

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A TRAITOR TO MEMORY*

# ELIZABETH GEORGE

# A PLACE OF HIDING

"Elizabeth George reigns as queen of the mystery genre. The Lynley books constitute the smartest, most gratifyingly complex and impassioned mystery series now being published." —*Entertainment Weekly*



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## PRAISE FOR A PLACE OF HIDING

"George has mastered the British mystery so well that you'd never guess she's American. The 12 books in her Lynley series are woven together in intricate but seamless patterns. This is mystery writing at its most complex and intelligent. Grade: A." —*Entertainment Weekly* (Editor's Choice)

"[George is] at the top of her form. This exquisitely plotted mystery bursts with well-developed characters. . . . With her flair for language, George reinforces her reputation as one of today's finest mystery writers."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Dense, complex, and riveting." —*Booklist*

"Engrossing . . . There are very few writers today who can create so many completely rounded, whole and human characters. Those who have not yet read George will find this an excellent place to begin." —*Mystery Ink*

"Vintage George." —*The Columbus Dispatch*

"A tale so full of sudden twists and turns that for some it may be difficult to put this book down, even long after bedtime." —*The Tampa Tribune*

"Devilishly good!" —*Orange Coast*

"As always, Elizabeth George has spun a gripping, complex tale, full of passion, loss and longing, dark emotions and fragility. Read her if you like your mysteries shaken and ingenious." —*The Bellingham Herald*

"Miss George not only continues her amazing work but may well have created—to date—her masterpiece. . . . Powerful and passionate, *A Place of Hiding* is a book that will endure." —*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

## AND FOR THE MASTERY OF ELIZABETH GEORGE

"Ms. George can do it all, with style to spare."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

"Elizabeth George reigns as queen of the mystery genre. The Lynley books constitute the smartest, most gratifyingly complex and impassioned mystery series now being published." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"Like P. D. James, George knows the import of the smallest human gesture." —*People*

"Ms. George proves that the classiest crime writers are true novelists." —*The New York Times*

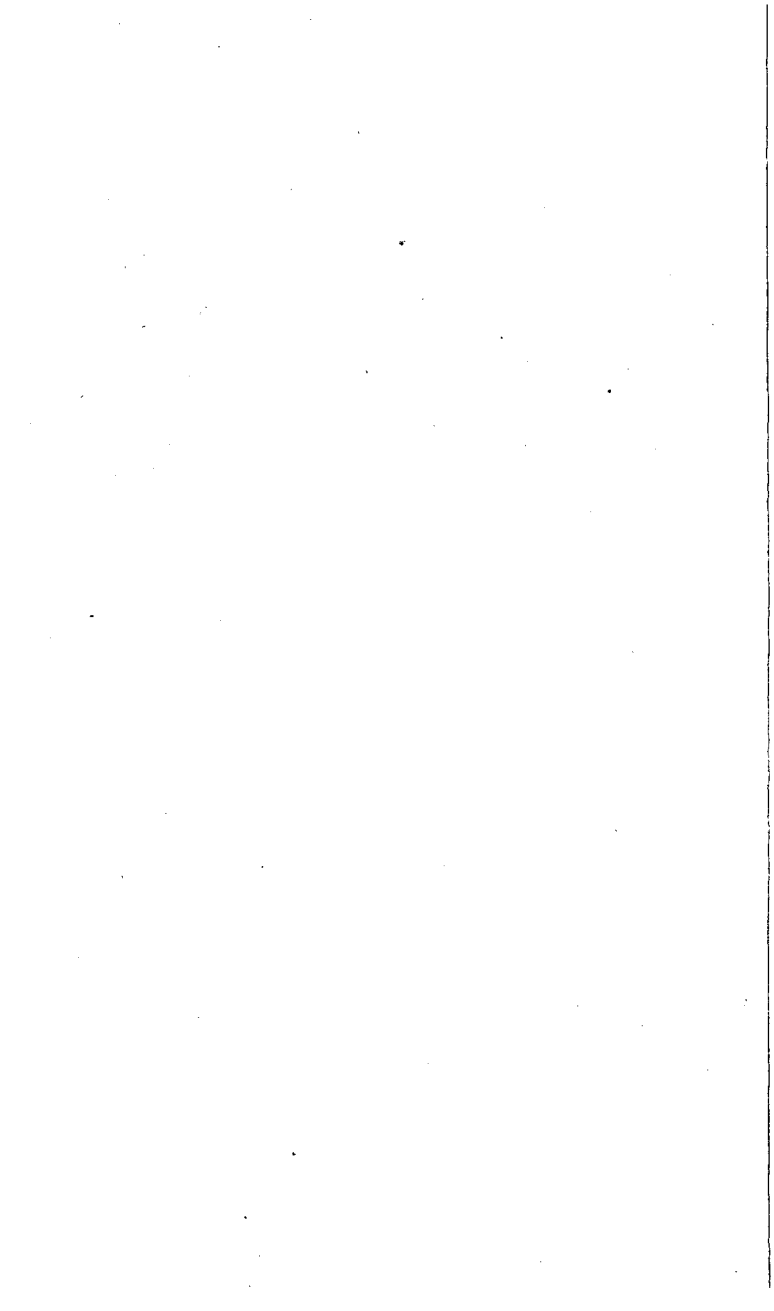
"George is a master. . . . She upholds the English tradition beautifully." —*Chicago Tribune*

"Few novelists whose first works are greeted with unanimous acclaim are able to maintain the quality that won them initial praise, let alone show greater depth with every book. Elizabeth George, to the delight of her legions of fans, is perhaps the most notable American exception." —*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

November 10

2:45 P.M.

MONTECITO,  
CALIFORNIA



SANTA ANA WINDS WERE no friends of photography, but that was something you could not tell an egomaniacal architect who believed his entire reputation rested upon capturing for posterity—and for *Architectural Digest*—fifty-two thousand square feet of unfinished hillside sprawl *today*. You couldn't even try to tell him that. Because when you finally found the location after making what felt like two dozen wrong turns, you were already late, he was already ticked off, and the arid wind was already throwing up so much dust that all you wanted to do was get out of there as fast as possible, which wasn't going to *be* possible if you argued with him over whether you were going to take the pictures in the first place. So you took them, never mind the dust, never mind the tumbleweeds that seemed to have been imported by a special-effects team to make several million dollars' worth of California ocean-view real estate look like Barstow in August, and never mind the fact that the grit got under your contact lenses and the air made your skin feel like peach pits and your hair like burnt hay. The job was everything; the job was all. And since China River supported herself by doing the job, she did it.

But she wasn't happy. When she completed the work, a patina of grime lay on her clothes and against her skin, and the only thing she wanted—other than a tall glass of

the coldest water she could find and a long soak in a very cool tub—was to be out of there: off the hillside and closer to the beach. So she said, “That’s it, then. I’ll have proofs for you to choose from the day after tomorrow. One o’clock? Your office? Good. I’ll be there,” and she strode off without giving the man a chance to reply. She didn’t much care about his reaction to her abrupt departure, either.

She drove back down the hillside in her ancient Plymouth, along a smoothly paved road, potholes being permanently banned in Montecito. The route took her past houses of the Santa Barbara super-rich who lived their shielded privileged lives behind electronic gates, where they swam in designer swimming pools and towed themselves off afterwards on terrycloth as thick and white as a Colorado snow bank. She braked occasionally for Mexican gardeners who sweated behind those protective walls and for teenage girls on horseback who bounced along in tight-fitting blue jeans and skimpy T-shirts. The hair on these girls swung in the sunlight. On every last one of them it was long and straight and shiny like something lit it from within. Their skin was flawless and their teeth were perfect, too. And not a single one of them carried an ounce of unwanted flesh anywhere. But then, why would they? Weight wouldn’t have had the moral fortitude to linger upon them any longer than the time it took them to stand on the bathroom scale, get hysterical, and fling themselves at the toilet afterwards.

They were so pathetic, China thought. The whole coddled, undernourished crowd of them. And what was worse for the little twits: Their mothers probably looked exactly like them, doing their part to be role models for a lifetime of personal trainers, plastic surgery, shopping excursions, daily massages, weekly manicures, and regular sessions with a shrink. There was *nothing* like having a



gold-plated meal ticket, courtesy of some idiot whose only requirement of his women was zeroed in on the looks department.

Whenever China had to come to Montecito, she couldn't wait to get *out* of Montecito, and today was no different. If anything, today the wind and the heat made the urgency to put this place behind her worse than normal, like something gnawing at her mood. Which was bad enough already. An overall uneasiness had been sitting on her shoulders since the moment her alarm had rung early that morning.

Nothing else had rung. That was the problem. Upon waking, she'd made that automatic three-hour leap in time to ten-A.M.-in-Manhattan-so-why-hasn't-he-called, and while the hours passed till the one at which she had to leave for her appointment in Montecito, she'd mostly watched the phone and stewed, something that was easy enough to do since it was nearly eighty degrees by nine A.M.

She'd tried to occupy herself. She'd watered the entire front yard by hand and she'd done the same to the back, right down to the grass. She'd talked over the fence to Anita Garcia—Hey, girl, is this weather killing you? Man oh man, it's destroying me—and sympathised with her neighbour's degree of water retention in this last month of her pregnancy. She'd washed the Plymouth and dried it as she went, managing to stay one step ahead of the dust that wanted to adhere to it and turn into mud. And she leaped inside the house twice when the phone rang, only to find those unctuous, obnoxious telephone solicitors on the line, the kind who always wanted to know what kind of day you were having before they launched into their spiels about changing your long-distance telephone company which would, of course, also change your life. Finally, she'd had to leave for Montecito. But not before she

picked up the phone one last time to make sure she had a dial tone and not before she double-checked her answering machine to make sure it would take a message.

All the time she hated herself for not being able just to *dismiss* him. But that had been the problem for years. Thirteen of them. God. How she hated love.

Her cell phone was the phone that finally did the ringing towards the end of her drive home to the beach. Not five minutes away from the uneven lump of sidewalk that marked the concrete path to her own front door, it chimed on the passenger seat and China grabbed it up to hear Matt's voice.

"Hey, good-looking." He sounded cheerful.

"Hey yourself." She hated the instant relief she felt, like she'd been uncorked of carbonated anxiety. She said nothing else.

He read that easily. "Pissed?"

Nothing from her end. Let him hang, she thought.

"I guess I've blown my wad with this one."

"Where've you been?" she demanded. "I thought you were calling this morning. I waited at the house. I *hate* it when you do that, Matt. Why don't you get it? If you're not going to call, just say that in the first place and I can deal with it, okay? Why didn't you call?"

"Sorry. I meant to. I kept reminding myself all day."

"And . . . ?"

"It's not going to sound good, China."

"Try me."

"Okay. A real bitch of a cold front moved in last night. I had to spend half the morning trying to find a decent coat."

"You couldn't call from your cell while you were out?"

"Forgot to take it. I'm sorry. Like I said."

She could hear the ubiquitous background noises

of Manhattan, the same noises she heard whenever he called from New York. The blare of horns reverberating through architectural canyons, jack hammers firing like heavy armaments against cement. But if he'd left his cell phone in the hotel, what was he doing on the street with it now?

"On my way to dinner," he told her. "Last meeting. Of the day, that is."

She'd pulled to the sidewalk at a vacant spot about thirty yards down the street from her house. She hated stopping because the air conditioning in her car was too weak to make much of a dent in the stifling interior so she was desperate to get out, but Matt's last remark made the heat suddenly less important and certainly far less noticeable. All her attention shifted to his meaning.

If nothing else, she'd learned to keep her mouth shut when he dropped one of his small verbal incendiary bombs. There'd been a time when she'd jump all over him at a remark like "Of the day, that is," to weed specifics out of his implications. But the years had taught her that silence served just as well as demands or accusations. It also gave her the upper hand once he finally admitted what he was trying to avoid saying.

It came in a rush. "Here's the situation. I've got to stay here another week. I've got a chance to talk to some people about a grant, and I need to see them."

"Matt. Come on."

"Wait, babe. Listen. These guys dumped a fortune on a filmmaker from NYU last year. They're looking for a project. Hear that? They're actually *looking*."

"How do you know?"

"That's what I was told."

"By who?"

"So I called them and I managed to get an appointment. But not till next Thursday. So I've got to stay."

"Goodbye Cambria, then."

"No, we'll do it. We just can't next week."

"Sure. Then when?"

"That's just it." The street sounds on the other end of the cell phone seemed to grow louder for a moment, as if he were throwing himself into the midst of them, forced off the sidewalk by the congestion of the city at the end of a workday.

She said, "Matt? Matt?" and knew a moment of irrational panic when she thought she'd lost him. Damn phones and damn signals, always fading in and out.

But he came back on the line and it was quieter. He'd ducked inside a restaurant, he said. "This is make or break for the film. China, this one's a festival winner. Sundance for sure, and you know what that can mean. I hate letting you down like this, but if I don't make a pitch to these people, I'm not going to be worth taking you anywhere. To Cambria. To Paris. Or to Kalamazoo. That's just how it is."

"Fine," she told him, but it was not and he would know that by the flat sound of her voice. It had been a month since he'd managed to carve two days away from pitch-meetings in LA and funding-scaevenges across the rest of the country, and before that it had been six weeks while she cold-called potential clients for herself and he continued to pursue the horizon of his dream. "Sometimes," she said, "I wonder if you'll ever be able to put it together, Matt."

"I know. It seems like it takes forever to get a film going. And sometimes it does. You know the stories. Years in development and then—*wham!*—instant box office. But I want to do this. I need to do it. I'm just sorry it seems like we end up apart more than we're together."

China heard all this as she watched a toddler trundle along the sidewalk on his tricycle, trailed by his watchful

mother and even more watchful German shepherd. The child came to a spot where the cement was uneven, lifted on an angle by the root of a tree, and his wheel rammed into the resulting eruption. He tried to move his pedals against it, but he could do nothing till Mom came to his aid. The sight of this filled China with unaccountable sadness.

Matt was waiting for her response. She tried to think of some new variation on expressing disappointment, but she could come up with nothing. So she said, "I wasn't really talking about putting together a film, Matt."

He said, "Oh."

Then there was nothing more to discuss because she knew that he would stay in New York to keep the appointment he'd fought so hard to get and she would have to fend for herself, another date broken, another wrench thrown in the works of the great Life Plan.

She said, "Well, good luck with your meeting."

He said, "We'll talk. All week. All right? You okay with this, China?"

"What choice do I have?" she asked him and said goodbye.

She hated herself for ending their conversation like that, but she was hot, miserable, dispirited, depressed . . . Call it what you wanted to call it. In any event, she had nothing more to give.

She loathed the part of herself that was unsure of the future, and most of the time she could keep that side of her character subdued. When it got away from her and gained dominance in her life like an overconfident guide into chaos, it never led to anything good. It reduced her to adhering to a belief in the importance of the sort of womanhood she had long detested, one defined by having a man at any cost, lassoing him into marriage, and plugging up his life with babies ASAP. She would not go there, she

told herself repeatedly. But a fraction of her wanted it anyway.

This led her to asking questions, making demands, and turning her attention to an *us* instead of keeping it focused on a *me*. When that occurred, what flared up between her and the man in question—who had always been Matt—was a replay of the debate they'd been having for five years now. This was a circular polemic on the subject of marriage that had so far achieved the same result: his obvious reluctance—as if she actually *needed* to see it and hear it—followed by her furious recriminations, which were then followed by a break-up initiated by whoever felt most exasperated with the differences that cropped up between them.

Those same differences kept bringing them back together, though. For they charged the relationship with an undeniable excitement that so far neither one of them had found with anyone else. He had probably tried. China knew that. But she had not. She didn't need to. She'd known for years that Matthew Whitecomb was right for her.

China had arrived at this conclusion yet again by the time she reached her bungalow: one thousand square feet of 1920 architecture that had once served as the weekend getaway of an Angeleno. It sat among other similar cottages on a street lined with palm trees, close enough to the beach to reap the benefit of the ocean breeze, far enough from the water to be affordable.

It was definitely humble, comprising five small rooms—if you counted the bathroom—and only nine windows, with a wide front porch and a rectangle of lawn in the front and the back. A picket fence fronted the property, shedding flakes of white paint into the flowerbeds and onto the sidewalk, and it was to the gate in this fence

that China lumbered with her photography equipment once she ended her conversation with Matt.

The heat beat down, only less marginally intense than it had been on the hillside, but the wind wasn't as fierce. The palm fronds rattled like old bones in the trees, and where lavender lantana grew against the front fence, it hung listlessly in the bright sunlight, with flowers like purple asterisks, growing out of ground that was thoroughly parched this afternoon, as if it hadn't been watered this morning.

China lifted the lopsided gate and swung it open, her camera cases weighting down her shoulder and her intention to head for the garden hose and drag it over to soak the poor flowers. But she forgot this intention in the sight that greeted her: A man, naked down to his Skivvies, was lying on his stomach in the middle of her lawn with his head pillowed on what appeared to be the ball of his blue jeans and a faded yellow T-shirt. No shoes were in evidence, and the soles of his feet were black beyond black and so calloused at the heels that the skin was canyoned. If his ankles and elbows were anything to go by, he appeared to be someone who eschewed bathing, too. But not eating or exercising, since he was well built without being fat. And not drinking, since at the moment his right hand clutched a sweating bottle of Pellegrino.

*Her Pellegrino by the look of it.* The water she'd been looking forward to downing.

He turned over lazily and squinted up at her, resting on his dirty elbows. "Your security sucks the big one, Chine." He took a long swig from the bottle.

China glanced at the porch where the screen door hung open and the front door gaped wide. "God damn it," she cried. "Did you break into my house again?"

Her brother sat up and shaded his eyes. "What the

hell are you dressed like that for? Ninety frigging degrees and you look like Aspen in January."

"And you look like an arrest for exposure waiting to happen. Good grief, Cherokee, show some sense. There're little girls in this neighbourhood. One of them walks by and sees you like that, you'll have a squad car here in fifteen minutes." She frowned. "D'you have subblock on?"

"Didn't answer my question," he pointed out. "What's with the leather? Delayed rebellion?" He grinned. "If Mom got a look at those pants, she'd have a real—"

"I wear them because I like them," she cut in. "They're comfortable." And I can afford them, she thought. Which was more than half the reason: owning something lush and useless in Southern California because she *wanted* to own it, after a childhood and adolescence spent trolling the racks in Goodwill for clothes that simultaneously fit, were not completely hideous, and—for the benefit of her mother's beliefs—had no scrap of animal skin anywhere on them.

"Oh sure." He scrambled to his feet as she passed him and went onto the porch. "Leather in the middle of a Santa Ana. Real comfortable. That makes sense."

"That's my last bottle of Pellegrino." She dropped her camera cases just inside the front door. "I was looking forward to it all the way home."

"From where?" When she told him, he chuckled. "Oh, I get it. Doing a shoot for an *architect*. Loaded and at loose ends? I hope so. Available also? This is cool. Well, let me see how you look, then." He upended the bottle of water into his mouth and examined her while he did so. When he was sated, he handed the bottle to her and said, "You can have the rest. Your hair looks like crap. Whyn't you stop bleaching it? Not good for you. Sure not good



for the water table, all those chemicals going down the drain.”

“As if you care about the water table.”

“I’ve got my standards.”

“One of which obviously isn’t waiting for people to get home before you raid their houses.”

“You’re lucky it was only me,” he said. “It’s pretty dumb to go off and leave the windows open. Your screens are complete shit. A pocket knife. That’s all it took.”

China saw her brother’s means of access into her house since, in Cherokee’s typical fashion, he’d done nothing to hide how he’d managed to enter. One of the two living room windows was without its old screen, which had been easy enough for Cherokee to remove since only a metal hook and eye had held it in place against the sill. At least her brother had had enough sense to break in through a window that was off the street and out of sight of the neighbours, any one of whom would have willingly called the police.

She went through to the kitchen, the bottle of Pellegrino in her hand. She poured what was left of the mineral water into a glass with a wedge of lime. She swirled it round, drank it down, and put the glass in the sink, unsatisfied and annoyed.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked her brother. “How’d you get up here? Did you fix your car?”

“That piece of crap?” He padded across the linoleum to the refrigerator, pulled it open, and browsed through the plastic bags of fruit and vegetables inside. He emerged with a red bell pepper, which he took to the sink and meticulously washed off before scoring a knife from a drawer and slicing the pepper in half. He cleaned both halves and handed one of them to China. “I’ve got some things going so I won’t need a car anyway.”

China ignored the hook implied in his final remark.