



**ELENA GRAF**

**RIP TIDE**

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**PURPLE HAND PRESS**

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Trade Paperback Edition  
ISBN-13 978-1-953195-24-1  
ePub Edition  
ISBN-13 978-1-953195-23-4

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02.25.2025

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Also by Elena Graf

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# Dedication

*To Sheila, as always*

## Notes

This book contains live links to YouTube. You can listen to the musical selections cited in this book if your e-reader app enables browsing the internet and you are connected to Wi-Fi. Music links are indicated by blue underlined type. The links will take you out of the e-reader app. To report a broken link please send an email to: [purplehandpress@gmail.com](mailto:purplehandpress@gmail.com)

For a character guide to the inhabitants of Hobbs, Maine, please visit: <https://elenagraf.com/hobbs-characters/>

The *Verdi Requiem* is mentioned often in this book. You can access an excellent YouTube recording [here](#).

# Chapter 1

From the window of the church library, Lucy Bartlett gazed at the ocean across the salt marsh. The rising September sun cut a brilliant path of light on the waves. The view of the row of colorful beachfront houses on the barrier island looked like a postcard. Lucy murmured a little prayer of gratitude for being blessed to live in such a beautiful place.

The morning air had been brisk, whipping up Hobbs' famous beryl waves. Lucy and her wife, Liz, had walked at the edge of the damp sand to keep the water out of their shoes. As usual on chilly mornings, Liz had held Lucy's hand in the pocket of her sweatshirt. She respectfully gave Lucy the silence she needed for her prayers, a condition of being allowed to accompany her on her morning walks. But as much as Lucy loved her wife, she occasionally missed the solitude of walking alone. When she did, the sea gulls followed her. She considered them her most faithful congregation. If the beach was empty, Lucy might sing to them, always surprised and pleased when they sang back.

Singing had unexpectedly taken a more prominent role in Lucy's life. The Met had engaged her as the soprano soloist in its pre-season *Verdi Requiem*. The first performance was only a few weeks away, which meant she and Liz would be in New York for rehearsals. As much as Lucy looked forward to returning to the vibrant city that had once been her home, she still wondered how to balance her original career as an opera singer with her vocation as a priest and rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church.

She could be justifiably proud of what she had done for this church. The old building had been neglected for decades. The congregation had been in decline. With the support of a group of influential women, especially the town's richest woman, Olivia Enright, Lucy had saved the historic building, with its inspiring stained-glass windows and famous organ, from ruin. She'd assembled a competent vestry that brought home the parish diaspora and welcomed new families.

She couldn't have done it without the help of Tom Simmons, who

had stepped back from leading a prominent New Haven church, to live in Maine as an openly gay man. His guidance of St. Margaret's inexperienced new rector had made all the difference. He'd justifiably earned his retirement to Florida with his new husband, but he'd returned without question after the horrific shooting at Hobbs Elementary.

Although the reason for Tom's return to the parish was sad, Lucy was glad to have him back. His sturdy presence had steadied St. Margaret's during the pandemic. In the aftermath of the shooting, his long experience as a rector and his counseling skills were invaluable. The vestry was wise to reverse his retirement and take him back without question. Now, they just needed to find him an office in the rectory. Until they did, he was sharing Lucy's.

On her way to the break room, she passed the closed door. Behind it, Tom was meeting with Liz, who hadn't been the same since she'd been forced to shoot Peter Langdon. She'd formed a special bond with the young man, who'd been her patient since he was young. Although he'd shot nine little boys and their teacher, killing him, even in self-defense, was devastating. For months, Liz couldn't return to work as senior doctor at Hobbs Family Practice or her many leadership roles in the town's civic organizations. Eventually, time and talking to Tom had brought her back to at least the appearance of normality.

Whenever Lucy wondered what Liz and Tom might be talking about behind closed doors, she stifled her curiosity. It was none of her business what Liz said in her sessions. Lucy was simply grateful that Liz was talking to someone. Although Tom wasn't a licensed therapist, he was a gifted counselor. Their intelligence was well matched. Liz liked to play with people, but Tom was smart enough to see through her little games.

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Liz Stolz scrutinized the man sitting across from her. Tom Simmons' rapidly thinning hair was now more salt than pepper. To disguise the loss, he'd been wearing it shorter. His ruddy complexion, merry blue eyes, and warm smile were unchanged, despite the pandemic and Erika Bultmann's sudden death at only sixty-two. They'd once been lovers as



well as graduate school rivals, so Tom took her loss especially hard. But the ultimate shock had been the mass shooting at Hobbs Elementary. After that, Tom had grayed rapidly. And he wasn't the only one. Liz's hair had gone from iron gray to snowy white almost overnight.

She was relieved that Tom wasn't wearing his clerical shirt today. The informality helped preserve the illusion that what they were doing was having a friendly chat, not, God forbid, psychotherapy. The stiff linen collar of Tom's rugby shirt was unbuttoned, showing a pink streak of raw skin where his razor had scraped too hard. His bare throat looked so vulnerable when his Adam's apple rose and fell. He swallowed frequently. The waiting had made him anxious.

Liz knew it was standard therapy practice to allow the client to open the conversation, but she always stalled until he looked at the clock.

"Why do I think you're getting ready to say something important?" he finally said, breaking the stalemate.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Liz grinned slyly. Tom was exceptionally observant. Was noticing every detail a part of seminary training like it was in medical school? "Usually, I'm better at hiding my intentions," she said, stretching out her long legs in front of her.

"Yes, but I've known you too long."

"Forty-two years," said Liz, subtracting the dates in her head. "Has it really been that long? I can't believe it." She gazed out the window toward the churchyard, where her friend lay buried. "And you've been nothing but trouble since Erika introduced us."

At the mention of Erika, Tom sighed. "Liz, tell the truth. You're glad I'm here. Otherwise, your wife would make you see a real therapist."

"Since you're not billing my insurance, your credentials are irrelevant." But he was right. Liz would prefer to talk to an old friend than an official "shrink." She'd had few options after Lucy had blackmailed her into "getting help." Liz could choose Tom or someone else, but Lucy had insisted that she needed counseling.

As if Liz could share her burden with anyone. She'd asked both Lucy and Tom, in their role as priests, to give her absolution, hoping the magic from her Catholic childhood would make the guilt go away, but it hadn't...not even for a moment.

“You bastard! The suicide fantasy was between us. Why couldn’t you keep your big mouth shut?”

“As a doctor, you know why. I couldn’t keep something so important from your wife.”

“But you told me our talks were confidential. I thought I could trust you!”

“You *can* trust me...to do the right thing.”

Liz shot him a skeptical look.

Tom looked sad. “You’ll never forgive me for that, will you?”

“Probably not,” said Liz. “But I know you mean well...so does Lucy.”

Tom pursed his lips. “All right, Liz, stop prevaricating and cut to the chase. What do you want to tell me?” Tom never wasted her time, which she appreciated.

“I want my guns back. Please tell my wife I’m no longer a suicide risk.”

Tom adjusted his posture and studied her with a little frown. “The shooting was almost eight months ago. In all that time, you have shown no interest in your guns. Why do you suddenly need them *now*?”

Liz gazed into his blue eyes, now steely with resolve. No matter how much she complained, she loved Tom and valued their long friendship. She wouldn’t insult him with more bullshit. “My gun club asked me to teach my ‘firearms for women’ class. There’s a long waiting list, so they’re pressuring me.”

Tom lowered his shoulders to their normal position, but he wasn’t done with her. “Liz, we’ve talked about your overdeveloped sense of responsibility. You don’t always have to save the day.”

“I need to do this,” she said, meeting his penetrating gaze. “Things have been a little tense at my gun club. My interview on *Sixty Minutes* didn’t sit right with some people. Besides, I’m on the board and the only NRA certified instructor.”

“You’re still a licensed surgeon, but you retired from the operating room because of your arthritis. Consider the PTSD from the shooting another impairment and step back from teaching gun classes. At least, for a while...”

“I’m fine, Tom. I swear to you I’ve gotten over it.”

The flinty look returned to his eyes. “You’re not fine, Liz. You have PTSD. You know as well as I do that you will never get over it. Neither will anyone who was in the school that day. That trauma will be with you as long as you live.”

“Well, dammit. That’s exactly why I want my guns back. I want to be able to fire my pistol without cringing.”

Looking surprised, Tom sat back in his chair. “You mean, practice tough love on yourself? That’s so typical of you.”

“Why not? It always works,” said Liz under her breath. She gazed out the window at Erika’s grave. “I learned that trick early. When my high school classmate died, I joined the volunteer ambulance service to overcome my fear of death. It worked. I believe in facing my fears head on.”

“Like volunteering to negotiate with a man who’d decimated a third-grade class?” The memory of that day made Liz queasy, but she forced herself to hold Tom’s gaze while the scene vividly replayed in her mind—Peter’s glassy-eyed stare across the room, the overwhelming stench of cannabis smoke. “I thought I could convince him to release the hostages. I wasn’t trying to prove anything.”

“Hah! You’re always trying to prove something. As long as I’ve known you, you’ve been trying to prove something. You never turn down a dare or an impossible challenge. The harder, the better.”

Liz hated that Tom knew her so well. “Really, Tom, it was about the hostages.”

“Even Susan, whom you’ve never liked?”

“I don’t dislike her per se,” Liz protested. She was lying. Susan, with her insipid worship of Lucy, annoyed the hell out of her. “I didn’t like her interference in my relationship with Lucy, and all the subterfuge around why she’d come to Maine. But when Peter had a gun to her head, none of that mattered.”

“And you protected her. I think you still believe if you had said or done something else, there might have been a different outcome.”

*He’s leading me like a witness*, thought Liz. “Yes, I thought I could reason with Peter. He trusted me.”

“Legally and morally, you did the right thing.”

Intellectually, she knew that he was correct. “So why do I still feel so fucking awful?”

“Because you cared for Peter and wanted to save him. Except he didn’t want to be saved. He wanted you to end his life because he couldn’t do it himself. You keep thinking you could have prevented his death. He wanted to die.”

“Susan often reminds me that I saved three lives that day including my own. Not bad odds, considering how many others died.”

“Nine kids and their teacher. One permanently brain damaged.”

Liz continued the countdown. “One who will have gut issues for the rest of his life. One who will never walk again. Others with lifelong health challenges from their wounds. We always talk about the dead, not the injured survivors.”

Tom sighed. “Unfortunately, that’s true.”

“As a surgeon, I used to patch up people like that. They’re never right again. Their bowels leak or their breathing is compromised. Never mind the muscle damage. An assault rifle turns the tissue into mincemeat.” Tom looked slightly nauseated by her descriptions, so Liz stopped.

“Liz, if you swear to me that you will not harm yourself, you can have your guns back.”

“Thank you.”

“Now for your end of the bargain.”

“Oh, really, Tom. I’m a doctor. If I wanted to kill myself, I could think of less messy ways to do it. You’re not serious.”

He glared at her from under his brows to show that he most certainly was. Liz rolled her eyes, but she raised her right hand like a court witness. “All right, Tom, I swear. I will not use my guns to harm myself.”

Tom sat back in the club chair and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. Unconsciously, Liz mirrored his pose. “Liz, I’ve always known you to keep your word. After you leave, I’ll call Brenda and Lucy and tell them I signed off on access to your guns.”

“That was too easy.”

Tom shrugged. “Honestly, I never thought you were serious about killing yourself. I think you were right. It was just a thought experiment.

You were trying the idea on for size.”

“So why did you tell on me to Lucy in the first place!”

“I couldn’t take a chance, and I was professionally obligated. I know you do things your own way up here in Maine. But sometimes, I need to play by the rules.”

“Fuck you, Tom.”

He laughed heartily. “Oh, come on, Liz. I’m not that bad.”

“No, you’re not. And I have a soft spot for you, you old bastard. But I do have something else to tell you.” Liz paused to allow him a moment to prepare. “I want to end our sessions.”

“Just when things were getting interesting,” he said with exaggerated disappointment. “I’d hoped I’d find out why you need to save everyone.”

“I don’t save people, Tom. I treat them for medical conditions. Saving people is your job.”

“You tried to turn Peter Langdon around. You talked him into taking your gun safety class. You got him a job working in Sam’s renovation business. You kept checking on him to see how things were going...”

Liz crossed her arms on her chest. “I was only doing Lucy a favor. His mother was her client. She was worried about all those guns in her basement. Lucy didn’t know what to do, so she called me. I told Brenda what was going on. You know, the unconventional way we do things up here in Maine,” she said, mocking him. “Peter had been my patient since he was a boy, so when he came in for an exam, I casually mentioned my safety class. And Sam needed help with her tiling business. Too bad I didn’t know the whole story.” Liz stared at her fingernails the way men did, her fingers rolled into her palm. “I thought I had a rapport with the kid.”

“You did. That’s why he chose you to hear his terrible secret.”

“Why do abused children always seem to grow up into abusive adults?”

“Those who get the right care don’t. Unfortunately, if we don’t know about the abuse, we can’t help,” Tom said in a sad voice.

“Churchmen do such a good job of covering it up,” said Liz with an accusing look. “How could we?” She drew a long breath of frustration.

“Why don’t they just kill themselves before they go on a rampage and shoot so many innocent people?”

“Because mass shooters are screaming to be heard. The shooting is their way of making a statement.” Tom studied her. “Liz, please don’t quit counseling. I’m not playing now. I’m here for you.” The kind pleading in his eyes forced Liz to look away.

“I know you are, and I appreciate it.”

“I’ve already told Jeff I’m staying this winter.”

“I bet he’s not too happy about that.”

Tom shrugged. “No, but we can go down to Florida for long visits. He loves this town, and he can see there’s so much to do. Everyone is still a wreck. Besides, with all her singing engagements, Lucy can use the help.” Liz realized that Tom liked being associate rector. He’d only quit to please Jeff.

“Tom, please understand. I need a break. I need to get back to normal life. Our sessions keep reminding me of that awful day.”

“Quitting counseling won’t help you forget or make your life go back to the way it was.”

Liz knew that Tom was right, but she was determined to end these ridiculous sessions.

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Lucy always found preaching on this Gospel frustrating. After browsing the commentaries in the library, she knew she was not alone. She decided that a caffeine jolt might stimulate her thinking. As she headed toward the break room, the sound of Tom’s voice, booming from behind, startled her. “Good morning, Mother Lucy. You can have your office back now.”

“Good morning, Father Tom. I was just about to go back to the library to work on my sermon.”

“That’s right. Wednesday is homily day, isn’t it? I always write them on Fridays.”

“I like to give myself lots of time to prepare because something always comes up.”

“A smart practice. I admit to cheating occasionally and recycling some of my old sermons from Trinity. This congregation hasn’t heard

them, so they don't care."

"Bad boy."

Tom grinned. "And damn proud of it!"

"Coming from your session with Liz?" Lucy asked ingenuously. "Still going okay?"

"Well, it was, but sadly, now it's over."

"She didn't," said Lucy, gripping his arm.

"Oh, yes, she did. Come on, Lucy. We both knew that project was on borrowed time. Liz hates the very idea of psychotherapy. I'm surprised she can stand being married to a 'shrink.'"

Lucy rolled her eyes. "She still uses that word no matter how many times I tell her I hate it."

"It's Liz. Like a kid, the more you discourage something, the more she'll do it. Maybe she'll change eventually, but at her age, I doubt it."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I've seen positive changes. I just wish she hadn't quit therapy. She still wakes up with nightmares about the shooting."

"I'm sure she does, but we can't force her to do counseling." Tom sighed. "Oh, and I'm supposed to tell you, I okayed getting her guns back."

"Tom, please say you didn't."

"Lucy, I had no choice. She gave up the guns voluntarily. She's as sane as we are."

"Which isn't saying much."

"No, but if asked by a judge, I can't honestly say she's a suicide risk. She seems like the old Liz to me. You know—contrary, skeptical, sometimes snide. All the things we know and love about her. She says she wants things to go back to normal."

"Don't we all wish for that?" said Lucy with a long exhale. Since the pandemic, everything was different. Her congregation was growing again, but many families had never come back. Most of the Sunday school classrooms went unused. Merchants were still trying to rebuild their businesses. Kids were struggling to catch up to where they were before Covid shut down the schools, and then the shooting...

"Yes, but she's right," said Tom, watching Lucy's face. "At some

point, we need to let go of the grief and try to get back to some semblance of normality. Obsessing about what happened just keeps reinforcing it in people's minds. That doesn't mean we forget about the victims or their families, we just ease into a more positive approach."

"Easier said than done. The news media won't let go of it. The local paper just did a big story on the boy who'll be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life." Lucy patted Tom's arm. "But you're right...as always. Dwelling on the sadness can become oppressive. People need a sense of security and a return to normal. We'll continue to counsel the survivors and raise money for the families. It's the best we can do."

"How is the foundation doing?"

"We've exceeded our target by over a million, and we're forging ahead. We may soon need to hire a part-time director."

"That's certainly a good problem to have."

"Liz and I will be doing some fundraising while we're in New York. That pro we hired is doing a great job. Olivia recommended her from past charity work. They worked together on many fundraising campaigns, and Olivia is leveraging her ties to the New York financial community. They seem to be getting past the insider trading scandal. After all, it was her son who committed the crime, not Olivia."

"Eventually, people forget," Tom said. "The newest and nastiest takes precedence in people's minds. Olivia just had the misfortune of being Jason's mother. Like Renee was Peter's mother. Yes, they raised those men, but they're not responsible for what they did. I'm all for redemption. After all, it's what we preach."

"How did you know that's the theme for my sermon?" asked Lucy.

"Because I'm riffing on the same Gospel." Tom winked. "And we both live the truth that, even late in life, we can strive for authenticity and forgiveness." Tom gave Lucy a quick half hug. "Let me not keep you from your creativity, and I have some home visits to make."

"Are you coming to the *Verdi Requiem*?"

"Wouldn't miss it! Jeff made hotel reservations and got tickets as soon as they went on sale."

"I'm always glad to have a sympathetic listener in the audience," said Lucy.



“Oh, I wouldn’t worry. They love you in New York.”

Tom whistled as he headed down the hall. With a prayer of gratitude for his ministry, Lucy gratefully reclaimed her office. On impulse, she sat in the chair where Liz usually sat during her sessions and found it still warm. Smiling, Lucy decided to work there instead of at her desk.

She’d barely written two sentences when there was a knock at her open door. “Come in,” she called and looked up to see a smiling dark face. “Good morning, Reshma.”

“Good morning, Mother Lucy,” said the young curate. “Are you working on your sermon? If so, forgive me for disturbing you.”

“That’s why I work here every other Wednesday. I expect to be disturbed. What can I do for you?”

“Ah,” said Reshma, grinning. “It’s what I can do for *you*. I’m on my way to the pâtisserie for a chocolatine. Would you like one?”

Lucy closed her laptop to show that Reshma had her complete attention. “You’ve developed a real taste for chocolate croissants,” she said. “What happened to your usual granola with yogurt breakfast?”

She guessed that Reshma’s face was flaming even though her dark skin hid the blush. “I know yogurt with granola is healthier, but I *really* like chocolatine. Don’t you ever binge on something you like?”

Lucy smiled, knowing that Reshma’s addiction to the French treat was only part of the story. The real reason Reshma wanted to go to the new pâtisserie was the proprietor. They’d met when Tiffany had created the pastries for Lucy’s wedding. Later, the young pastry chef had volunteered to make them for Reshma’s ordination.

“Thank you, Reshma, but I’ve eaten breakfast, and I need to fit into my dress for the Met concert.”

Reshma looked skeptical. “Like you need to worry.”

“You’re young. You don’t know how easily the weight can come on after a certain age, and how it sticks around.”

Again, the skeptical look. “I won’t be long,” Reshma promised.

*Yeah, right*, thought Lucy and smiled to herself as she opened her laptop.

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Reshma John patiently waited her turn to order. During the tourist

season, every coffee shop and café in Hobbs was jammed. Reshma had always favored Awakened Brews, which featured organic, free-trade coffee. That was before Tiffany had sent a special birthday pastry, as gorgeous on the outside as it was delicious on the inside. The delicate napoleon with its crispy layers and the luscious custard filling had been dusted with confectioners' gold. The glittering box was tied with a golden bow. Attached was a sweet note with a mildly suggestive original poem that intrigued Reshma. Now, she was a devoted regular at Wicked Pleasures Pâtisserie. She wasn't too sure about the name, which could equally apply to an adult toy shop as a bakery. But that didn't matter. The main attraction was Tiffany Taylor, the owner and chief pastry chef.

In Reshma's eyes, Tiffany was the living embodiment of an angel. She sparkled like the confectioners' gold she used to brighten her petit fours and chocolate tartlets. She was as blond as the angels in the children's Bible Reshma had been given when she'd arrived in an Episcopal boarding school as a charity student.

Some of Reshma's seminary friends accused her of internalizing colonialism by admiring European religious art. The historical Jesus hadn't been a blond, blue-eyed Scandinavian. He was a dark-skinned Semite from the Middle East, who'd probably looked more like Reshma than the white teachers in her upscale religious school. Yet Reshma still found art depicting a black Mary cradling a dark baby Jesus unsettling. Her friends tried to explain that was the result of brainwashing by the dominant culture, subtler than how religious schools tried to force assimilation on Native Americans or the colonial missionaries on Africans, but no less harmful. They told her she must replace the European images with something more culturally correct. But why? Reshma found European art beautiful and inspiring.

The wait in line gave Reshma the opportunity to observe Tiffany. The people who came for her fancy pastries were as smitten by the proprietor's radiant smile as by her beautiful creations. Reshma watched anxiously as a young man in fluorescent green biking clothes bent to speak confidentially. Whatever he'd said made Tiffany giggle.

It hadn't occurred to Reshma that her beautiful angel might like men. Maybe the special birthday gift had been nothing but good

marketing. As St. Margaret's curate, Reshma knew many people in town. A recommendation from her could go far. Reshma glanced at the line behind her. Tiffany was still busy with the bicyclist. Maybe Reshma could slip away unnoticed. The moment Reshma thought of escaping, Tiffany turned and smiled in her direction. Reshma froze where she stood.

Tiffany went back to her customer. Reshma felt the attention of a woman eyeing her collar. She was wearing it today because she'd taken over online morning prayers now that Susan had returned to teaching. The glaring woman's haircut, shaved on the sides, with a long purple tuft at the top shaped into a point, suggested she was some version of queer. Reshma only used that word with people of her own generation. Her colleagues at St. Margaret's remembered a time when "queer" was a slur and cringed whenever she said it, even Mother Lucy, who was younger than the others.

Reshma smiled at the staring woman, who responded with a dirty look and faced forward. Reshma wondered what she had done to deserve such contempt. Did the queer woman have a problem with Reshma being black? That was unlikely from a person her age. Maybe she was one of the many victims of religious abuse who now hated religion. Reshma sighed. As a newly ordained priest, she was proud to wear her collar, just like the woman in front of her was proud to wear a queer hairstyle. Why couldn't people be proud of who they were without the need to make someone else *wrong*?

Reshma's day, which had started out being greeted by the rising sun pouring through her window, had been so full of hope. She'd read some beautiful scripture to her faithful Facebook prayer group, and now she was in line to order coffee and chocolate from the beautiful Tiffany. But the idea that everyone was being forced to take sides made Reshma grumpy. Her perfect smile drooped. When it was her turn to step up to give her order, Tiffany anxiously asked, "Reshma, is everything all right?"

Reshma smiled, revealing her perfect teeth. "It is now."

Tiffany's blue eyes smiled back. "The usual?"

"Please."

“Do you have a few minutes?” Tiffany asked shyly.

Reshma glanced at the long line behind her. “Do you?”

“I’ll get Kristen to watch the register for a few minutes. I can use a break. I’ve been on my feet since five.” Tiffany went into the kitchen, which prompted some grumbling from the line behind Reshma. Kristen, a slightly darker version of her boss, but just as perky and bright, came out from the back and took Tiffany’s place at the register.

“Come on,” said Tiffany and put two super-size coffees with a shot of mocha and plates of chocolate croissants on a tray. She opened the gate by the register and nodded to Reshma. “I know a quieter place to sit.” She led the way past the pile of enormous bags of flour and sugar to a door. It opened onto a bright office, fully equipped with the latest technology, and a bistro table with two chairs. “This is my office. I don’t get to spend a lot of time in here because I’m always baking. Forgive the mess.” Tiffany brushed some papers off a table and invited her to sit down.

Reshma glanced around. Apart from the stack of unopened envelopes on the desk and an empty coffee cup, the small room looked tidy. “Thanks for inviting me into your private space.”

“You’re welcome. I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

Reshma’s heart rate sped up a few beats. “You have?”

“Yes. One of my other customers said you’ve been experimenting with African cuisine, and you cook it well.”

Reshma tried to figure out the origin of this opinion. She thought of Susan, who’d often been her dinner guest and had sampled some of Reshma’s Sudanese favorites. It seemed unlikely that Susan, who saved every penny, would fritter away her money on fancy pastries.

“Who told you about my African cooking?” Reshma finally asked.

“Your friend Teresa Gai. She comes in to get scones. She says mine are the closest to those from the British bakery in Khartoum,” Tiffany said proudly. “Her daughter really likes them.”

“Oh, Teresa! I’ve learned so much from her about cooking dishes from my homeland. I was away at boarding school, so I never had the opportunity to learn traditional recipes from my mother. She passed when I was in college.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Tiffany, her blue eyes clouding with sympathy.

“Thank you. She suffered so much from the cancer, so her death was a mercy. It left me alone in this country, but I was lucky to have the support of friends at school and my teachers.”

“That’s good. Friends can be like family too.”

“Yes, they can,” said Reshma in a hopeful voice. “But tell me. Why are you interested in African cooking?”

“Well, I have some friends from the CIA coming up this weekend, and African cuisine is our theme.”

“The CIA?” That sounded like a government agency.

Tiffany laughed. “No, not the place with the spies. The Culinary Institute of America. People who went there, like me, always call it by its initials. When I get together with my friends, we cook because that’s what chefs do. So much fun! I wondered if you might like to join us.”

Reshma wanted to jump out of her chair with excitement. Tiffany was inviting her to dinner at her place. Then her enthusiasm sank like a lead fishing weight. She would be cooking with trained chefs. Not long ago, she couldn’t even make a hard-boiled egg that wasn’t runny or green around the yoke. “Are you sure? I’m just an amateur. I don’t want to embarrass you or myself in front of your culinary school friends.”

“You’re ahead of us. We’re looking up recipes we’ve never cooked before. Maybe you can look over mine to see which is worth the effort.” Tiffany leaned forward and there was a little twinkle in her eye.

“Sure,” said Reshma. “When?”

“How about tonight? I eat early though. A baker has to get up early to make the pastries and open the store for the coffee crowd.”

“How early?” asked Reshma cautiously.

“Five o’clock. Does that work? You can come over any time after four.”

Reshma mentally scanned her calendar. She had a pastoral team meeting at three, but they seldom ran more than an hour.

“Great! I’ll be there. Just give me the address.”

“Oh, it’s here. I live upstairs.”

“Well, that’s easy.”

Tiffany nudged Reshma’s plate closer. “Go on. Eat up. I need to get

back to work, and I'm sure you do too."

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"Liz! Where are you?" called a familiar voice upstairs. Liz stood up from dragging boxes across the floor. She turned around and saw stylish pumps and well-toned legs heading down the basement stairs. Maggie's face appeared above the stair rail. "Down here already? Couldn't you wait?"

"I'm moving some stuff away so I can get to the safe. It's been months since it's been opened, and all this crap has piled up in front of it."

Maggie clucked her tongue. "So unlike you, Liz, to accumulate boxes. You hate clutter."

Liz lifted a box onto the relocated stack. "It's not my clutter. This shit belongs to Lucy."

Maggie pursed her lips. "That's right. Blame it on your wife. You're good at that."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Maggie, don't start with me. It is Lucy's shit. These are her theology books from the beach house. She dumped them in an empty office in the rectory when she moved. She's cleaning out an office for Tom, now that he's back full time, so they've landed here."

"He's back full time? That's a lot of clergy at St. Margaret's," said Maggie with a frown of disapproval.

The implied criticism of Lucy annoyed Liz. "Reshma's brand new. Susan's only part time, so is Tom. Besides, what's it to you?"

Maggie gave Liz a hard look. "Why are you such a crab ass? Here I am doing you a favor."

"You asked me a question, and I answered it," Liz replied irritably. "And you didn't have to come over. You could have just called me with the combination, or I could have waited until Brenda got home and got it out of her gun safe."

"I know, but I didn't mind bringing it over. I don't see you very often." Liz listened carefully to the subtext. Maggie missed her. Maybe she was lonely with Sam off building skyscrapers again. Either way, it wasn't surprising that she'd come to Liz, now that the dust from the

divorce had finally settled. Maggie was the kind of woman who had many superficial friendships with other women, but few close friends. That's why her deep friendship with Lucy was so surprising and its end such a loss to both women. Maggie eyed her cautiously. "How about a hug? Or doesn't Lucy allow it?"

"Of course, she does. She hugs everyone." Liz clamped Maggie close.

"Careful. The implants."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," Liz said, letting her go. "A big squeeze is not going to hurt them."

Maggie opened her bag and took out a piece of paper. "Here you go. I had it in my jewelry box."

Liz took the paper and tapped the numbered keys until there was an audible click. "And there we are. It worked!" Liz opened the door. It gave her a strange sense of relief to see all the fitted plastic cases containing her handguns and the long guns neatly stowed in their slots. The colorful boxes of ammunition were piled up on the shelf just as she'd left them. Nobody, not even Lucy, had had access to the safe in the eight months since Brenda had locked it and changed the combination. It looked like everything was there, but Liz took a quick inventory, touching each item. She could trust herself now to handle these things, and others did too. She was a normal person again, no longer a suicide risk who needed surveillance.

"Happy now?" Maggie asked.

"Yes, I'm glad to have my guns back."

Maggie shook her head. "I don't get it, but it's your thing, not mine."

From a nearby shelf, Liz took a roll of blue masking tape and taped the paper that Maggie had brought to the safe door.

"What's the point of the safe if you have the combination taped to the front?"

"Well, I'm not going to leave it there. I'll memorize it after you leave. Then I'll put it in a safe place." She locked the safe again. "Have you had breakfast?"

"No, I didn't have class today, so I slept in. I'd barely had my first cup of coffee when Brenda messaged me, but knowing you, I figured I'd better get over here ASAP! I know how impatient you can be when you

want something.” After fifty years, Maggie probably knew her better than anyone.

“Come on upstairs and I’ll make you some breakfast,” said Liz. She moved a box that wasn’t too heavy away with her foot so they could pass.

“I can make you breakfast,” said Maggie when they were in the kitchen. “I bet you don’t get that often.” Everyone knew Lucy wasn’t much of a cook.

“When you’re in my house, *I* make the breakfast.” At first, Maggie grinned at Liz’s tough guy imitation, but then her eyes misted.

“It used to be my house too.”

Liz scooped her up, more gently this time. “Oh, Maggie. Things change. Come on. I’ll make you some blueberry pancakes.”

Liz filled two pods with coffee. “Don’t be a stranger, Maggie. Sit down and make yourself comfortable,” said Liz, getting cream for the coffee out of the refrigerator while the coffee brewed.

“I still feel like I should be making you breakfast.”

“Why? You did me a favor. Just relax. I don’t get to make blueberry pancakes very often. Lucy loves them but says they make her fat. The kids don’t come up much, now that they’re growing up and in every sport and after-school activity.”

“I know, it’s the same with the girls,” said Maggie wistfully. “Like you say, things change.”

Liz gazed into the refrigerator. “Luckily, I do have fresh blueberries. If I’d known you were coming, I would have picked up some buttermilk.”

“You can make some with milk and white vinegar.”

“I know, but it’s not the same.”

“Your pancake recipe is the best,” said Maggie as Liz brought her coffee to the table. “Katrina and Nicki love them.”

Liz smiled at the thought that Maggie still made her blueberry pancakes for her grandchildren. “I know Sam likes them too,” said Liz.

Maggie’s expression changed and she looked away.

“What’s the matter?” asked Liz.

“Oh, nothing.” Maggie waved dismissively.

“Don’t bullshit me, Maggie. We’ve known each other too long for



that.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” said Liz with a shrug and went to get her coffee. “If you change your mind, I’m here to listen.”

“Why would I want to talk about my current partner with my ex?”

“Because I’ve known both of you for decades, so my perspective might be helpful.”

Maggie made a face. “You were jealous when I got together with Sam.”

“Yes, but not for the reason you think. I never thought Sam would side with you against me. I mean she knew how you fucked that kid actor to get back at me.” Liz was instantly sorry she’d said that and busied herself with preparing her coffee. “I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“You’re still angry, and so am I. It was on the tip of my tongue to say you kissed Lucy on the boat. And now I brought it up anyway.” She sighed deeply. “Why can’t we just put this behind us?”

“Because it happened, and nothing we can do can change it.”

“You know I really loved you.”

“And I really loved you too,” murmured Liz, mostly to herself.

“I still love you, but I can’t be married to you. Can we just be friends? I mean, real friends. No pretense?”

“We can try, but we’ve both said and done plenty of stupid things, mean things too,” said Liz. “Let me get breakfast started.”

“You know what? Skip the pancakes. Just make something simple.”

“Fried eggs okay? I can make you an omelet.”

“Never mind. Fried would be fine,” Maggie said quickly. “You like them that way.” Liz got up and put a skillet on the stove and cut a knob of butter into it. “What would Lucy say if she knew you were making me breakfast?”

“She’d probably be happy that we’re getting along better.” Liz put bread into the toaster. “You could join the truce. She misses you.”

“I know. It’s just hard. So much has happened.”

Liz could feel Maggie’s eyes on her back while she tended the eggs. When they were done to her satisfaction, she efficiently scooped them out of the pan and buttered the toast. She brought their plates to the

table. "So, tell me what's going on with Sam."

"Liz, I'm afraid to tell you because you'll interfere."

"If she's not treating you right, you're damn right I'll interfere."

Maggie looked up from her plate. "See? That's what I mean. You always think it's your job to fix things."

"Well, it is my job. That's what I do. I *fix* things."

"Why can't you just listen?...without judgment if that's even possible with you?"

Liz pursed her lips. "Of course, it is. As a doctor, I listen to a lot of stuff without judgment. You'd be surprised."

"Not at all. I know you're very good at pretending you don't have emotional reactions, but I know better."

"Okay, you're right," said Liz to stop the conversation about her. She wanted to know about Sam. "When is Sam coming home?"

Maggie put down her fork. "Maybe she's not."

"What?"

"She loves Chicago and wants to move there."

"Did she ask you to come along?" asked Liz, as casually as she could.

"She did, more out of loyalty, I think, than she really wants me there. She's with her architecture friends. They're mostly a younger crowd."

"You're assuming that."

"Yes, but you know my instincts are usually good. Like I knew your proposal was mostly a need to prove you'd stand by me despite the cancer diagnosis."

Liz wanted to argue that it was more, then decided it was more important to find out about Sam and the move. "Trust your instincts, but you should also have a heart-to-heart with Sam. Maybe she really does want you to move with her."

"I don't need to tell you how complicated it is. I'm seventy. I don't want to make another big move, and most of the reason Sam wants to leave is she wants to get away from Hobbs. The stigma of being responsible for giving the shooter access to the school haunts her. I think people have mostly stopped blaming her, but she feels guilty. She thinks going to Chicago will give her a fresh start."

"The geographical cure never works, but I can see why she might

think so.”

“It worked for you,” Maggie pointed out. “When you were fed up with your job as chief of surgery at Yale, you moved up here.”

Liz didn’t want Maggie to read her feelings, which as a theater director, she excelled at doing, so she focused her attention on her plate. “I’m glad that Sam is making friends with other architects. She always felt on the outs with that community because she was a woman in a man’s profession. I get that. I felt the same. There weren’t a lot of female surgeons when I started. Younger women have a different perspective.”

“Yes, they do. They’re reaping the benefits of the battles we fought.”

“Will Sam sell the house?” asked Liz, focusing on the practical aspects.

“I don’t know. If she does, I’d have to buy it or I’m homeless again. I knew I shouldn’t sell the Scarborough house to Alina.”

“You hold the mortgage, so technically you still own it.”

“Technically.”

Liz had finished eating, so she crossed her cutlery on her plate. “Alina said you can always move back into the apartment in the basement.”

“Now that she’s engaged, she doesn’t really want me there. The kids are getting older and don’t need grandma to babysit them. That basement apartment was always dark and damp and cold in the winter. I put up with it because I needed to get away from you and Hobbs, and the kids needed me.”

“Oh, Maggie, I’m sorry. Don’t take it personally. Sam’s relationships never last.”

“I know, and I didn’t really have any expectations.”

“Honestly, I was surprised you got involved with her so fast.”

Maggie’s hazel eyes scanned Liz’s face. Liz guessed she was deciding whether to trust her. “I needed her then,” Maggie finally said. “She was kind to me after the cancer came back. She told me I was attractive despite my mastectomies and the difference in age. She told me what I needed to hear.”

Liz looked at her ex-wife. She was attractive, not a natural beauty like Lucy, but Maggie knew how to make the most of her assets. She kept her white hair long and wore it in elaborate braids or updos. Her

makeup was always just so. Liz reached for her hand. “You’re beautiful, Maggie. Don’t ever think you’re not.”

Maggie squeezed her hand. “Oh, Liz, you’re prejudiced. Look at me. I have fake breasts. I’m old.”

“I’m old too,” said Liz, “but I’m not done yet.” She got up to brew another cup of coffee. “You could buy the house from Sam. It’s worth a lot because it’s waterfront property, and it was renovated by a prize-winning architect. I’m sure she’d give you a good price.”

“Liz, it’s awful being out there without Sam. I’m used to having close neighbors. There are only a few houses on Jimson Pond, and they’re summer homes. It’s so dark out there at night.”

“Sam’s house is isolated, but so is this place. Were you afraid when I went off to a conference or down to New York to visit my mother?”

“No, I knew you had all those security cameras, and when the place is locked up, it’s like a fortress. But even more, I knew you’d be home soon, and I’d be safe.” Maggie’s voice broke on the last word.

Liz was torn. Should she brush off the emotion to spare herself and Maggie the indignity of showing how moved she was? There was also the possibility that Maggie was just acting. She had the uncanny ability to accurately portray a feeling summoned from nowhere. Liz’s intuition told her this was genuine. Then, Maggie’s colorful scarf slipped. The sudden view of her neck, pale and as delicate as crepe, made her look so vulnerable. Liz swallowed the lump in her throat, and tried to pretend she hadn’t seen Maggie’s tears. Then a hand reached across the table and covered hers.

“Thanks for listening,” said Maggie. “I’m sorry to burden you with my troubles.”

“I’m your friend, Maggie, and I care about you. How long have you been frightened to be alone on Jimson Pond?”

“In the beginning, Sam was always there, so I never noticed how isolated we were. Then she went out to California to make her pitch for the museum project, and I realized there was no one around. Winter’s long nights are the worst. And there are so many noises in the woods—the loons calling each other on the pond, unidentified growls and howls. When it freezes, you can hear the ice groaning as it expands. The acorns

sound like artillery when they hit the metal roof. In a storm, you can hear the water slapping against the dock.”

“But the acorns won’t hurt you, and that house was built on high ground to avoid flooding. Burglars are more likely to hit the empty summer homes than Sam’s place. And the police patrol regularly.”

Maggie’s hazel eyes held Liz’s gaze. “Brenda gave me your gun for protection, the one you used to kill Peter Langdon.”

Liz’s breath caught. Brenda had offered to buy the CZ-10 to take it off her hands, but Liz wouldn’t take the money. That was the last they’d spoken about the gun, Liz’s favorite carry pistol, manufactured in the Czech Republic to old world standards. It was rare and valuable, and it had nearly broken Liz’s heart to give it away.

“Maggie, you’re terrified of guns. Why did you let Brenda give it to you?”

“She was in a bind. Cherie wanted it out of the house.”

“Why? Brenda’s the police chief. She has her service weapons and personal pistol in the hall closet. What’s the difference?”

“You know why. She’s hated guns since that trooper shot her sister. She felt creepy about this gun because you killed Peter Langdon with it. That and Brenda’s fascination with it. So I offered to keep it at Sam’s until you were ready to have it back.”

“Where is it now?”

“On the sideboard in the hall.”

Liz wanted to jump up and run into the hall and get it, but that would send the wrong message. Instead, she picked up the toast crust she’d left and chewed thoughtfully. “Thanks for bringing it home.”

“You’re welcome.” Maggie picked up her fork. “And thanks for listening to my tale of woe.”

Liz nodded and finished her coffee in silence.