as far as she'd dared to go with a woman until Lucy showed her there was more to making love.

Lucy sat naked on the bed with that intense look of concentration in her green eyes. Her unbound red hair cascaded in waves over her elegant shoulders. She'd taken off her makeup, and all her freckles showed, so many they could never be counted.

"Do you know how to make yourself come?" she asked gently. Susan did know, but she was ashamed to tell Lucy, never mind meet her eyes. The confessional was the only place she'd admit her personal sin, and then in whispers. The convent chaplain often gave her the entire rosary

to say as penance. The other nuns probably wondered which mortal sin she'd committed.

Lucy opened her arms and gathered her in. "Come here. I'll show you." There was so much fumbling that night, but in the moment of release, Susan wept fierce tears of gratitude.

In Liz Stolz's garden that afternoon, Susan had studied the house, wondering which of the many windows belonged to the master bedroom. She'd never been upstairs. From what she'd seen of the house and Liz's decorating style, she guessed the place where they slept would be large, airy, and minimally adorned. It was probably on the third floor for the view of the ocean.

Were they making love now? Susan wondered. Was Lucy lying with her legs spread wide to welcome her lover? Susan knew she especially liked that. Liz, with her cocksure attitude and rakish smile, seemed like the type who could be forceful. After all Lucy had suffered, Susan hoped she would never hurt her. But now that Lucy had gotten past the rape, maybe she enjoyed self-assured confidence more than timid caresses.

Thinking of Lucy making love left Susan throbbing. When she shifted her weight in her seat, she felt how damp it was between her legs and knew it wasn't from the heat.

Coveting someone's wife was forbidden, explicitly called out in the commandments as sinful, and she should beg forgiveness. While she was praying, her phone began to play loud music. She silenced the ringer before the merry Mozart theme disturbed the neighbors. The screen showed the name of her caller: Roberta Lantry.

"I hope it's not too late," Bobbie said apologetically.

"No, between the noise from the street and the heat, I'm still awake." The statement of fact sounded like a complaint, which Susan hadn't intended. She forced a smile to change her tone. "I'm sitting in the dark, listening to music."

"I bet you'll be glad to get out of there."

"For the quiet alone, yes, but also to stop living out of boxes. When I got the job at the elementary school, I knew I'd be in Hobbs for a while, so I cleaned out the locker where they stored my sister's things. Everything has been piled up in boxes in the living room."

“When you get the green light to move into the rectory, I’ll help you move the boxes.”

“You’d do that? That’s so kind, but first, I need to get in there and do some cleaning. You know how men are, even the tidy ones.”

“When do you plan to clean?”

“Saturday morning. First thing.”

“I’ll help. Let’s meet for breakfast, and we can go together.”

“Thanks, but you don’t need to help me clean.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

Susan smiled. She had a friend. It had been such a long time since she’d applied that word to anyone, even Lucy.

Since they’d crossed the state line, Liz had been counting down the mile markers. The six-hour time difference from Europe made driving the long, monotonous highway even harder. During her training, she’d learned some tricks to stay alert. Getting enough oxygen was key, which was why she’d turned off the air conditioner and opened her window. On break from long shifts on surgical duty, she used to stand on the hospital balcony to get fresh air. In those days, the New Haven sky was often thick with smog, so the term was relative.

The reflective white paint of the green highway sign warned that the Hobbs exit was two miles ahead—Liz’s signal to wake her sleeping passengers. She reached over to touch Lucy’s thigh, feeling her warmth through the thin knit of her summer dress. She felt Lucy’s hand cover hers. “Are we home?” she whispered and sat up.

“Almost. Want to wake up the crew in the back seat? I can take you and Emily home first and then drop off Denise.”

“That’s backtracking. Let’s head to the rectory first.”

The soft voices had gotten Emily’s attention. Her head popped up in the back seat. “Mom, I’m staying with Denise tonight.”

Liz could feel Lucy’s expectant gaze on her cheek. Emily sharing a curate’s studio with St. Margaret’s music director would not be a good look for anyone. Lucy cleared her throat, urging Liz to say something.

Liz engaged Emily’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. “It’s late, Emily.

Why don't you invite Denise to stay with us?" In the dark, Liz could feel Lucy's smile of approval.

"Would you like to stay?" Emily asked Denise, who'd been sitting beside her silently, waiting to see how the family dynamic played out.

"Really, Denise. It's no trouble," Liz assured her. "You can stay downstairs. It's completely private." The first-floor bedroom was set off by its own hallway. It was where Liz put her sexually active guests.

"That's very kind, Liz. I accept."

In the rear-view mirror, Liz could see how much the invitation had pleased Emily, despite her limited ability to express emotion. As a bonus, Liz could avoid the tourist traffic in downtown Hobbs. On a Friday, it would be brutal.

Liz felt good about the decision. For tonight, she'd made two young people happy, but she and Lucy would need to discuss how to handle such situations in the future. Although Lucy had encouraged the invitation, Liz knew she had misgivings about the on-again, off-again relationship between Emily and Denise. There was the age gap, amplified by Emily's strict religious upbringing in the home of her adoptive family. Her Asperger's didn't help.

"I hope Melissa remembered to check the water," Liz said as her headlights flashed on the front windows.

"You paid all that money for your fancy watering system, but you don't trust it?" Lucy said.

"When I lived in Connecticut, I twice came home to an empty well. If you're going to drag me around the world for your performances, we need an irrigation system that works."

"Don't make me your excuse to buy expensive tech toys." Lucy unbuckled her seat belt and opened the car door. Liz stared at her wife, wondering what she'd done wrong. The answer was, nothing. After traveling for the entire day, they were all exhausted.

Liz opened the cargo area and lined up the bags on the driveway. Ordinarily, she'd carry in the luggage for guests, but Emily and Denise were a fraction of her age and certainly not helpless.

"Come on, Denise," said Emily. "I'll show you where your room is."

Liz rolled the enormous suitcases up the side ramp.

“Let’s unpack tomorrow,” Lucy said, unloading her hand luggage in the front hall.

“Good idea, but I’ll bring the bags upstairs in case we need something.” Liz piled as much as she could on the suitcases. Dragging the load through the hall, she thanked Sam for suggesting an elevator to the third floor. She parked their luggage in the small room Maggie had used as an office. It was still bare, although her ex-wife had been gone for over a year.

“Thank you for inviting Denise to stay,” Lucy said, unbuttoning her blouse. She sighed as she unhooked her bra and released her breasts.

Liz forced herself to look at something else to avoid wanting to caress them. She guessed that Lucy was probably too tired for sex tonight.

“Looks like Denise and Emily are sleeping together again,” Liz said. “I guess this trip made her relaxed enough to like sex.”

Lucy gave her a sharp look. “Liz, keep your voice down. Don’t make me sorry for sharing that with you.”

“They can’t hear us up here. Sam soundproofed the entire house.”

“Even so, keep it down,” said Lucy, walking naked into the bathroom. “I’m going to take a quick shower.”

“While you do that, I’m going to purge the security footage and reset the cameras. Want anything from downstairs? A glass of wine?”

“No, thanks. I just want to sleep.”

Liz decided to skip the elevator this time. Her knees, stiff from sitting on the long flight, followed by the drive, complained as she walked down the stairs. The house smelled stale and shut up, so she stopped on the second floor to open a few windows. Emily’s bedroom was empty, which she expected. Liz smiled, imagining what was going on downstairs.

Checking the door to the garage gave her an idea. She went in and looked up the stairs to the door of the apartment she’d built for her mother. Monica Stolz had blamed Maine for taking her daughter far from her childhood home and declared that she hated the entire state. The old woman had died without once staying in the apartment.

Now that Melissa and Courtney were renting Lucy’s beach house, the roomy studio was empty. Emily could use it as a permanent place

to store her stuff. The separate entrance would give her privacy to entertain guests, but the second-floor bridge would give her access to the main house—a perfect situation for a young woman trying to find her way into adult life. Liz decided to suggest the idea to Lucy when she went upstairs.

She locked up the garage and headed to the media room. In the room behind the stage was the video studio Maggie's daughter had set up during the lockdown. Alina had used it to edit her news stories and broadcast live entertainment provided by her mother's talented friends. Now that Maggie was spending more time in Hobbs, and the frost was beginning to thaw, maybe they could do it again. Tony Roselli and the gang from the Webhanet Playhouse would jump on the idea.

Liz sat down at the security console and checked in with all the security cameras. One caught Emily and Denise sneaking into the kitchen to look for alcohol. Liz smiled as the file ran back to the beginning at high speed. She did a spot check at random intervals. The garden camera showed Melissa coming into and leaving the garden around the same time every day. When Liz had asked the young attorney to monitor the water, she knew she would be reliable.

Then she saw the unexpected image of Susan Gedney and slammed down the pause button. She went back to the frame where Susan had appeared and replayed it at normal speed. She watched Susan approach the house and study it intently, unaware that she was looking right into the camera. After going into the alcove where the water valve was located, she left through the garden gate.

Unnerved by seeing Susan's pale face staring back at her, Liz played the scene again. She looked at the timestamp. It was close to when Melissa usually came to check the water. Maybe she'd delegated the task to Susan. Before deleting the file, Liz saved the segment to cloud storage.

Lucy had declined a glass of wine, but Liz poured two anyway. Balancing them as she walked up the stairs, she debated whether to tell her wife about seeing Susan on the video. She decided it would only upset Lucy, especially right before bed.

Lucy was wearing one of her casual nightgowns. Liz took it as a

message to manage her expectations.

“Oh, what a dear you are!” Lucy exclaimed when Liz handed her the glass of wine. “How did you know when I saw yours, I’d change my mind?”

“I just did,” said Liz with shrug.

“The water is probably still hot, if you want to take a shower.”

“Is that a suggestion?” Liz sniffed her armpit.

Lucy smiled. “You smell fine, but I always feel grungy after being on a plane. Don’t you?” She moved over and patted the place next to her. Sitting cross-legged, Liz settled beside her. “All quiet below?” Lucy asked.

“I caught the kids sneaking into the kitchen on the security camera.”

Lucy glanced at the door as if she expected someone to be outside. “Good idea to keep them downstairs. Gives us privacy too.”

“Agreed.” Liz took a sip of wine and set down the glass. “Luce, I have an idea. What do you think about offering Emily the garage apartment? It’s a place to store her stuff. She could join us for meals or ignore us. Her choice.”

“That’s generous Liz, but you’ll have to heat the place and keep the power on while she’s at Yale.”

“That’s easy to manage.”

Lucy leaned back against the pillow. “I like that idea. It will give her a feeling of independence.”

“Good. We’ll tell her tomorrow after Denise leaves.”

Lucy petted Liz’s thigh. “Sweetie, why don’t you jump in the shower, so we can go to bed?” She gave Liz a sexy side-eye to indicate she had more in mind than sleep.

“You’re not too tired?”

“I’m overstimulated from all the travel. Sex always relaxes me.”

“Mother Lucy,” Liz said, dramatically feigning shock, “in your book, you say that sex is *only* for expressing love.”

“Liz, you know I love you to the moon and back, but relaxation is not a bad reason to have sex.”

Liz finished her wine in two gulps. “I’ll be right back.”