

A winter scene featuring a large, weathered log in the foreground, partially submerged in a body of water. The water is dark blue and filled with numerous ice floes of various sizes. In the background, a line of bare trees stands against a pale, overcast sky. The overall atmosphere is cold and desolate.

**ELENA GRAF**

# ICED OUT

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*To the memory of Dr. Joseph D. Connors,  
a true friend*

## Notes

For a character guide to the inhabitants of Hobbs,  
Maine, please visit: [https://www.elenagraf.com/  
hobbs-characters/](https://www.elenagraf.com/hobbs-characters/)

## Chapter 1

The scuffs of high-heeled shoes on the tile floor got Lucy's attention. Across the table, Maggie looked up from the print edition of the *New York Times* and stared. "Liz, are you wearing *heels*?" she asked incredulously. Because Liz towered over other people, she usually wore flats. "And a *skirt*?" In cool weather, Liz's usual office outfit was a blazer, button-down shirt, and dress slacks.

"Ah-yuh," Liz replied. Her attempts at imitating a Maine accent never quite succeeded because there was always the faint trace of New York in her intonations. After casually filling a coffee pod, she emphatically jabbed the button of the coffee maker. "Maggie, don't look like you've never seen me dressed like this before," Liz said with barely disguised annoyance.

Maggie carefully folded over the newspaper. "But only when absolutely *necessary*."

"I'm giving a talk at the school board this morning," Liz said in an even voice, but Lucy could hear her impatience. Liz never liked to explain herself, especially not to Maggie.

"You didn't get dressed up for school board meetings before." Maggie sat back and perched her reading glasses on her head.

"I'm doing a Q&A about the new vaccine recommendations from the CDC," Liz grudgingly explained. "Since Covid, no one trusts government agencies. Now that we have an antivaxxer running Health and Human Services, it's even more confusing. Bobbie Brainworms swore he wouldn't take a position against vaccines. They all lie during confirmation hearings."

"So you dressed up to look as credible as possible," Maggie concluded. "You're channeling your old persona as a world-renowned surgeon and breast cancer guru."

"Bingo," said Liz, stirring cream into her coffee.

Maggie gave Liz a head-to-toe inspection. "Gotta hand it to you, honey. You still know how to rock a power suit."

“Thanks...I guess.” Liz grinned at Lucy. “But I have an ulterior motive. Since Lucy decided she’s a leg woman, I like to give her something to look at.” Liz hiked up her skirt to mid-thigh. With a reedy whistle, Lucy admired Liz’s shapely legs.

Maggie turned in Lucy’s direction. “I used to beg her to dress up, even just a little. Now, you’ve got her wearing skirts because you like her legs. Lucy, what’s your secret?”

Lucy raised her shoulders. “Nothing special. Maybe I don’t reinforce other people’s expectations. That gives Liz the freedom to express herself in any way that feels right to her.”

“Spoken like a true shrink,” Liz said cynically as she brought her coffee to the island. “Sometimes, I enjoy getting a rise out of people, and I know when I dress like this, people pay attention. Look at the two of you staring at me, like I’m an alien from another planet. When I was at Yale New Haven, I used to dress like this every day.”

“You look great, Liz, and thank you for the view.” Lucy blew Liz a kiss, which she pretended to catch. “I totally get it. When I wear my collar, people look at me differently. Do you mind if I come to your talk? I don’t have any meetings until two. I might get questions from my therapy clients or members of the congregation.”

Liz didn’t look up but arched her brow. “Luce, you know you shouldn’t be giving medical advice. What are you supposed to say?”

Lucy mimicked the dry tone of a TV drug commercial: “If you have concerns or questions, ask your doctor.”

“Exactly. Those influencers with their unfounded ideas about medicine are dangerous. You’re better off *not* offering advice because it’s not worth any more than Bobby Brainworms’ or Maggie’s.”

Obviously indignant, Maggie puffed herself up, ready to launch a vigorous defense. Lucy sighed. It was too early in the morning for a quarrel. “At least, I try to stay informed,” declared Maggie. “Why can’t I say I believe in science? Or say that vaccines eradicated many of the dangerous childhood diseases you and I had as children? I spent the entire time I had measles in a dark room because people

believed it could keep kids from going blind. Liz, was there anything to that idea?"

Liz stopped scrolling her phone and looked thoughtful. "Measles causes light sensitivity. Being in a dark room could make a patient more comfortable, but it wouldn't prevent blindness. Measles retinopathy can be a serious complication, but it's uncommon in healthy children, who get enough Vitamin A."

"Maybe I'll come to your talk too," Maggie said. "I always learn something when you talk about medicine. I'm off today."

Liz looked from Maggie to Lucy and back again. Lucy guessed she sensed a conspiracy. She often accused her two wives of "ganging up on her." Liz frowned, then shrugged. "You know where the school board meets."

"In the administration building," said Maggie.

"Not anymore. Since the right wing began focusing on local politics, we need more space. We're in the middle school auditorium now. The school board meetings used to be boring as hell. I'd plan my next woodworking projects while pretending to pay attention. Now, *everything's* an issue: the books in the library, trans girls in sports, and of course, vaccinations."

"Maybe it's a good thing people are taking an interest in their kids' education," said Maggie. "I just wish it weren't so politicized." When Liz pulled out one of the stools from the island and sat down, Maggie pointedly said, "Liz, you could join us."

"Thanks, but you and Lucy look comfy, and I need to leave soon." She went back to scrolling her phone. "Anything interesting going on this morning?"

"They're organizing a nationwide protest of Musk's DOGE cuts," said Maggie, looking across the table to get Lucy's attention. "We're going right?"

"You bet, and this time, I'm wearing my collar. Cutting medical care for the poor is an issue that should concern every Christian."

"The Medicaid expansion was the best thing that happened for

the working poor since food stamps,” said Liz. “If they intend to cut healthcare, I’ll even carry a sign.”

Lucy and Maggie turned in Liz’s direction. Her statement counted as an even bigger change in her behavior than wearing a skirt or spike heels. During the heated fall campaign, she’d refused to attend any rallies for their candidates, insisting that it would reflect badly on Hobbs Family Practice to see the senior doctor standing on the street waving a political sign.

“That doesn’t sound like you, Liz,” said Maggie, folding up the newspaper to signal she was done with it, now that the conversation had become more interesting.

“Well, even I have my limits,” said Liz. “We’re long past the old norms. Firing those scientists and vaccine experts will put people’s lives in danger. I can’t just sit back and watch.”

“I’m glad you realize things have changed.” Maggie cut a generous piece of apple bread, slathered butter on it, and brought it to the island. “Here, you should eat something before you go.”

Liz murmured her thanks and took a bite. “When the markets plummeted after he imposed his stupid tariffs, I’d hoped that the business community would influence his behavior, but the indexes floated back up like nothing ever happened.” Of course, Liz would use the stock market as a barometer of political sentiment. Although she’d reluctantly turned over management of their portfolios to Olivia Enright, a former hedge fund manager, she watched their positions like a hawk. “When all the billionaires began bending the knee, and the legacy media settled those absurd lawsuits, it was obvious he owns them. The conservative Supreme Court justices are in his pocket. No one is coming to save us, but us.”

“Fortunately, there are more of us than there are of them,” Maggie said.

“But they have more guns,” Liz said gravely.

“Don’t let that be an excuse for you to buy more,” Maggie warned. “You already have an arsenal.”

“They’re for training,” Liz replied and took a big bite of apple bread.

Maggie looked across the table for support, but Lucy knew better than to get involved in this conversation. After the school shooting, Tom Simmons had shocked her into action by alerting her to Liz’s suicidal ideation. Liz had her guns back now, and Lucy had to trust her to make good decisions.

“Don’t worry,” Liz replied with a shrug. “If I got more, I’d need another gun safe, which would be expensive, and we don’t have the room.”

Maggie glared at her and shook her head with a sigh.

The calm that had existed before Liz’s pervasive energy had disturbed it returned. Lucy went back to reading her email. Maggie picked up the newspaper and continued to browse.

“Holy fucking shit!” Liz’s sudden outburst made Lucy jump.

“What is it now?” she asked as calmly as her shaken nerves would allow. With this administration, it could be anything—more government workers fired, more agencies shut down, more hacks into people’s sensitive information.

Liz’s eyes were glued to the screen. “Brenda, are you insane! *What the fuck* were you thinking?”

“Stop screaming profanity and tell us what’s going on,” Maggie prodded anxiously.

“Listen to this from the Portland paper: ‘Police Chief Brenda Harrison said the department has signed a 287c agreement with the Department of Homeland Security. She explained that it would expand the toolkit of Hobbs officers. She said that the training would help keep the town safer because they wouldn’t have to wait for ICE agents to come up from Boston.’”

“That sounds reasonable,” Maggie said.

“It is reasonable,” Liz agreed, “but it goes on to be critical of the decision and suggests the Hobbs PD wants to align itself with ICE.”

“Is that supposed to be a news story or an opinion piece?” asked

Maggie. Long ago, she'd been the editor of their college newspaper and often lamented the demise of objective journalism.

"Nowadays, who can tell?" Liz said. "Forget the spin, and look at the optics. We all think ICE is over the top. Now, our police chief has aligned herself with them. Not a good look for her or the Hobbs PD."

"Liz is right," Lucy said. "It doesn't look good, but before we jump to conclusions, you should talk to Brenda." The vibration of the phone in Lucy's hands startled her. The photo of an attractive, dark-complected woman appeared on the screen along with the name Cherie Harrison. "That didn't take long," said Lucy, swiping open the call. "Good morning, Cherie."

"It's in the paper already," Cherie said, clearly agitated. "Brenda says she has no idea how the press got hold of the story, but she tried to answer their questions as best she could."

"Cherie, mind if I put you on speaker?" asked Lucy. "Liz is here, and I'm sure she'd like to listen in."

There was a moment of hesitation. "Sure, put Liz on. I'd like to hear her take."

Liz sat down in the breakfast nook beside Lucy. "Cherie, tell Brenda not to make *any* more statements to the press."

"I think she figured that out," Cherie said with a sigh. "She kept trying to explain herself. She thought the facts would speak for themselves. But you know how those reporters are."

"She might have a perfectly fine explanation for getting involved with ICE," Liz continued, "but reporters won't see it that way. They just want a story. Trust me, I have experience after that actress didn't follow my medical advice and then sued *me* for malpractice."

"Brenda's pretty upset," Cherie said, adjusting the pitch of her voice to a calmer level. "Liz, please talk to her. She really needs advice, and she won't listen to me."

"I'll swing by the station after my talk at the school board," offered Liz.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Lucy asked Cherie. “I wasn’t going to come in until my afternoon meeting, but I can if you need me.”

“Thanks, Lucy. I’d love your advice, but I think the only one Brenda will listen to is Liz.”

“Why don’t you and Brenda come over for dinner tonight?” Maggie suddenly suggested, which drew a sharp look from Lucy. No one was supposed to know that Maggie was not just living next to them; she was living *with* them.

“You’re over there early, Maggie,” said the voice on the phone with more than a hint of suspicious curiosity.

Maggie gracefully shifted into actress mode. “I came over to make breakfast because Liz has that early meeting. I figured she needed fortification,” she said, fabricating a relatively plausible explanation. “We all know how much Lucy hates to cook.”

“I do not!” Lucy protested. “I’m just not very good at it.” At the kitchen island, Liz snickered.

Maggie waved to Lucy to indicate she should play along. “Cherie, I’m making a big pot of stew, so there’s plenty. After dinner, the kids can watch a movie in Liz’s media room. You know how much they love watching their Disney favorites on that big screen. That will give the adults the privacy to strategize how to deal with this situation.”

“Liz, is this okay with you?” Cherie asked tentatively.

“Absolutely fine,” Liz replied. “We don’t see you enough outside of work. Right, Lucy?”

Lucy was staring at Maggie in a futile attempt to make her understand how her presence at that early hour would raise questions. Maggie conspicuously ignored her. Frustrated, Lucy finally gave up. “Yes, fine,” she replied in a flat tone.

“Are you sure it’s not too much with the kids, Lucy?” Cherie asked. “I can ask Aunt Simone to watch them tonight. Those kids love time with their auntie.”

“It’s up to you, Cherie,” said Liz, “but we’d be happy to have the kids, too.”

There was a long moment of hesitation before Cherie said, “Honestly, I’m really stressed, and *I* wouldn’t mind a break. We need to speak honestly. Keith, especially, gets so anxious when there’s any conflict.”

“I’m going to the school board meeting to hear what Liz has to say about vaccinations,” Lucy said. “Then I’ll come to the office. We can talk more.”

“Thanks, Lucy. Meanwhile, I’ll let Brenda know we’re invited for dinner. What can we bring?”

“Nothing,” said Maggie. “We have everything we need. Come at six.”

After Cherie ended the call, Liz got up. “Sorry, ladies, but I need to go. If you decide to come to the meeting, I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll be there,” Maggie promised.

“Me too,” Lucy called to Liz’s back. The garage door opened, but Lucy waited until she heard it close to address the issue. She focused on Maggie’s hazel eyes, moody now because she knew she was guilty.

“Lucy, I know what you’re going to say,” she said, showing her palms. “I’m sorry, but I forget that I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Maggie, you *are* supposed to be here,” said Lucy with a sigh of impatience. “We just need to be careful who knows about our life together.”

“Brenda is Liz’s best friend, now that Sam is gone,” protested Maggie petulantly. “How can she keep this from her?”

“Brenda is a sweetheart, but she’s very conventional, and so is Cherie. Finding out about us could wreck our relationship with them. Besides, every new person who learns the truth could be the one who blows our cover.”

“I still think it’s no one’s business what we do in bed. Besides, I live right next door, practically in the same house. Why shouldn’t I

be here? I was here all the time, making dinner or breakfast, before we all got involved. No one knew about it, and no one cared. We're just being paranoid, which makes us look guilty and causes more suspicion."

"I'm sure they already suspect," Lucy reluctantly admitted. "But we don't need to confirm anything. And you're right. It's no one's business what we do in bed."

Maggie shook her head and occupied herself with clearing the breakfast dishes. Lucy realized she felt hurt by the criticism. After all, she'd meant no harm. She wanted to help, and extending an invitation to Cherie was generous. "Maggie, I'm sorry," Lucy murmured.

"No, you're right, Lucy...as always. I need to be more careful, or you'll lose your job." Lucy smiled because Maggie was taking responsibility instead of becoming defensive. She might be seventy-one, but she was still making progress.

"Thanks for understanding."

Maggie nodded and began rinsing the dishes. Lucy glanced at the clock over the sink. If she intended to show up at the school board meeting, she needed to get dressed, and she should probably wear her collar.

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When Lucy gave her admin one of those furtive therapist's assessments, a palpable ache formed in her chest. Jodi looked completely exhausted, understandable because the young woman had two preschoolers at home. Fortunately, her mother looked after them during the workday. Both Jodi and her husband needed to work to pay the mortgage, but day care was so expensive. And people wondered why young people didn't have more kids. How could they afford them?

Simone Ballou, Cherie's aunt, had suggested adding another day to the after-school program that Denise Chantal, their transgender music director, had started before returning to her singing career.

Working mothers loved it, especially Jodi, who could use the extra hours of pay and the convenience. Her mother dropped off the kids after school, and Jodi could just walk downstairs after work to bring them home.

Jodi finally turned and noticed Lucy standing there. “Good morning, Lucy. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“These ballet flats are nearly soundless. Taking lessons from Mother Susan on how to approach with stealth.” Lucy raised an auburn brow.

“Mother Susan has perfected that trick.” Jodi emphatically pointed to the door of Lucy’s office. “By the way, she’s waiting for you.” The message that Susan wanted to see her had pinged into Lucy’s phone just as she was leaving the house. The idea of starting the day with Susan brought on a long sigh, but meeting with clergy was part of her duties as a rector.

Lucy had no good reason to avoid Susan. Although her tenure as an assistant priest at St. Margaret’s had gotten off to a rough start, Susan had turned herself around. Bobbie, the always smiling nurse practitioner in Liz’s family practice, had a steadying influence on her. To Lucy’s knowledge, Susan had been faithfully attending her AA meetings, and now she led the one at St. Margaret’s. There was a time when Susan was too ashamed to even show her face there, which was partly Lucy’s fault. She’d been so unwelcoming when her former lover had first returned to Hobbs.

Lucy took a deep breath and summoned her trademark smile before entering her office. “Good morning, Susan!” she said warmly. Susan’s eyes lit up, but fortunately, the cloying lovesick expression was absent. Maybe her relationship with Bobbie had finally cured her of her obsession with Lucy.

Susan always rose when her “superior” came into the room, one of those annoying convent customs she’d probably never lose. Lucy hung her coat on the vintage coat stand near the door. “Susan, how nice to see you on a school day,” said Lucy, a forgivable lie. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this morning?”

“Something significant happened over the weekend. I thought you’d want to know as soon as possible...as my rector...and my *friend*.”

As a therapist, Lucy’s eyes never missed a detail. They settled on the large, glittering stone on Susan’s hand. “You’re engaged?” Lucy struggled for the appropriate emotion. She wanted to show that she was happy for Susan, but no matter how much she tried to force the feeling, she just couldn’t. But why wasn’t she overjoyed? This meant the end of Susan’s crazy infatuation after years of trying to gently ease her away.

Susan held up her hand. “Last night. Bobbie asked me out to La Scala for a date night. Over an obscenely rich ‘death by chocolate,’ which we were virtuously sharing, she produced this.”

Lucy managed to remember that all women wanted their engagement rings admired by their friends. “Let me see,” she said, reaching out.

Blushing, Susan approached. “It’s nothing compared to that huge diamond Liz gave you.”

“It’s an antique. After Liz’s grandfather became rich, he bought it for her grandmother in the 1950s. Liz said they don’t find natural diamonds like it anymore.” Lucy took Susan’s hand and inspected the ring. “It’s beautiful. I love the little diamonds around the big stone. I bet it cost Bobbie a fortune.”

Susan shrugged and withdrew her hand. “She inherited all that money from Joyce. She might as well spend it.” Lucy heard an echo of what Bobbie had probably said when being questioned about the cost. Susan had grown up poor. The vow of chastity she’d taken in the convent had only reinforced her frugal inclinations. “Most of the young women I work with think giving a diamond engagement ring is a silly idea,” Susan said. “They talk about blood diamonds and colonial exploitation.”

“Well, they’re right. In some countries, diamond miners are exploited, but you can buy what they call ‘ethical diamonds.’”

"I'm sure that's what Bobbie did," Susan said with obvious pride in her voice. "She cares about such things more than you know."

Lucy brushed off the implied criticism and gestured to the visitor's chair. "Thanks for letting me know. You should also tell Tom and Reshma."

"Tom knows. He's my spiritual advisor, so I told him first."

"Good. What did he say?"

"He said he's so happy for me. He told me how much his life has changed for the better since he'd married Jeff."

"And you're sure about this marriage?" asked Lucy, frowning a little. She hated to sound skeptical, but it was easier to revert to her role as a couples' counselor than to sort out her real feelings about this development.

"Yes, I think so," Susan said, finally sitting down. "I've known Bobbie since I returned to Hobbs. We were friends for more than a year before we got involved. And at our age, we can't waste any time. Who knows what tomorrow may bring?" Lucy could bet that was another direct quote from Bobbie. "I feel like I should give Bobbie something, but on a teacher's salary, I can't afford anything expensive. Did you give Liz something when she proposed?"

Lucy smiled at the memory of Liz in the restaurant after the concert in the park. She'd waited until dinner was over before popping the question. Blushing and speechless, she pushed the velvet covered box across the table. In the end, Lucy had to do the asking. "No, and I think she would have been uncomfortable. Usually the person who proposes gives the ring. Don't worry. You'll have your chance to give her a ring...at the wedding."

Susan exhaled a long sigh and finally sat back in her chair. "That's what I thought. Bobbie looked so relieved when I said yes."

"You're not easy to figure out, Susan. You could have just as easily said no."

Susan made a sad face. "That would have crushed her."

“That’s not why you agreed to marry her? Because you didn’t want to disappoint her?” Lucy said in her neutral counseling voice.

“No, no! I want our relationship to be honorable. Getting married means we can finally live together openly.”

“So that’s your reason?”

“No, Lucy, it’s *not*. I love Bobbie.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted to hear. So, obviously, you’ll be moving out of the rectory.”

“Yes, maybe Reshma could move into the rector’s quarters. That curate’s studio is so cramped. She loves to cook and you can barely put down a spoon on that little countertop.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Lucy vaguely. “I’ve also been thinking about your request to come on as a full-time priest. Are you sure you want to quit your teaching job?”

“Bobbie says I won’t need to work anymore, but she intends to keep working, so I think I should too. Of course, I want to follow my vocation as a priest.” She lowered her eyes, another maddening convent custom. “But if you don’t want me...”

Lucy fought the temptation to roll her eyes at the obvious passive aggression. “It’s not that I don’t want you, Susan. It’s just that St. Margaret’s doesn’t need four full-time priests, especially when some churches have none. Have you considered applying for openings in other parishes?”

“But you and Tom are always off traveling, and Reshma is too young and inexperienced to handle it on her own.”

“You’re right about that, and she appreciates your mentoring. But I also know you really like teaching. It was your first vocation.”

“If I teach another three years, I’ll get a nice, little pension.”

“That’s something to consider. As you said, who knows what tomorrow may bring?”

Susan eyed Lucy suspiciously. “You don’t want me as a full-time priest.”

Lucy stifled a sigh of exasperation. “That’s not what I said,

Susan, but it will be hard to get approval from the vestry for the additional salary. We need the money for the work on the church. It's an old building and eats up our budget. It's not personal. You're an excellent priest. We just can't afford it."

Susan didn't look convinced, but she murmured, "I understand."

"I hope you do." Lucy glanced at her phone. "Now, I'm sorry but I have to go. Liz is giving a talk about vaccination policy at the school board meeting."

"And I must leave too. I asked for personal leave this morning to talk to you. I wanted to tell you in person, of course. I owe you that."

Lucy gave Susan a firm look. "You don't owe me anything, Susan. We've both paid our debts to one another. But I appreciate you coming to tell me in person." As an afterthought, Lucy added, "Congratulations."

Susan got up, but she didn't leave. Lucy realized she expected more—some gesture of affection. Lucy went around the desk and gave her a quick hug. "Please pass along my congratulations to Bobbie too."

"I will," said Susan, finally looking satisfied.

After she left, Lucy put on her coat. She needed to hurry, or she'd be late for Liz's talk. On the way out of her office, she ran smack into Cherie Harrison. No one was hurt in the collision, and they fell into one another's arms, laughing. "I was just coming to see you," said Cherie, "but it looks like you're on the way out the door."

"I'm heading to the school board building for the meeting," Lucy explained. "I want to hear what Liz has to say...in case I get vaccination questions."

"You shouldn't be giving medical advice," Cherie said, echoing Liz's earlier warning.

"I know. I should tell people to ask their doctor."

Cherie laughed. "I see Liz has you well trained."

"That she does. She would take over everything if I let her." Liz had suggested folding Hobbs Family Counseling under the LLC

she'd formed for her medical practice, but Lucy had resisted the idea. It was enough to have merged most of her other assets with those of her wives. Lucy wasn't sure why, but she wanted to keep this small part of her world independent. Maybe it was because Liz had such little respect for psychotherapy and could be so bossy. Lucy also didn't want to hear her advice on how to run her practice, even though it would likely be practical and sound.

It suddenly occurred to Lucy that she should encourage Cherie, who had two school-age children, to attend the school board meeting. "You should be going to the school board meeting, not me."

Cherie smiled. "Oh, I already heard Liz's speech. She used me as her practice audience because I have kids."

A little flash of jealousy surprised Lucy. Before Maggie had moved in with them, Liz would test all her presentations on Lucy. As her sermons came together, Lucy read the drafts to Liz. With Maggie there, they seldom exchanged their half-baked concepts, probably because it felt like holding a third-party hostage. Now, Lucy realized how much she missed being able to speak her thoughts aloud without deliberation, asking for permission, or wondering if it would annoy someone.

Lucy became aware of Cherie's striking blue-green eyes studying her curiously. Yes, it was obvious Lucy had become lost in her own thoughts. She smiled an apology. Cherie gracefully said, "It was so nice of Maggie to invite us for dinner tonight. Does she make breakfast for you often?"

Every muscle in Lucy's body tensed. Did Cherie suspect what was *really* going on at their house? Cherie peered deeply into Lucy's eyes, but there was no suspicion, merely curiosity.

"That kitchen in the garage apartment is so tiny," Lucy said quickly. "It must be terribly confining for a trained chef to even fry an egg on that little stove. Plus, our kitchen used to be Maggie's. She's comfortable there."

"I'm just glad to hear you're all getting along so well. There was

a time Liz and Maggie couldn't even be in the same room together, never mind cook in the same kitchen."

"I remember it well," Lucy admitted with a sigh. "But I don't mind having someone make breakfast for me or bake tasty treats. You know I'm helpless when it comes to cooking."

Cherie studied her coolly. "You're not helpless, Lucy. You can cook when you want to."

"But why bother stressing? Liz likes to cook, and Maggie is professionally trained. It seems to make them happy, so why not?"

"Lucy, you've got everyone wrapped around your little finger, don't you?" Cherie clucked her tongue and made a low chuckle of disapproval that had a decidedly Southern drawl to it. Unlike her racial identity, Cherie's place of origin was never in doubt. Her Louisiana accent was unmistakable. "All you need to do is smile that big, beautiful smile, and everyone wants to take care of you."

Lucy mimed horror. "Is it that obvious?"

"No, of course not. You're just applying your knowledge of people's personalities to manage their behavior. Half the time people probably don't even realize you're doing it, and, as far as I know, you don't do any harm. Using feminine wiles on your partner is something I've been known to do myself!"

"Never try to trick another therapist," Lucy said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Nope, we can spot a manipulation a mile away." Cherie glanced at her watch. "Lucy, you'd better get going if you don't want to be late. You know your spouse is a stickler for punctuality."

"Even though she's late all the time!"

"She's a doctor. She has an excuse."

"I have one too. I'm a priest."

Cherie's eyes were merry. "Yes, you are, and you have an answer for everything."

Lucy winked. "That's my job." But she could see the wall clock over Cherie's shoulder and knew she needed to get moving or she'd miss Liz's talk.

Driving to the school, Lucy reflected on the dreariness of early spring in Maine. The ground was thawing. The water, trapped all winter, bubbled up in the roadways, spitting through the asphalt like millions of tiny goblins. The plow piles along the road were dirty and rounded from melting in the growing sunshine. Maine was the most beautiful place Lucy had ever lived, but there was nothing endearing about mud season.

Despite the date on the calendar, it was brisk that morning. Lucy wished she'd remembered her gloves. The parking lot was packed, requiring her to walk some distance to the school entrance.

Liz and Maggie were sitting near the front. Being late looked bad for the rector of Hobbs' Episcopal Church, so Lucy summoned the confidence to stride down the center aisle like she owned the place. From her opera career, she'd learned that, when things went wrong, acting like everything was perfectly normal was the best strategy.

Liz picked up her coat, placed on the neighboring chair to save Lucy a seat. After Lucy sat down, a long-fingered hand surreptitiously reached over to take hers—Liz's way of making amends for the dirty look she'd given her wife when she'd arrived. Liz's warm hands were always welcome, but especially when they walked on the beach on chilly mornings, and she took one of Lucy's hands into the pocket of her sweatshirt with hers. On cold winter nights Liz was like Lucy's private furnace. Maybe Cherie was right and Lucy did use people. She was a compulsive hugger. Often, she gave hugs just to get them back.

*Stop, she told herself. There's nothing wrong with needing human affection. That's why God gave us arms!*

The booming voice of the school board chairman interrupted Lucy's examination of conscience. "And now, we're going to hear from Dr. Stolz, who, as you all know, is the senior doctor at Hobbs Family Practice and the medical advisor to the school board."

Liz took her place at the podium on the stage. "Good morning. The board asked me to talk about vaccines. I know many people are

confused. You hear opinions from your friends or read things online. What should you believe?” Lucy had heard Liz speak at medical conferences in a very different tone. Then, she was all business, efficiently citing facts and figures, to prove her points. With this audience, she’d adopted a relaxed, almost folksy tone. One would never know that she was once chief of surgery at Yale New Haven and one of the world’s leading authorities on breast cancer. To the townspeople of Hobbs, she was just “Dr. Liz.”

*We all manipulate our listeners to encourage them to listen,* Lucy thought, which she knew from her training for the ministry and psychotherapy. *I’m still defending myself against Cherie’s observations,* she finally admitted.

She listened to Liz gave a quick summary of her opinions about vaccination. They’re safe. They have centuries of experience behind them. (She told a little anecdote of how George Washington gained military advantage by vaccinating his troops against smallpox.) Lucy watched the guys in the audience suddenly lean forward and pay more attention. Men loved history, especially military history. Liz now had them hooked.

She didn’t short-sell the risks of vaccines, but she spoke in a way that seemed to put people at ease. Then she asked for questions. Dozens of hands shot up. Lucy glanced at Maggie’s face and saw she was as proud as she was.

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“Hard day?” Maggie said, turning away from the stove to give Lucy a kiss.

Lucy heaved out a sigh. “You don’t know the half of it!”

“It must have been bad. You’re still wearing your collar.”

Lucy’s hand flew to her throat. The inflexible band of white linen was still pinned to her blouse. Usually, Lucy took it off as soon as she got into her car to drive home. Today, she’d been too distracted by the jumble of memories from a day when nothing seemed to go right.

With everyone being so jumpy since the president had been inaugurated, the emergency counseling sessions were understandable, but even her staff was needy. Her young curate, Reshma, had been brought as a refugee from Sudan as a child. She was a naturalized citizen, but she worried for her friends, Teresa and her daughter, Grace. They had arrived more recently, victims of yet another Sudanese civil war. Teresa and Grace were terrified that they'd be swept up in an ICE raid, even though they had all their papers and were "legal."

In the last election, Reshma had campaigned for the Democratic candidates, but now she was afraid to join any political event. "It's bad enough that I stick out in lily-white Maine, I don't want to endanger myself or the church by standing on the street with a sign." Lucy's heart ached watching her protégée wrestle between her impulse to fight back against what she perceived as injustice and her instincts for self-preservation.

Shaking her head, Lucy finally reached up to unpin her collar.

"I'd help you," said Maggie, watching her struggle with the pin in the back, "but I'm afraid I'd get grease on it. Liz works so hard to press your linen collars just right." She sighed. "When I lived here, she always let Ellie do all the ironing. I never saw her iron anything since we were in college."

"I'm almost sorry I told her how well Erika used to iron my collars for me. Liz took it on to prove she could do it just as well," Lucy said, but it was strangely affecting to watch an ex-surgeon take on this humble duty.

Maggie nodded sadly. "I heard her promise Erika she'd take care of you if anything happened to her. You know how Liz is. She'd rather die than break her word." Maggie's tone rang with the certainty that came from knowing someone for half a century.

Lucy was too raw from the stressful day to talk about Erika. It was true what she said in grief counseling. The pain never goes away completely. It simply becomes less intense. "Where is Liz? Don't tell me she's late at the office again."

“She’s outside bringing in firewood.” Maggie turned and landed a quick peck on Lucy’s cheek. “Go on, honey. Get out of your work clothes. I’ll have snacks ready by the time you come down. Brenda and Cherie should be here soon.”

Gazing into the living room before ascending the stairs, Lucy reflected on how much she appreciated the quiet domesticity of their lives together. The scent of a wood fire smelled like home. Its mellow, penetrating warmth soothed her. When she lived in the old building that served as rectory and parish house, it was always cold. In that drafty place, the cast iron radiators could never crank out enough heat. They clanged loudly when the steam came up, but she loved warming her nightgown on the hoops before going to bed.

Her nostalgic memories of the rectory also brought back the loneliness she’d felt before Liz and Maggie had ‘adopted’ her. Coming home to delicious smells from the kitchen was a blessing. When Lucy was a brand-new rector and lived alone, she was too busy to cook for herself. Her meals were usually salads topped with a protein like chickpeas or a hardboiled egg. The minimalist fare had helped her maintain her trim figure. Once she’d moved in with Erika, who was an excellent cook, she’d had to watch her weight for the first time. Now, with Liz and Maggie, both gourmet cooks, it was even more of a struggle. Fortunately, as rector of a large church, Lucy was always running around so much, she burned off calories just doing her job.

She quickly changed into a cozy sweater and lounge pants. Feeling the need for an extra dose of comfort, she put on her sherpa-lined clogs. Dinner with Brenda and Cherie would be informal. She could bet that Liz would be in her jeans and a hoodie, her usual cool-weather, off-duty outfit. Maggie was always dressed—hair perfect, a full complement of makeup, even on her days off from teaching.

They’d been best friends for over a year before Lucy had seen Maggie without makeup. She’d finally figured out that the polished

glamor was an inextricable part of Maggie's persona as an actress, and she was always "on." Although Lucy had also spent a good part of her life on the opera stage and in the public eye as a priest, she firmly believed in "downtime" when she could show her naked face and be herself.

Someone came up the stairs. Lucy instantly knew it was Liz. Her step and movements were distinctive. Air molecules made way for her. "Hey, Luce. Glad you're home. Brenda and Cherie just arrived." Liz caught her in a sturdy hug that almost lifted her off the ground. Lucy gratefully molded herself to Liz's warm body. The heat in the bedroom was turned down as usual. "How was your day?" asked Liz, nuzzling her ear.

"Busy as hell."

Lucy could feel the low chuckle rise in Liz's throat. "That's no way for a priest to talk!"

"Too bad. As you well know, this priest throws the F-bomb too."

"Come downstairs, and I'll pour you a glass of wine. I'm sure you deserve one." Liz bent to offer a sweet kiss, lingering just long enough to be provocative, then let her go. "Later, you sexy thing. I promise." After Liz released her, Lucy immediately felt chilled and wanted her back. She heard Liz's rapid footsteps on the stairs but resisted the urgency because she'd been rushing all day.

Chivalrously, Brenda rose when Lucy came into the room. Like Liz, she'd absorbed the "gentlemanly manners" their parents had tried to teach their brothers. "How's my favorite priest?" Brenda asked, kissing her on each cheek and giving her a tight squeeze. Cherie, who knew Lucy could never get enough hugs, opened her arms and embraced her warmly.

"Just some snacks to start us off," said Maggie, trying to herd them all back to their seats. "The stew can sit for a while."

"Thanks for inviting us on such short notice," said Cherie, giving Maggie a half hug.

Liz poured herself a glass of Irish whiskey. "I can't have my

friend making a PR nightmare for herself without offering some unsolicited advice.”

“I’m glad for any advice. I was totally shocked at how fast this thing blew up. I don’t even know how the press found out I signed the 287c agreement. We didn’t tell anyone, not even the town manager or the select board. We sign up for lots of trainings no one ever knows about.”

Liz took a long, reflective sip of whiskey. “Unfortunately, the press has a way of discovering anything that will get eyeballs. Reporters can search public records for a good lead. And you conveniently supplied it.”

“Liz, I swear to you, when my administrative chief brought this training opportunity to me, I thought it was a great idea. Right now, if we apprehend someone here illegally, and they have a criminal record, we need to wait for ICE to come up from Boston. That can take two hours. More, if they’re busy. Meanwhile, I’ve got a patrol officer waiting on the side of the road with a potentially dangerous perp. The officer is out of commission until ICE shows up. It’s a real public safety issue.”

“So what will this ICE training do for you?” Maggie asked, offering a tray of beautifully presented canapés. Lucy, who hadn’t eaten much for lunch, hungrily collected a few.

“Once my officers are trained,” Brenda explained, “they can deliver the suspect to a federally approved facility, where they will be held until ICE can pick them up.”

Munching on a piece of cheese, Liz looked thoughtful. “Sounds perfectly reasonable to me.”

“I thought so too, and still think so,” said Brenda, accepting some olive tapenade bruschetta from Maggie. “That’s why we signed up. The Feds take our problem off our hands so we can get back to keeping Hobbs safe.”

Lucy turned to Brenda’s wife. “Cherie, what do you think?”

“I’ll always support Brenda because I love her. I didn’t even know about it until all the ruckus started.”

Brenda turned to Cherie. “Honey, I never thought of telling you because I never thought it would cause all this commotion.”

Liz idly inspected her fingers like a man would, fingers curled into her palm. “Brenda, what planet do you live on?”

“Liz!” Maggie hissed. “Brenda is your *friend*.”

“I know. As her friend, I need to be honest with her. This is by far the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen her do.” Liz peered at Brenda. That imperious stare, once used to intimidate junior doctors, made everyone in the room sit up and pay attention. Brenda, occupying the leather club chair by the wood stove, squirmed. “Brenda,” said Liz slowly, “do you watch the news?”

“Cherie and I stopped watching it since the former guy got in again.”

“We all have,” Liz said, finally releasing Brenda’s gaze. “We hope by not watching TV, we can pretend all these awful things aren’t happening, but they are. ICE is acting lawlessly and with impunity. Stephen Miller has set a goal of deporting three thousand undocumented people *a day*. They say they’re only after violent criminals, but they’re picking up grandmothers who have lived here for decades. Don’t you see that associating with them makes you look *bad*?”

Brenda blinked. “As chief of police, I’m obligated to cooperate with other law enforcement agencies. Doesn’t matter if it’s other states or the Feds.”

“I understand. But that assumes the agencies are acting within the law. Come on, Brenda. You see how bad this looks.”

Brenda sat back in her chair as if pushed back by Liz’s steady gaze. “I know what people are saying, but this is good training.”

Lucy nudged Liz’s thigh, hoping she’d get the message and back off. It was clear that Brenda thought she hadn’t done anything wrong. “Brenda, I know you always try to do the right thing,” Lucy said gently. “This isn’t as clear to other people as it seems to you.”

“I’m getting that now,” Brenda said, her blond brows dipping

towards the base of her nose. She turned to Cherie, who reached for her hand. "So what should I do?"

"For one thing, stop talking to the press," Liz said emphatically.

"But I want them to understand!"

"They won't understand. Your reasons don't matter to them. All they know is people hate ICE, and this story will get lots of clicks."

Brenda looked reflective as the information penetrated her mind. Lucy realized Brenda had never even considered how this would look to the public.

Maggie leaned forward. "I put a lot of effort into this dinner, and I want everyone to enjoy it. Can we pause this conversation until after we eat?"

Cherie looked like a huge burden had been lifted from her shoulders. "Thanks, Maggie. That's a good idea. What can I do to help?"

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When Lucy came to bed, she found Liz with her hands clasped behind her head, staring at the ceiling. Lucy slipped into bed beside her. "What are you thinking, gorgeous?"

"That Brenda is between a rock and hard place." Liz raised her arm so Lucy could nestle against her breast.

After the hard day and the evening's tough conversation, Lucy would rather cuddle than analyze a dicey political situation, but she'd asked what Liz had on her mind. "How so?"

When Liz sighed, her breath smelled sweet and minty from toothpaste. "In a leadership position in a male dominated profession like law enforcement, you can't switch positions just because someone objects. If you roll over that easily, you risk looking weak or admitting that you made a bad decision. Sometimes, you find yourself backed into a corner with no escape."

"You think that's how Brenda feels?" Lucy asked, genuinely curious.

"I can't say how Brenda feels, but that's how I felt many times when I was chief of surgery. A situation changes and you're stuck

with the decision you made under other circumstances. Even worse, one of your staff has done something stupid, and you're trapped between supporting them or courting a lawsuit. It's easy to say, 'just do the right thing,' but what's right isn't always obvious or something you can do."

Lucy thought back to some of the hard decisions she'd had to make as rector of St. Margaret's, like when she more or less forced the vestry to hire a trans woman. Denise Chantal was clearly the most qualified candidate, so it was the right thing to do. The old guard's pearl clutching was expected but almost comical. The decision to continue the mask requirements during the waning days of the pandemic was certainly unpopular with the conservative members of the congregation.

While she'd asked for input from others, Lucy had made those tough calls. Yet if she had realized she'd made a wrong decision, she wouldn't think twice about changing her mind. *Did I appear weak?* she wondered. "I've had to make some hard calls. Liz, you helped me decide some of them, but what good is digging in and refusing to admit you've changed your mind?"

"That's what a woman would do because it's common sense. Guys think differently. Brenda, like me, works in a male culture, or at least, I did when I was a surgeon. I'd meet with the chiefs of obstetrics or pediatrics, which were more female-friendly departments. They handled things differently. Discussion and collaborative decision-making was the norm. Like the military, the surgical service was a hierarchy with a top-down, command-control-coerce leadership style. In those days, being a surgeon meant being decisive and confident and always *right*, even when you were wrong. Things are changing now, but not fast enough. In old boys' professions, like policing, the pace is even slower."

While Lucy considered what Liz had said, she reached up and teased her nipple. Liz grunted. "Lucy, what are you up to?"

Lucy grinned against her breast. "What do you think?" She slid

her hand under Liz's shirt and began rubbing her belly. "I'm surprised Maggie didn't join us tonight."

Liz yawned. "I told you she'd lose interest in sex. By the third year of our marriage, she'd push me away unless it was one of our designated nights."

"You had designated nights?" Lucy leaned up on her elbow and peered into Liz's blue eyes. "That must have been hard on you. You LOVE sex."

"I do, especially with you." Liz rolled Lucy over on her back and began kissing her. She was gentle, which was perfect for Lucy's mood tonight. She was tired and wasn't even sure she could stay awake for sex. Once Liz raised her nightgown and began kissing her breasts, Lucy was completely awake. Feeling Liz's mouth on her nipples stirred sensations in other places that Lucy hoped Liz would kiss. She didn't have to wait long. Liz worked her way down Lucy's body, kissing and licking the most erogenous zones, before parting her legs with her shoulders.

The feel of her tongue on her sex was warm, curious, gentle, then probing. This wonderfully ordinary lovemaking was exactly what Lucy needed tonight. She opened her legs wider to get more of the sensuous teasing. Not only did Liz have perfect pitch, which could be annoying when Lucy rehearsed, she had a musician's sense of rhythm. She advanced, withdrew, increased pressure, then lightened it in perfect sync with Lucy's needs. Then, Liz frustrated her with a course change without warning, but she always came back just in time. On cue, Lucy's body vibrated with a shimmering orgasm. She threaded her fingers through Liz's hair and pulled tight.

When it ended, Liz returned to Lucy's arms. "See? Better watch what you start, because you know I'll always finish it."

"I love it when you make love to me like that."

"The old-fashioned way, without toys or acrobatics? Like an old married couple?"

"We're married and old, so I guess so," replied Lucy with a lazy smile.

“Not dead yet,” said Liz, frowning.

Lucy’s finger flew to Liz’s lip. “Don’t even say such a thing.” Liz looked sad, obviously reminded of Erika, her best friend, her wingman, and Lucy’s first wife.

“Don’t catch Maggie’s Irish superstition, please,” Liz warned gently.

Lucy changed the subject by digging into Liz’s lounge pants. “Don’t worry. It’s not contagious.” She smiled against Liz’s cheek when she found her lover wet and open. “Oh, my heroic and strong wife needs attention. Here’s proof.” She found her way inside.

“Your wife is putty in your hands, Lovely Lucy. Put me out of my misery...please.”

Lucy had barely gotten started, when Liz came in her arms. As always, when Liz was excited, it took barely a touch to produce an orgasm. Lucy had yet to come up with a strategy to slow the process other than making Liz come first. It didn’t matter tonight. They were both warm, satisfied, and blissfully alone.

Liz gave Lucy one last appreciative caress before pulling down her nightgown. “Thanks. That was nice and unexpected. I could see how tired you are.”

“Never too tired for you, lover,” Lucy said in a sultry voice.

“Keep on like that, and I’ll have no choice but to make you come again.”

“Not tonight.” Lucy snuggled more deeply into Liz’s body. “Did I tell you how much I liked your talk at the school board today? I loved how well you deflected that woman defending that debunked autism study. Just the right amount of kind but firm rebuttal. She thought you were on her side until you convinced her to see it your way.”

“I’m learning that a quiet voice speaks louder than shouting or cutting someone off at the knees.”

“I can see a definite improvement in your approach. You’ve finally figured out you don’t have to crush your opponent to get your point across.”

“Only took seventy years,” Liz said, stifling a yawn.

“Stop talking about your age. People will think you’re obsessed with it.”

“I’m not, but seventy is a big birthday.”

“It is, but you have months before then.” Lucy decided that Liz needed a deep tongue kiss to reassure her that she wasn’t “dead yet.”