

High October

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To Sheila, as always

FIVE YEARS AGO

Chapter 1

As Liz Stolz sat in the drive-up line at Awakened Brews, she wondered if the day would bring any interesting cases. Family practice could be monotonous, but when the summer visitors came to town, anything could happen.

The intercom stirred to life. A young male voice asked for her order.

“Good morning, Billy. It’s Dr. Liz.” That was all she needed to say. By the time she drove around to the window, her coffee was prepared exactly the way she liked it—extra large, dark roast, double cream, no sugar.

The young man stuck his skinny, muscular arm out the window to put the cup directly into her hands. “Careful, Doc. It’s hot,” Billy cautioned as he did every day. Liz handled the cup gingerly, mindful of the temperature. People said it was hot enough to melt a fishing hole in Sebago in the dead of winter.

Liz paid cash and added a few extra dollars. “Keep the change.”

Billy’s face visibly brightened, although tipping was Dr. Stolz’s habit, and everyone at Awakened Brews knew it. Liz liked knowing that her generosity was appreciated. She liked that she knew the young people who made her coffee. One mowed her lawn in summer, another raked the leaves in fall and shoveled the snow off her garage roof in winter, but she could call on any of them to help her haul heavy things to the dump or stack firewood.

Liz liked everything about the town of Hobbs, where she’d settled after she’d bought the family practice on Beach Road. Hobbs boasted more miles of sandy beach than any town in Maine. Despite its popularity with the tourists, Hobbs was a real town with a supermarket, a movie theater, and a high school. Less than ten thousand people lived there year-round, but in the summer, the population swelled to four times that size. When it reached its peak three weeks before Labor Day, traffic on Route 1 came to a standstill.

At five thirty in the morning, the route to the beach was mostly clear.

Liz parked her truck and settled on a bench near the fence to wait for the sunrise. A storm had come through during the night, and the wind off the water was brisk. The banners in front of the T-shirt shop were flapping furiously, making a fierce racket.

Tourists from the beachfront motels had their phones poised to snap photos of the famous Hobbs sunrise. Finally, a sliver of orange light appeared on the horizon accompanied by bands of incandescent pinks and brilliant lavenders.

By the time the sun had risen, the crowd had dispersed and Liz's coffee was gone. She pitched her empty cup into the rusted oil barrel and headed down the stairs to the beach. Walking along the water's edge, she set a brisk pace to the estuarine preserve. The occasional splash of cold ocean into her rafting sandals didn't bother her. The water would never be warmer than it was in August.

She recognized some of the beach walkers and nodded a greeting as she passed. Some stopped for a brief chat. Liz always planned for these interruptions. Without them, the walk took exactly forty-three minutes, with conversations, an hour. Either way, she was back in her truck in plenty of time. She tried to tamp down her wind-blown hair, almost impossible now that she had let it go completely gray. She covered the unruly curls with her favorite baseball cap from the Dead River Bait Company. The fabric on the bill was fraying, but she liked the visual pun of the fish skeleton logo.

After unlocking the back door to the office of Hobbs Family Practice, she took a very hot shower before the front office staff arrived. While the nurses drew blood, she reviewed the morning's appointments—follow-ups for blood work, a child with a nasty summer cold, a couple of emergencies: two UTIs and a sprained thumb. One of her partners was on vacation, so Liz had double duty, which meant a busy day.

The afternoon was for physicals. It was Friday, so Liz let her office staff go home early while she examined the last patient. She entered her notes into the system and locked up the office.

Liz's usual Friday evening routine in warm weather included a lobster

roll and slaw at the beach. During the day, it was almost impossible to find parking. At dinner time, the tourists jammed into the restaurants along Route 1, and the beach lot was empty. Liz pitched her sling chair on the jetty and positioned it for the best view of the harbor. She took a deep breath and filled her lungs with sea air.

Life doesn't get any better than this.

The stiff wind that had been blowing since morning hadn't let up. Eventually, Liz moved her picnic into the cab of her truck to enjoy the last colorful gifts of the sky. After the sun set, she headed home.

She planted herself on the sofa in the media room with an IPA from a new brewery in Kittery. She listened to the end of PBS evening news while she scanned her emails. The IPA was crisp and hoppy, but it made her sleepy, so she punched up a throw pillow and rolled over to take a nap.

She awoke with a start to the sound of her phone dancing on the table. Her eyes were gluey as she tried to focus on the screen. Webhanet Playhouse? What could that be about? Liz answered with her doctor voice: "Elizabeth Stolz."

"Liz? It's Tony." Liz sat up and shook her head to clear it.

"Tony? Hey," she said with a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm.

"I hate to bother you, but my lead actress fell and really hurt her leg. Urgent care is closed."

"So? Bring her down to Southern Med."

"Liz, it's Friday night in the summer. It will be a madhouse. She's in a lot of pain. Please."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Tony." Liz rubbed her eyes. "Really?"

"Liz, you owe me for all those tickets I give your friends."

"You owe me for all those house calls I make to your theater." Resigned, she got to her feet. "Meet me at my office. I'll need an x-ray to see if it's fractured."

Liz grabbed her cap from the hook near the garage door. As she hauled herself into the cab of her truck, she realized she had no idea what was playing at the Webhanet Playhouse. She avoided town during the summer season because of the traffic and hadn't seen the marquee in months.

She arrived before Tony and unlocked the front door before heading into the back to turn on the lights. She found a stethoscope in her desk and hung it around her neck.

“We’re here!” The sound of Tony’s booming actor’s voice was accompanied by shuffling and soft moans of pain.

Liz came into the waiting room. “Hey, Tony.”

The assistant director of the Webhanet Playhouse was in his forties, deeply tanned, and pencil slim. He had thick brows and a bushy moustache, which unintentionally gave him a Groucho Marx look. “Thanks so much for coming over,” he said.

Liz nodded and tossed her ball cap on the check-in counter. The patient, a pretty, middle-aged blonde raised her eyes and stared at her. Liz decided that the woman was older than she first looked, so she took her pulse and gave her heart a quick listen. Normal heart sounds. She looked vaguely familiar, but then so many actresses look familiar.

Liz knelt on one knee and gently prodded the puffy area around the woman’s ankle. The rapid swelling could mean a sprain or a fracture. Ankles could be so finicky with all the tendons and ligaments in the vicinity. Liz always x-rayed lower extremity trauma to be sure.

“Okay, Tony. Help me get our patient down to the x-ray room.”

The woman grabbed a carelessly painted, neon-green cane that had probably been a prop in a Webhanet Playhouse production. With Tony’s help, she succeeded in limping into the x-ray room.

The x-ray showed a fracture of the lateral malleolus of the right fibula, minimally displaced. Liz reasoned that she could reduce it with manipulation, but it would be agony for the patient. “The small bone in your leg is broken right above the ankle, but I can set it.”

“Tony says you’re a surgeon,” the woman said.

“Yes, but orthopedics isn’t my specialty. Fortunately, this is reduction 101. Any medical student could do it, but it will be painful. If you want me to go ahead, I’ll give you a fast-acting painkiller by injection.”

“Yes, all right,” said the patient. Saying that much had taken effort. She’d been holding her breath because of the pain.

Liz touched her hand. “Try to breathe normally or you’ll get lightheaded.” The woman nodded. “Tony, can you please help our patient into the exam room across the hall?”

Liz went into her office to unlock the safe and remove a pen injector. When she returned, she stabbed the woman in the thigh right through her costume, an aqua jumpsuit of a slinky, shimmering material. “We need to wait a couple of minutes for the painkiller to work.” Liz rolled away on her stool to have another look at the x-ray. She glanced at her watch to gauge how long to wait. “Just another minute or two.” She smiled to reassure the patient, who now looked even more familiar. *She’s at least my age*, thought Liz. *She’s not a natural blonde, and that stage makeup is covering a multitude of sins*. It annoyed Liz that she couldn’t place her. Former patient? Hospital staff? Someone she’d seen on TV?

The woman closed her eyes and sighed. “The pain is just fading away.” She opened her eyes and managed a little smile. “What did you give me?”

“Morphine. Old-fashioned, but it always does the trick.”

“She gives good drugs,” volunteered Tony.

Liz shot him a filthy look. “That’s enough, Tony.” He was joking, of course, but the Feds were keeping a watchful eye on opiate use, and Liz didn’t know anything about this woman.

She glanced at her watch. “Lie down for me, please.” She helped the woman bring her legs up on the table. “I’m going to pull and push at the same time. Despite the painkiller, it’s going to hurt quite a bit. I promise to be quick. Ready?”

The woman nodded. She attempted a brave smile, but she let out a sharp yelp as Liz pulled the bone back into place.

“All done. You’re a real trooper.” Liz slid her arm under the woman’s shoulders to help her sit up. “I’ll be right back.”

Liz went to the supply room to see what cast materials were left after the busy tourist season. Summer visitors came in with the most amazing injuries, so they always had plenty of splints and elastic bandages on hand. Liz rummaged around on the bottom shelf and found a brand-new walking

boot still wrapped in plastic and the cotton socks to go with it. There were also some pneumatic splints for lower extremities. She took one of those too.

“We’re in luck,” she announced, returning to the room. “You can put weight on a closed fracture like this, so a walking boot will do fine. Now, we’re going to take a little stroll down to the x-ray room, so I can make sure everything is lined up correctly. If it is, you can probably skip a visit to an orthopedic surgeon...if that matters to you.”

“I have a high deductible, so yes, it matters. Thank you.”

The x-ray showed the bone ends met perfectly. Liz came in to help the woman put on the boot again. “It looks fine.”

Tony solicitously held the woman’s arm as he helped her down the hall to Liz’s consulting room. “See? I told you she’d fix you right up. Isn’t she fabulous?”

The woman gave Liz a brief, curious look.

“All kidding aside, thank you sooooo much.” Tony patted Liz’s shoulder.

“Don’t thank me yet. No stage work for your star until that bone heals. And she can’t drive for at least six weeks.” Liz sat down behind the desk and pulled a prescription pad out of the drawer. “I can write a script for Percocet, but ibuprofen is better if you can stand the pain.”

“Don’t you need my insurance card?” The woman looked flustered. “Usually, that’s the first thing they ask for.”

“Yes, I guess I do.” Liz’s front-office staff was so efficient, she hardly thought about paperwork, but there would be hell to pay if she let a patient leave without getting her insurance information. “Yes, please give me your card, and if you could fill out a new patient form, my staff will contact you for the other information. One minute.”

Liz located a new patient form and a clipboard at the front desk. By the time she returned to her office, the woman had found her insurance card. Liz went into the business office to copy it. She always tried to address patients by name, but she’d been in such a hurry to stop the pain, she hadn’t thought to ask. After she copied both sides of the card, she picked it up and

read the name: "Margaret Mary Krusick."

Krusick? That name sounded so familiar.

"No! Can't be..."