

Love in the Time of Corona

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Chapter One

Liz Stolz felt a gentle hand on the back of her neck and looked up to see a steaming cup of coffee.

“Good morning,” said Maggie, bending to offer a kiss. “I saw you left a full cup of coffee in the coffee maker. It was ice cold, so I made you a fresh cup.” Maggie glanced at the screen of Liz’s iPad and frowned. “Looking at the stock market again? You’re just making yourself crazy.”

“We’ve had two huge drops because of that virus in China. Now the futures are down over seven hundred points!”

Maggie gave Liz’s shoulder a sympathetic pat and sat down with her coffee. “You’re getting yourself all worked up before you go to work. Not a good idea.”

Liz flipped closed her iPad and tasted her coffee. “Perfect. You always get it just right.”

“After all this time, you’d think so.”

“You always got it right.” Liz smiled at Maggie, admiring her still sleepy face. The fine wrinkles around her eyes were a sure sign that she was no longer the college student Liz had fallen in love with forty-six years ago. As she gazed into Maggie’s hazel eyes, Liz could still see that lively, young woman peering back.

Maggie had come down in her nightgown and bathrobe. Usually, she was dressed and wearing makeup before she appeared in the morning, but they were alone in the house. Vanity and a long career on the stage prevented her from showing her bare face to anyone but her wife.

At sixty-six, Maggie was pale without makeup. She’d let her long hair go completely gray because Liz had put the fear of God in her about hair dye causing cancer. Maggie had enough cancer risk from her BRCA2 without adding to it.

“What’s spooking the markets?” she asked, surprising Liz with the question. Maggie hardly ever asked about finances, seemingly

more than content to let Liz manage her portfolio. When Liz tried to explain how she was investing her money, her wife's interest was never more than casual and fleeting.

"This coronavirus is new. Nothing we've ever seen before. No one has natural immunity. It spreads quickly, and it's often deadly. If too many people get sick at once, it could shut down factories. China makes a lot of things we need, including parts for everything from cars to cell phones. An interruption in the supply chain would have a huge impact on the economy, and that's only the beginning."

Maggie, who'd been listening intently, studied her face. "You're really worried, aren't you?"

As a doctor, Liz tried to keep her facial expressions under control, so she wasn't happy to hear that her concern had been so obvious. "I'm not panicking yet, but I want to be prepared."

"What does that mean?" Maggie seemed more alert than when she had first come down, which meant she would be receptive to additional information.

"It means that we could be in for a pandemic. The medical system could be overwhelmed and there could be shortages of everything...like in a war."

"What should we do?" Maggie asked in an anxious voice.

"Well, for now, I'm going to order more PPE for the practice and advise Brenda and Duvaney to do the same."

"What's a PPE?"

"Personal protective equipment. You know, masks, gowns, gloves..."

Maggie put down her coffee cup. "You're serious."

"Yes."

Maggie patted her hand. "You'll do the right thing. You always do."

Liz glanced at her watch. Whenever she looked at the gold Cartier, she remembered the big party Yale-New Haven had thrown for her when she'd retired as chief of surgery. A gold watch! Could

they have come up with something more clichéd? Fortunately, it was useful for counting pulse beats and timing medical processes, and it was accurate to the millisecond.

“I need to get moving soon,” said Liz. “I have my breakfast with Brenda this morning, and I have to pick up Cherie first.” Liz gazed out the window of the breakfast room. The lazy snowflakes had gotten larger and were coming down faster. “How much snow are we supposed to get today?”

Maggie checked her phone. “Channel Eight says eight to ten.”

“Are the schools closed?”

“Yes, all the Hobbs schools are closed. No rehearsal this afternoon.”

“Good. I’m glad you don’t have to drive in this weather.”

Maggie gave Liz a playful smack on the arm. “Stop. You know I’m a good driver.”

“You hardly drove while you lived in New York. For twenty years, you didn’t even own a car!”

“I’m still a good driver,” said Maggie indignantly. “I don’t get warnings all the time like you do. They’d give you tickets if you weren’t a doctor.”

“And I’m friends with the chief.”

“I wouldn’t play that card too often, if I were you.” Maggie reached for *The New York Times*. Her preference for reading ink on paper still mystified Liz, but she paid for a subscription to the print edition without complaint. “I’m home all day, so I’ll cook tonight,” said Maggie. “I have my eye on those Cornish hens you defrosted.”

“Thanks. I look forward to something amazing,” said Liz, getting up.

Maggie gave her a critical look. “Put on some makeup. You don’t want to scare the police chief and your new PA.”

“Cherie’s not new anymore. She’s been with the practice for eight months,” said Liz and headed toward the kitchen.

“Put on some makeup!” Maggie called after her.

Liz rolled her eyes, but after she showered and dressed, she put on some foundation, blush and a little mascara. After six years of marriage, Liz had learned it was easier to comply with Maggie's directions than to argue with her. Liz put on a polar fleece jacket over her top because it was always a little chilly in the old diner where she had breakfast once a week with the police chief.

The tradition had begun shortly after Liz bought the family practice on Beach Road. The head of the Hobbs chamber of commerce suggested the idea as a way to learn more about the town and its inner workings. Now that Liz and Brenda Harrison were close friends and fishing buddies, the reason for the weekly meetings was as much social as business.

Liz gave Maggie a quick kiss on the way out.

"Text me when you get there," Maggie ordered.

"Maggie..."

"Just do it, so I know you're safe."

Liz opened the garage door to the bay where her Audi was parked. The gray sky overhead promised more snow. It would be easier to brush off the top of an SUV than climb into the back of her pickup truck to sweep it out. Liz pulled the car out of the garage and sat for a minute to let the engine tick down. She engaged the gear shift and looked over her shoulder to back up. As much as Liz loved technology, she still didn't trust the backup monitor on the dash.

She sighed as she headed down the long drive to the street. Usually, she looked forward to her breakfasts with Brenda, but not this morning. Whenever Brenda and Cherie were in the same room, the tension was palpable. Liz guessed it wasn't personal. Brenda was affable and friendly. She was popular with the townspeople. The girl scouts brought her cookies and chocolate milk. The kindergarten students crayoned colorful portraits of the chief, which she proudly displayed on the walls of her office.

When Liz finally decided to talk to her PA about her problem with Brenda, Cherie admitted she hated cops. Probing the reason

would have been inappropriate, but Liz urged Cherie to dial down the hostile looks. A town of nine thousand people was too small for petty animosities.

As Liz drove to the little cottage where Cherie lived with her father, she thought back to the day they'd first met. Liz was usually frugal with the practice's resources, but she had flown Cherie Bois up from Houston based on her strong résumé and compelling cover letter.

When Cherie had arrived for the interview, Liz couldn't help but stare. Cherie's beautifully proportioned figure was trim and toned for a woman nearing fifty. She had compelling blue-green eyes. Her flawless skin looked perpetually tan and provided a striking contrast to her blond hair. Her unique coloring, combined with perfect features, made her attractive enough to be a model, news anchor, or actress, but Cherie had started out as a psychiatric social worker before becoming a physician's assistant.

Hardly anyone in Hobbs knew Cherie was biracial. Her maternal grandmother had been black. In the first interview, Cherie had made sure to tell Liz that, despite being able to pass for white, she identified as African American. She also made a point of coming out. "In the interest of full transparency."

"That's fine, I'm gay too, but you do know Maine is one of the whitest states in the union. Ninety-five percent white. Will that bother you?"

"No, of course not."

"I see you've spent the majority of your career in the South. What brings you to Maine?"

"My father is a Mainer. He was born here and wanted to come home now that he's getting to the end of his life. He missed Maine. French Canadian."

"I noticed the French name."

"Yes, but I pronounce it Boyz."

"Got it," said Liz. To make her admiration of the woman less

obvious, she pretended to peruse her résumé.

The interview had gone well, but that night Liz admitted to Maggie that she was reluctant to hire Cherie because she was so attractive.

“Liz Stolz! That’s reverse discrimination. The woman can’t help being attractive. Your eyes are on springs around Lucy Bartlett too, but you manage.”

“Lucy is married to my best friend and she’s a priest. I would never mess with her.”

“And you’re married to me. You can look, but don’t you dare touch!” said Maggie, wagging her finger. “Dear God, give me patience.” She raised her eyes toward heaven. “Sixty-three years old, and she still thinks with her crotch!”

Maggie’s comments had shamed her into calling Cherie back for a second interview. This time, via Skype. After her partners had interviewed Cherie and given her glowing reviews, Liz couldn’t find a reason not to extend an offer. That was back in July, at the height of the summer season. Cherie had hit the ground running and had since become Liz’s right hand. Her diagnoses were always spot on. She knew when to make decisions on her own and when to ask questions. Not that she always took Liz’s advice, but she asked.

Liz pulled into the short driveway to the cottage. Cherie was outside brushing off her car. She waved and opened the car door to put the brush inside. Every car in Maine carried a long-handled brush with a scraper on one end as standard equipment. In September, Reny’s always had a bucketful by the front door. By the end of October, they were completely sold out.

Cherie’s warm breath momentarily fogged the windshield on her side. “Good morning, Dr. Stolz,” she said.

“Good morning, Cherie. How’s your father today?”

Cherie shrugged. “The same. He’s lonely since I made him give up his car. His COPD keeps him from taking walks like he used to. I encourage him to invite his friends to play cards, but he doesn’t

seem interested.”

“Getting old is hard,” said Liz. “Keep encouraging him. Isolation will only make him get old faster.”

“Yes, it will.” Cherie looked straight ahead. “Okay. Let’s do this,” she said in a determined voice.

Liz smiled. “It’s not a colonoscopy, just breakfast with the chief. I think she likes you.”

“I know. I wish she didn’t.”

“I know you don’t like cops, but Brenda is not your average cop.”

Cherie shook her head. “Let’s just go and get it over with.”

On the way to the diner, they passed the offices of Hobbs Family Practice. “I see we have plenty of blood draws this morning,” Liz said, mentally counting the cars in the parking lot. “Next week will be busy.” She glanced at Cherie who was still bravely staring ahead. “How do you find the routine of family practice? It can be pretty monotonous at times.”

“For you maybe. You were a surgeon. For me, every day is a new adventure.”

“Surgery can be pretty boring too. I knew guys who did nothing but knee and hip replacements. I did so many mastectomies and lumpectomies, I almost got tired of seeing breasts.” Liz turned to Cherie with a quick grin. “But I never did.”

“You’re so bad. But at least people can tell you’re gay. Hardly anyone guesses about me. Looking feminine can be a liability.”

“Not for the rest of us. We enjoy the view.” Liz instantly realized she’d said the wrong thing. “I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

“Apology accepted,” said Cherie. “Just drive, Dr. Stolz. The roads are icy.”