

Chapter 1

6:00 a.m.

Tonight, thought Olivia Enright. *Tonight, I'll ask Amy to stay.*

They hadn't discussed it, but after giving Olivia the green light to have sex again, her cardiologist girlfriend should be expecting the invitation. Dr. Amy Hsu had put her on a strict diet, tweaked her medication, and prescribed yoga to reduce her stress. Last week, she'd pronounced her fit to resume all activities.

Olivia had already gone back to work full time, but today, her schedule was light—no appointments with her financial clients, no urgent business at the town hall except a meeting with the police chief about the new rules for concealed carry permits. She could enjoy a leisurely start to the day.

She poured another cup of *real* coffee, more progress since her last physical. She'd gleefully discarded all the bags of decaf despite their ridiculous cost. She'd bought them, hoping that premium mail-order brands would be an improvement, but they all tasted like dishwater. Her heart attack had taught her one important lesson—no amount of money could buy the pleasure she'd once enjoyed.

She could see the dark beach through the kitchen window and decided to take a walk. The weather had been unseasonably warm all winter. The snow from the big Christmas storm had melted by New Year's Day. At six a.m., the outside thermometer already read forty-six degrees.

The horizon was rosy by the time Olivia had put on her favorite walking shoes and stepped out onto the sand. Off season, only the dog walkers and a few hardy souls were out at that hour. Olivia often ran into Dr. Stolz and her wife, the Episcopal rector, but Lucy Bartlett had changed her morning routine. Olivia guessed she needed more practice now that her big comeback at the Met was only two months away. As soon as tickets had gone on sale, Olivia had reserved two seats, hoping Amy would want to come. Of course, that meant an overnight stay in

New York and a debate over the hotel accommodations. Olivia wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

The excuses Amy offered for avoiding sex sounded perfectly reasonable. Getting involved with a patient would cross an inviolable ethical line. The Thanksgiving heart attack, although not serious, was a wake-up call. Amy had described in frightening detail how the exertion during orgasm could trigger another attack. "I'm only telling you because I care." Without question, she did, but it also felt like she was keeping Olivia at arm's length.

Amy's resistance puzzled her. She'd never failed to maneuver a woman she fancied into bed, and this woman excited her like no other, not even Sam McKinnon, who was possibly the most thrilling sex partner Olivia had ever had. Amy was exotic, the first Asian woman to catch Olivia's eye, but it was less about her looks than her placid personality. After a lifetime of drama and high-stakes risk, Olivia found Amy's cool reserve oddly erotic.

Watching the sun emerge from an expanding puddle of incandescent pink, she imagined Amy standing beside her. Olivia preferred quiet in the morning, but she wouldn't have to assert the need because Amy listened more than she spoke. She never wasted words or tried to fill a silence with mindless chatter. Although Olivia loved a captive audience, she appreciated Amy's sincere attention. Unlike most of Olivia's lovers, who'd only been interested in her for her money, Amy seemed unfazed by her past as a powerful hedge fund manager or her many millions of dollars in assets. It was refreshing to have value beyond her portfolio, but Olivia sometimes wished Amy would be just a little more impressed.

The tide was coming in. Striding along the damp sand at the ocean's edge, Olivia dodged the lapping waves. Despite the warm winter, the water would be frigid. Getting it into her shoes would end the outing. Olivia hated wet feet.

The sun had finally risen. She zipped up her parka. It was cooler than she'd thought, and the wind off the ocean was brisk. She wished she'd brought her hat and thought about going back for it. Maybe if she picked up the pace, she could keep herself warm. She checked her pulse and heart rate on her smart watch and found it was within normal

range.

Good. Let's go for it!

The aria was winding to a close. *Perfect timing*, Liz thought. She'd reached the bottom of the blaze-orange thermal mug she'd gotten for spending fifty dollars at the Kittery Trading Post. With the shortages since COVID, it wasn't hard to spend that kind of money on ammunition. The students in her handgun class were supposed to supply their own, but someone always ran out.

Lucy came to the end of *Elsa's Dream*, her character's signature aria. Thirty years ago, she debuted in *Lohengrin* at the Met. She was a lyric soprano, not specifically a Wagnerian, but she'd demanded a public apology for covering up her rape and suspected the casting was payback. Liz had tried to explain that the company wouldn't risk millions on a new production only to do something so petty, but Lucy wasn't listening or thinking rationally. The frenzy of preparing for this comeback performance had stolen her perspective.

"How was that? Better?" Lucy called to the back of the media room. Liz usually sat in the last row of home theater seats where she wouldn't be a distraction.

"Well..." Liz began, trying to buy herself some time. She didn't want to add to Lucy's anxiety, but she had to tell her the truth. "You're singing sharp again this morning. Can't you hear it?"

"Yes, especially here." Lucy sang the phrase again.

"Exactly."

Lucy raised her eyes toward heaven. "Gracious God, why did I have to marry a woman with perfect pitch?"

"Because it's useful. Lucy, you're not focusing. What's going on?"

"I'm meeting with the finance committee this morning about the bell tower renovations. Olivia keeps demanding more estimates."

"Oh, fuck Olivia," snarled Liz. "She doesn't own the place."

Lucy raised an auburn brow at the expletive. "In a way she does. If not for her endowment, we couldn't even think of making these big repairs."

"So? You're the rector, aren't you?"

“Yes, but I’m only an honorary member of these committees. I don’t actually have a vote.”

Liz finished the last swallow of coffee and looked at her watch. “You’ve been at this for more than an hour. Your mind’s not on singing. Let’s go for a walk.”

“I don’t think we have time this morning.”

“All right, we’ll walk at lunchtime. But you need to take a break. Doctor’s orders. Come on. I’ll make you some breakfast.”

In the kitchen, Liz took out a skillet and tossed in a lump of butter. “Rye toast this morning? Or cinnamon-raisin toast?” Lucy answered with a brilliant smile. She might be approaching sixty, a therapist, and the rector of a church, but hidden within her was a little girl who still loved cinnamon-raisin toast.

“What are you doing on your day off?” Lucy asked, filling a coffee pod for herself and one for Liz.

“Working in my shop till it warms up. After I meet you for lunch, I’ll go over to the range to practice. I’m teaching that handgun safety class on Saturday.” She looked out the kitchen window at the bare ground. “We’ve had so little snow this winter the outdoor range will probably be open.”

“I envy you, being outside. It looks like it will be a beautiful day.”

Liz kissed Lucy’s head on the way to the refrigerator to get the eggs. “But you hate guns, so you won’t miss that part.”

Courtney looked around to make sure no one was watching before leaning closer to accept Melissa’s kiss. At that obscene hour, everyone at the train station was half asleep, and if someone saw, did it really matter? Courtney tried to tell herself that Hobbs was a tolerant place. They accepted a lesbian rector at the Episcopal Church, a lesbian town manager, a lesbian doctor, and a lesbian police chief. Why wouldn’t they tolerate a bisexual school principal? But she worked with children, and when it came to their kids, people could lose their minds.

“Promise to be back by Thursday,” said Courtney, gazing intently into Melissa’s blue eyes.

“I can’t promise, but I’ll definitely be home by the weekend. Once

I get this trust signed, Mike will get off my back. The deal will make my quota for the first quarter, which means I won't have to go into the office for a while."

"That's good. I always miss you when you're in Boston."

"I know. I miss you too. I'm lucky I can still work from home. The other partners are all back in the office. Mike only lets me work remotely because I bring in so much money."

Melissa gulped down the last of her coffee and put the thermal mug in the cup holder. "You make the best coffee," she said with a smile. "I always miss it when I'm away."

"You miss *my coffee*?" asked Courtney incredulously. "With all those trendy coffee bars near your office!"

Courtney secretly worried that Hobbs was too quiet for Melissa and working in Boston would tempt her to move back. Whenever Courtney brought it up, Melissa reiterated why she'd chosen to live in Hobbs. She *loved* Courtney and their life together. She was happy to have her family living nearby, now that her mother was a full-year resident and her sister had moved to Portland. Her job as a successful trust attorney, with clients calling at all hours and endless meetings, wasn't as satisfying as it used to be. Now that she was in her forties, Melissa said, she wanted more out of life. Harriet Keene, the town lawyer, had invited her to join her practice, but Courtney couldn't see a woman of Melissa's ambition and talent doing wills and real estate transactions for the rest of her life.

"What's on your agenda today?" Melissa glanced at the dashboard clock. They were both aware the train would arrive soon.

"Nothing special except a faculty meeting to review last week's active shooter drill. Brenda said we didn't do well."

"Those drills must be a nightmare for the kids."

"The teachers too, but the superintendent says we have to have them, so we do."

"Say hi to Brenda for me, when you see her." Melissa reached for Courtney's hand. They sat holding hands, watching the dashboard clock tick down the minutes. "I'm sorry, babe, but the train will be here any minute. Give me another kiss, and I'll let you go."

6:30 a.m.

Brenda suspected that her wife was secretly laughing at her, but she didn't want bacon spatter on her uniform. The floral apron had once belonged to Cherie's mother. The worn cotton grew thinner with every washing, but Cherie believed in using the things passed down from family, not locking them away. She insisted she'd wear the apron until it fell apart.

When the bacon was done, Brenda fished it out and cracked eggs into the pan. Before the kids moved in, Cherie had always made breakfast. Out of necessity, Brenda had become more domestic. It surprised her because she never expected to be a mother. Unlike most women of her generation, her childhood dream hadn't been a big wedding and smiling babies. Brenda had always wanted to be a cop like her dad and big brothers. Yet, here she was, cooking breakfast, as she did most mornings after packing everyone's lunch. She'd lined up the brown lunch bags on the counter like her mother used to do.

Since they'd adopted the kids, Brenda had finally cut her hair short to grow out the blond. The monthly ritual of dyeing it took up too much time, and at her age, she wasn't kidding anyone. Cherie insisted that she liked her new "butch" haircut. Eventually, she'd grow it out because long hair required less attention.

"Hey, lover, what are you thinking about so hard?" asked Cherie, opening a yogurt for her youngest.

"Hair."

"Hair?"

"Yes, I'm deciding to grow mine again once this mousy blond is gone. Maggie Fitzgerald rocks a white braid, and I've been learning some new tricks from doing Megan's hair. Will you mind?"

Cherie's smile was full of love. "Sweetie pie, you are the most beautiful woman in the world, no matter how you wear your hair."

"You don't think the gray makes me look old? That's the only reason I ever dyed it. So those smart-ass new recruits don't think I'm an old lady."

"Brenda, you've been the police chief in this town for so long I don't

think anyone would dare. Besides, you could just give them your death stare. It makes even my blood run cold.”

“It does? Really?” Brenda liked the idea of being scary.

Cherie giggled. “No, but I think women should enjoy being the age they are. You worked hard for those gray hairs.”

“I still have twelve years till retirement. And Liz says my heart is almost back to normal. I think I can make it.”

“So do I. You’re doing great. And now that we have two kids to send to college, we’ll need the money. Doesn’t look like tuition is going down anytime soon.”

“They’re just babies,” said Brenda, gazing at Keith and Megan contentedly munching their Cheerios.

“I know, but it will go by faster than we think.” Cherie finished peeling an orange for her daughter and broke it into segments. The girl smiled and popped one into her mouth.

Brenda served Cherie’s eggs and her own. Try as she might, she couldn’t interest the kids in an old-fashioned breakfast like the meals her mother used to make. They were content with cereal and yogurt. Brenda decided she should be happy because it made her life easier, and they could all get out the door on time.

“I’m glad you’re not one of those backward healthcare people who think eggs are bad for you,” said Susan as Bobbie put a plate in front of her.

Bobbie laughed. “For an old lady, I like to think I’m open-minded and keep up with the research. So many primary care providers don’t. My boss insists on it. She quizzes us at staff meetings.”

“That sounds like Liz,” said Susan, breaking the egg yolk with her fork.

“I bet she had to do a lot of teaching when she was surgical chief at Yale,” Bobbie said, sitting down with her plate. “She’s good at it. I always learn something I never thought of.”

“Not everyone can be a good teacher. When I was in the convent, other nuns were going into social work, prison reform, legal action. I decided to stick with teaching because I love it. Plus, it pays better.”

Susan sighed. "I just wish it weren't so fraught with politics. The kids don't care. We're not harming them by telling them the truth. What's hurting them is all this hate!"

"I could never do what you're doing," said Bobbie. "It's hard enough to keep my mouth shut." She glanced up at the clock and the baby monitor beside her plate. "Eat up, honey. I'll need to deal with Joyce soon."

Bobbie looked up from her plate to see Susan's warm smile. She looked so kind and saintly. Bobbie almost expected to see a halo around her head, but she knew Susan was no saint, especially not in bed. Getting there had been so worth the wait. Bobbie hadn't known what to expect from a woman who'd been a nun and now a priest, but Susan was a tender lover, generous and attentive. Joyce had always had the upper hand. With Susan, there was an equitable balance, a give and take that boded well for the future.

The future. Bobbie was afraid to think about that. They were still sneaking around, hoping no one noticed when Susan stayed the night. Bobbie had been picking her up and dropping her off so Susan's car would remain in the rectory parking lot. But a small town was like a fishbowl.

"I can see you're hatching a scheme over there," said Susan. "You're so deep in thought."

"I'm thinking about coming out."

"What? Why now?"

"Joyce always insisted we stay in the closet, but she won't even know, and I'm sick and tired of hiding."

Susan looked worried. "I understand...and sympathize, of course, being in the same place. What do you plan to do?"

"Nothing, for now. I need to think about it and how it will impact you too. People are going to judge us when they find out what's really going on."

"And what's really going on? You're loyal enough to take care of your partner who has dementia. Someone else would have written her off and stuck her in a home."

"I do have legal responsibilities. She made me her guardian, turned over this house to me. She has no other family."

“Yes, but it’s out of kindness and love that you keep her in her home and created this clever scheme for her care, bringing in your student boarders, inviting a refugee nurse to live with you. People shouldn’t judge.”

Bobbie shook her head. “But they always do. They have romantic ideas about ‘until death do us part.’ What happens when the person doesn’t even remember you?”

“I think Joyce still remembers you. I’m glad she’s calmed down now that she’s realized I’m no real threat.”

“For now...” said Bobbie philosophically. “This disease is so quirky. Who knows what’s next?” She smiled to indicate she wanted to change the subject. “What are you doing after school today?”

“I have a meeting about the active shooter drill we had last week. We didn’t do as well as we’d hoped. The police chief is coming to review our performance and tell us what we can do better.”

“That school is a fortress. What are they so worried about?”

“I don’t know, but the district requires the drills. I hate them.”

“Are you afraid?”

Susan’s penetrating blue eyes engaged Bobbie’s. “Yes. Anything can happen. There are so many guns around. People who own them aren’t careful. They leave guns in places children can find them. Believe me, children see everything. If you don’t want a child to get something, you need to lock it up.”

Bobbie nodded in agreement. She was no expert on children, but Susan had been teaching for decades, so she should know.

Sam put on the old sweatshirt that she wore around the house and a pair of flattened moccasins. She needed to get back to her tiling job, which would have been finished by now if she hadn’t fired that stupid kid. She scratched the little patch of skin in the small of her back that got dry in the winter because she let the hot shower beat on it. That spot got sore from lifting forty-pound bags of thin set and mortar, which was why she’d hired Peter Langdon to do the heavy lifting.

Maggie stirred and turned in Sam’s direction. “Thought you could

sneak out, did you?”

“Good morning, gorgeous,” said Sam, sitting down on the bed beside her. “You don’t have an early class this morning. You can sleep in.”

“I know, but I want to make you some breakfast. That’s why you keep me, isn’t it?”

Sam grinned. “No, I ‘keep’ you because you’re beautiful and sexy, and...I love you.”

Maggie’s hazel eyes lit up. No matter how often Sam told Maggie how beautiful and loved she was, it was never enough. At first, Sam couldn’t understand why a woman like Maggie, who’d been on the stage and admired all her life, needed to hear so many compliments. Then one day, she got it.

No matter how Sam excelled in school or how many architectural awards she won, her mother never approved. She wanted her daughter to wear fashionable clothes, marry a wealthy man, and take her place in society. Sam couldn’t think of anything worse. Clearly, Maggie had old wounds too, but their solutions had been completely opposite. Maggie had become a glamorous actress to get the adulation she craved; Sam hid behind her competence. Despite their differences, they seemed to fit together just right, like two pieces of a puzzle.

After a tight-lipped kiss because Maggie was self-conscious about morning breath, Sam said, “If you insist on getting up and making me breakfast, I won’t turn it down.”

“Hmm. How about eggs Florentine? I have some spinach.” Sam imagined Maggie flipping through the recipe box she carried around in her mind.

“Sounds good. I’ll start the coffee.” Sam was glad Maggie had insisted she put away her single-serve coffee maker and make pots of coffee. Before Maggie had moved in, Sam gulped down her morning coffee out of a thermal mug in her truck. The old-fashioned method meant relaxed breakfasts while they finished the pot together.

By the time Sam finished her first cup, Maggie had showered and put on her makeup. She’d left her white hair loose to dry and wore a colorful caftan with fancy sandals that highlighted her sexy nail polish. Sam went out to the living room to load the hopper of the pellet stove so

her girlfriend's feet wouldn't get cold. By the time she returned, Maggie was whipping up a gourmet breakfast. Watching from the doorway, Sam felt overwhelmingly grateful for this fantasy come true.

"What's the matter?" asked Maggie, turning around.

"Nothing. Just admiring you." Her reward was a radiant smile.

"Get yourself another cup of coffee. Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

As Sam refilled her cup, she remembered a question she'd been meaning to ask. "I heard you talking to Liz last night. Everything okay?"

Maggie dramatically raised a brow. "Not eavesdropping, were you?"

"No, you didn't close the door, and it was impossible not to hear. I hope there's nothing wrong...with your health, I mean."

"Actually, I'm fine," said Maggie, turning back to the stove. "Liz was kind enough to tell me my tumor marker results. When the report is negative, my regular doctor doesn't always call. Meanwhile, I'm crawling the walls until I know I'm in the clear."

"I can't imagine having something like that hanging over my head for the rest of my life."

"That's how it is when you've had cancer and a gene mutation. It's always there, like a ticking bomb." Maggie cracked the eggs and carefully eased them into the simmering pan. "Liz checks the markers every time and calls me with the results."

"Did you know she was keeping track?" asked Sam, bringing her coffee to the table.

"Yes, but I didn't ask her to do it. She just does."

"Don't you feel like it's an invasion of your privacy? I mean, you're not married anymore."

"No, I appreciate that she cares."

"Don't take this wrong, Maggie, but I think Liz still loves you." Sam waited while Maggie figured out what to say.

"I know, but we can't be married. I need what she can't give. She needs what I can't give."

Sam nodded, wondering if she was giving Maggie what she needed. She certainly hoped so. She liked this arrangement.

"Are you jealous?" Maggie asked. Her narrowed eyes made Sam

think she wanted her to be.

“Maybe a little.”

“Don’t be. I’m your woman now.” The phrase was old-fashioned, but Sam liked the possession it implied. What they said and did in bed probably wasn’t politically correct either, but that was no one’s business. “Her woman” knew exactly how to get her going.

Maggie brought the plates to the table. Sam valued good visual design, and Maggie’s plating was always a feast for the eyes. This breakfast, garnished and arranged to perfection, was no exception.

“How much longer will you be working at the school?” asked Maggie, reaching for the fancy butter from Ireland that came in a brick.

“I’m grouting today. I would have been done by now if I didn’t have to fire that kid.”

“You’ve been complaining about him for months. I’m surprised it took so long.”

“When Peter’s focused, he works hard, but he’s not consistent. I don’t have many people working for me, but I need to be able to count on the ones I have.”

“Was he having personal problems?”

“Yeah, his girlfriend threw him out a couple of weeks ago, and he had to move back to his mother’s house. After that, I could always smell pot on him. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s doing harder stuff.”

Maggie sighed. “Some boys just can’t seem to find their place in the world, or if they do, how to keep it. I see them at the college. They start out okay and then something happens. It’s like they have no resilience.”

“Believe me, Maggie. I really tried with him.”

“I know you did. I remember when Liz got you involved.”

Maggie was there when Liz had told Sam about a kid with problems looking for a job. “I wasn’t sure about him at first, but he turned out to be a good tiler. He has a great eye for design.” Sam got up to get another cup of coffee. “I can’t wait for this project to be over. It’s kind of boring. I only took it because I was getting antsy waiting to hear about the museum project.”

“I knew that. But it’s good to stay busy. I know I’m glad to be teaching again, especially now that my baby-sitting services are no longer

required.” Maggie put up a brave front, but Sam knew she was hurt by how quickly her daughter and grandchildren had adjusted to her leaving. “How often will you have to be in California?” Maggie asked.

“Maybe a week or two a month. More in the beginning...and at the end when the finish materials are being installed. Will you be okay with that?”

Maggie shrugged. “Do I have a choice? I want you to be a success.”

“Maybe you can come with me sometimes. I could show you off. My arm candy.” Sam was just teasing, but Maggie’s eyes grew large.

“Is that how you see me?”

“No! Of course not,” protested Sam anxiously.

“Just pulling your leg, Sam. I know I’m more than that. But it’s flattering to hear you think I’m still attractive.”

“You had me going for a while.”

“Well, I hope so. I’m an actress, remember?” Maggie gave Sam a sexy wink.

7:30 a.m.

Amy Hsu enjoyed listening to the soft murmur of the assistants and nurses as they prepared for the day. She liked being part of this community of women who looked after the health of the town. Raised in a close-knit ethnic circle, she’d never felt completely comfortable with white women. When she was growing up, Amy’s parents did most of their socializing in the Chinese community. Friendships with Caucasians were discouraged. As if Amy would have time for friends between her studies and all the after-school activities carefully chosen to help her get into the right college.

When the time came to look for a mate, she’d been encouraged to choose one of her own kind. Her parents weren’t overjoyed to learn that Amy was a lesbian, but when they met Jill Chen, a brilliant neurosurgeon who even spoke Mandarin, she instantly became the approved choice. While Jill looked perfect on paper, she had a dark side. Surgeons needed strong egos and overdeveloped confidence to do their jobs, but Jill took pleasure in putting Amy in her place, reminding her that she was “just” a cardiologist. Raised to be unfailingly respectful and dutiful,

Amy had endured the constant put downs until she couldn't anymore.

When she'd finally complained about the abuse, her friends didn't believe her. She had no bruises, so she must be exaggerating. Her parents, especially her mother, expected her to turn a blind eye and make the marriage work. With everyone questioning her choices, no wonder she'd begun doubting herself, but there was one thing she was very sure about. Even though she missed the intimacy, sex especially, she was in no hurry to get involved again.

Amy decided to make another cup of tea. As she dispensed hot water from the instant hot faucet in the break room, she wondered if her cultural heritage had determined her choice of morning beverage. Teresa Gai, the newest medical assistant, came in to make tea, waiting respectfully while Amy filled her cup.

"And how are you on this fine day, Dr. Amy?" Teresa asked. "I am told that it is very warm for this time of year." Her English accent implied that her preference for tea was probably an ethnic choice too. She was a recent refugee from a part of war-torn Sudan that had once been a British colony.

"I was here last winter," said Amy, "It seemed colder than New York, but according to the national weather service, it was the warmest winter on record."

"But it's always refreshing!" When Teresa smiled, which was often, her teeth contrasted brilliantly against her dark skin. Being a recent transplant from the old world, she wasn't mixed blood like most African Americans. Amy found it comforting to have another woman of color in the practice. Cherie Harrison was biracial, but with her blond hair and light skin, she could pass for white. Everyone assumed she was, no matter how often she asserted that she was black.

Amy wondered why she was thinking so much about race this morning. Her friends in Hobbs treated her like anyone else. Olivia said that she didn't even consider Asians another race, but she'd said she found Amy's eyes "exotic." *Can't have it both ways*, thought Amy. *Make up your mind!* In some ways, Olivia was as overbearing as her ex, except she was direct whereas Jill was passive aggressive. She always denied pressuring Amy.

“Teresa, it seems you’ve become the queen of blood draws,” said Amy to make conversation.

“Dr. Amy, I am glad to be able to use my training in any useful way. And Dr. Liz is kind to be flexible about my hours so I can go to school.” In her own country, Teresa had been a certified nurse, but her credentials had been lost along with her husband, her parents, and her home. She and her daughter had barely escaped with their lives. But to practice her profession, she must retrain and be licensed all over again.

“We’re glad to get good people with all the labor shortages. How does Grace like her new school?”

“Very much. I feel lucky that we can live in one of the best school districts in the state. Miss Bobbie is encouraging her to study science.”

“That’s good. We need more girls in STEM disciplines.”

“A woman must get a good education and be prepared to make her own way in the world. One never knows where she will land. Look at me!”

7:46 a.m.

Riding shotgun in Liz’s big F-150 always made Lucy feel like a real Mainer. As they passed their neighbors out walking or jogging, Lucy waved to them, and they waved back. The friendliness of a small town in Maine was so different from the Massachusetts suburb of Springfield, where Lucy had grown up, or Boston, where she’d been a curate, or New York, where she’d attended Juilliard and made her home when she was a principal soprano at the Met. Hobbs felt like home in a way no other place had.

Since she’d been going back and forth to New York for her doctorate and the surprise opportunity to return to singing, Lucy had been spending more time away from Hobbs. No wonder she clung so fiercely to her new wife, her friends, and her congregation. She wanted to sing again, but she was trying to find a balance. It felt like the preparation for the new production of *Lohengrin* had taken over her life.

A hand reached across the console and rooted around in Lucy’s lap until it found hers. Somehow, Liz always sensed when she was struggling. Even before they’d become involved, whenever there was

trouble, Liz showed up to help. She'd come into the church where Lucy was praying and quietly sit beside her or appear at the rectory office with coffee from Awakened Brews. As a priest, Lucy couldn't officially believe in reincarnation, but she often wondered if they'd been together before. She'd never told Liz, who openly ridiculed new age religions. "No, things don't happen for a reason. No, there isn't a lesson to learn in every disaster," she said in her most disparaging tone. Liz always said things like that, but Lucy knew she was more spiritual than she let on.

Liz's hand was warm and squeezed Lucy's gently. "Honey, you need to stop worrying. That bell tower was falling apart decades before you came to Hobbs. It's still standing, and you don't have to fix it today."

"I try to remember that God is leading me and to live in the moment."

"Look at Erika. When she woke up that morning and headed up to Colby to teach her class, she had no idea she'd be dead by nightfall." Lucy couldn't forget that awful night. She wondered what would have happened if she hadn't fallen asleep in front of the TV downstairs and discovered Erika sooner. Liz said that aneurysms were often silent killers. In an otherwise healthy woman in her sixties, a doctor wouldn't necessarily consider a headache serious. "I shouldn't have brought up Erika," said Liz. "You have enough on your mind."

"No, I'm glad you did. Life is short and things can change quickly. Erika popped into your thoughts to remind me." Lucy could only get away with saying such things because she knew that Liz believed in spirits. She'd even admitted to having posthumous conversations with her dead friend.

Liz parked in front of the rectory door and yanked up the hand brake. "I'll pick you up at twelve-thirty and bring you a sandwich. Tuna okay?" Lucy happily agreed. Liz never made tuna salad from a can or foil pouches, only from fish left over from dinner. "We can eat in the truck before we go for our walk. It's warm today, but not that warm." Liz leaned over to offer a goodbye kiss. Lucy caught her arm and held on tight.

"I love you," she said more fervently than usual. Those words had been accompanied with all sorts of feelings—passion, playfulness, lust, joy, relief. This morning they sounded desperate.

“I love you too,” said Liz, looking curious. Her reassuring smile along with another gentle kiss made Lucy feel better. “See you later.”

Lucy stood on the rectory steps and watched Liz drive off, missing her already. At the start of a marriage, wanting to be together every minute wasn't unusual, but they weren't kids any more, and they both had responsibilities. Lucy trudged up the rectory stairs and opened the door.

Jodi, the admin, looked sleepy when Lucy passed her desk. She had two toddlers at home and getting them off to day care must be challenging. Ironically, work was probably the only place she felt off duty. “Oh, Lucy,” Jodi called as Lucy reached her office door. “Reshma was just here, looking for you. Should I call her and let her know you're here?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Lucy unpacked her laptop. She was reading her emails when she heard a familiar voice.

“Mother Lucy, do you have time for me now?” asked Reshma, standing in the doorway with two cups from Awakened Brews. Lucy motioned to her to come in.

Reshma settled into one of the visitors' chairs. She was wearing a linen collar this morning, so she must have done her laundry recently. Before Liz had installed a washer and dryer in the rectory, Lucy had to wash her clothes at the laundromat in town. By comparison, Reshma had it easy.

“Thanks for the coffee,” said Lucy, prying the plastic lid off her cup. She'd already had plenty of coffee, but she didn't want to hurt her curate's feelings. “Tell me what's going on.”

“Mother Lucy, I promise you that I am doing my best to get this Sunday school project off the ground, but I can't find any teachers, and there's only a handful of children signed up. People tell me the Sunday school was struggling even before the pandemic.”

“It was. The parish had fewer young families with children, so we had to cut back on the number of classes.”

The young woman emitted a deep sigh. “Mother Lucy, maybe this isn't a good assignment for me. I know nothing about education or what children need.”

“Think back to your own childhood and what you needed.”

“At Sunday school age, I was in a refugee camp in Sudan.”

Reminded of Reshma’s difficult path to where she was today, Lucy erased her smile. “I wish I could help you, but the only formal teaching I’ve done was in graduate school. Okay. I gave voice lessons to Denise, but that doesn’t count.”

“But at least you’re a mother.”

“But my child was sixteen when she came back, well past the age for Sunday school.” Lucy studied Reshma’s frown and realized she was genuinely perplexed. “I’m sorry, Reshma, but I really don’t know how to advise you. Susan is a teacher. Maybe she can help you. Or Simone. She used to be an elementary school principal.”

“Good idea. I’ll ask them, but I thought you should know why I haven’t made more progress.”

“I appreciate your keeping me informed. Let’s bring it up in the vestry meeting again and see if anyone has any suggestions. Meanwhile, reach out to Susan and Simone to see if they have some ideas.”

Reshma nodded, but now she seemed even more discouraged. “I was looking forward to this project. I like children.”

“That helps,” said Lucy. “I know you can do this. I’m counting on you!”

“I’ll do my best,” said Reshma without an ounce of enthusiasm.

After the young woman left, Lucy finished the coffee she’d brought and discovered she’d wanted it after all.

Sam groaned as she lifted the forty-pound bag of grout powder. This was the reason she hired young men. For a woman in her sixties, she was strong, but why break her back when a kid less than half her age could easily lift these bags? She was annoyed with herself for letting Peter Langdon go in a fit of temper, but she’d warned him about smoking pot at work. It didn’t matter that cannabis was legal in Maine now. She’d have done the same if he’d been drinking alcohol on the job.

She couldn’t blame Liz. She’d been up front about the boy’s problems. He’d been living with his single mother and couldn’t hold down a job. Lucy, who’d been counseling his mother, told Liz about his stash

of guns. That's when Liz made him her project and tried to straighten him out. She'd talked Sam into giving him a job. "On a trial basis, of course. If it doesn't work out, I'll figure something else out. I know a lot of people in the chamber of commerce." Liz often used her connections to fix things quietly, like getting Erika's father a place in senior housing. People complained about "old boys" networks. In Hobbs, the hidden power structure was a bunch of old girls.

Sam was willing to take a chance on the kid. Sometimes, the only thing a misfit needed was a chance to feel useful, but Peter was a strange one, all right. Barely legal, he was tall and gangly, but he had powerful arms and a strong back. Sam saw intelligence in his intense blue eyes, one reason she had been willing to give him a chance. His friends called him "Pete," but he'd asked his new boss to call him "Peter." Sam guessed it was his way of asking for her respect.

Sam brought in the last of her buckets and the mixer. She set them down and surveyed Peter's work. He had talent as a tiler, but lately, his mind hadn't been on the job. He'd volunteered that he'd been fighting with his girlfriend and asked Sam's advice. She didn't know what to say. Her own track record with women had been spotty at best.

Peter brought the girl around to show off some of his work. He'd grinned like a fool when she complimented him. Before they broke up, the fighting had gotten ugly, but he swore he'd never laid a hand on her. He had a temper, so Sam wouldn't have been surprised if he did. There was so much domestic violence in Maine, especially during the long winters.

When the girlfriend finally threw Peter out, he'd crawled back to his mother's. Not long after, Sam had met Renee in the supermarket and asked how it was going with Peter home again. Renee didn't say much, but from her hangdog look, it was obvious she wasn't happy about having him back.

Sam put on a mask and added grout to the bucket. She was glad she was still strong enough to keep the industrial-size mixer from dislocating her elbow or ripping her shoulder out of the socket, but this was a job she would have happily left for a male helper. She wondered how much longer she could do tile work if she couldn't find a replacement

for Peter. After she put on her knee pads, she spread some grout to test the consistency. Just right. Usually, she enjoyed the mindless work of spreading grout because it gave her time to think. This morning, her thoughts annoyed her.

She was angry that Peter had let her down after all she'd invested in mentoring him. She'd shared the design secrets she'd learned from a master tiler in Rome, where she'd gone in her fifties to study art history. She'd taught Peter the theory behind what they did along with the mechanics, explaining how modern decoupling membranes were based on the same principles the Romans used in mosaic floors that lasted thousands of years. He'd sucked up the knowledge like a sponge, always prompting her to tell him more. Before she'd fired him, she'd started teaching him drafting.

So much wasted talent and potential. What a crying shame.

8:00 a.m.

Courtney always waited outside while the buses arrived. When she was in elementary school, the principal used to greet the students at the door. Now that she was a principal, she hoped her students felt as welcomed as she had all those years ago. Elementary school had been the best time of her life. Her parents were still together and weren't constantly fighting. She'd adored her teacher, Mrs. Murphy, and had a perfect circle of girlfriends. She'd wished it would never end, probably why she'd chosen teaching as a profession.

She watched Brenda Harrison get out of her car and help her youngest, who still needed a booster seat. She set her campaign hat on the roof while she lifted her down, then carefully replaced it. She'd said she always wore full uniform around town because a chief needed to set an example. She always looked buttoned down, her shirts pressed with perfect creases, the cuffs never crushed. Courtney guessed her wife did the ironing in that family, but maybe not. Brenda looked more than competent. Courtney was glad that Melissa's dress blouses were "no iron." Expensive, but worth every penny.

Brenda herded her children toward the school entrance. She touched two fingers to the brim of her hat in a little salute. "Morning,

Ms. Barnes.” She always addressed Courtney formally when the children were nearby. Courtney supposed that was also to set a good example. She didn’t mind the careful manners or Brenda’s courtly, old-school respect. Simple courtesy would make the world a better place.

The chief bent to give each child a goodbye kiss and a hug. The girl always clung to her mother, but Brenda gave her a little nudge forward. Her eyes followed them carefully as they went through the front doors, opened wide when the buses arrived but carefully locked when school was in session. At this point, Brenda would usually tip her hat again and depart. Courtney guessed that she wanted to talk about the meeting that afternoon.

“I’ll let you take the lead,” said Brenda. “You’ll know how to frame it with your teachers. I’ll just give the details of how they fell short.”

“Okay but try not to be too hard on them. Morale is low lately. We’re short-staffed as it is, and there’s all the background noise.”

Of course, Brenda would understand the code Courtney was using to refer to the political controversy over library books and the history curriculum. At the school board’s request, she’d stationed a patrol car outside their last meeting.

“I understand, Courtney. I won’t pound your staff, but these drills are important to their safety. It’s my job to protect people, but there are so many threats. Sometimes, I don’t know how.”

Courtney felt Brenda’s frustration. She reached out and touched her arm. “Thank you. We appreciate your efforts.”

“Glad you do. Not everyone thinks police are the good guys anymore. It’s hard on department morale. Like you, we’re having trouble hiring. Used to be that young men dreamed of being cops. Some young women too.” Brenda grinned affably. “And I was one of them.”

For a moment, Courtney could look past the jowls and the crow’s feet and picture an eager young police rookie, looking sharp in her new uniform.

8:17 a.m.

Olivia wasn’t sure she liked Brenda with short hair, but she admired her for growing out the blond and going gray. The idea of doing such