

Strands

ELENA GRAF



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“Liz!” The stunningly clear voice carried over the water beating against the tiles. Liz shut off the faucet and squeezed most of the water out of her hair before turning around. Through the steam, she could make out a dark figure standing at the end of the enormous shower. The vapor swirled and began to clear, revealing a small, red-haired woman with her hands on her hips.

“Yes, Lucy?” Liz asked in her most patient voice.

Lucy smiled as if that would make everything better. Usually, it did, but a steaming hot shower was one of Liz’s guilty pleasures. Interrupting it was unforgivable. “I’m sorry to bother you. Are you almost done?”

“I am now, it seems.” Liz dried her face and wrapped the towel around her waist. She gingerly stepped across the wet tiles. “Are you leaving now?”

“Not yet. I need to talk to you first.”

Liz came out of the shower and stood on the bath mat. “What’s so important that it can’t wait?”

“I called to schedule a physical and found out that you’re no longer my doctor!”

With the edge of her hand, Liz cut away a drop of water running down her cheek. “Lucy, I kept trying to tell you...”

“I know. I know. I didn’t want to believe it. Can we talk?”

“Now?”

Lucy’s green eyes pleaded. “I promised Ginny I’d get right back to her.” The efficient woman who ran Liz’s practice hated to leave open appointments. Keeping her waiting was never a good idea.

“Let me put on some clothes.”

Lucy gave Liz’s naked breasts an admiring look. “I don’t know. I think I like you this way.”

“You’re not serious. You’re all dressed. You even have your collar on.” Liz nudged Lucy aside, so she could pass.

"I have that funeral this morning. There have been so many of them lately, not only postponements from the lockdown, but new ones every week. The old are deprived of their families and friends and just give up." Lucy shook her head sadly. "There's so much pain out there."

"Obviously, you can't be late for a funeral." Liz stood on the fuzzy rug in front of the sink to dry herself more thoroughly. Despite the shower, she wasn't completely awake. "Maybe this conversation should wait until later."

She wondered why Lucy, who was usually the first to object when an ethical line was crossed, couldn't accept the change. But where other people only saw black and white, Lucy saw myriad shades of gray. Her impulse was always to offer compassion, no matter what the rules said. When Liz had lost her mother and couldn't process her grief, Lucy had agreed to talk to her—as a friend, she'd emphasized, not as a psychotherapist. They both knew they were walking a fine line but decided it was acceptable. In a small town like Hobbs, people's lives eventually become intertwined like the strands of a rope.

Lucy was watching her. Somehow, she always knew when Liz had disappeared into her thoughts. "Liz?" she asked gently to bring her back.

"Give me a few minutes to throw on some clothes. If you make me a cup of coffee, I'll love you forever."

"You'd better love me forever. You asked me to marry you."

"Lucy, you've got that backwards. *You* asked *me* to marry you."

"I did, didn't I? Best thing I ever did," said Lucy, then looked thoughtful. "No, becoming a priest was the best thing I ever did."

"I'll remind you of that after a rough vestry meeting."

"We're meeting today."

"Thanks for the warning."

After Lucy left, Liz toweled her hair. Since the pandemic had begun, the white hairs had been encroaching on the iron grays. When Liz had complained, her stylist had said, "You don't know how lucky you are. People pay me to get that color!" Yanking a comb through the tangled waves, Liz wondered if she should ask the woman to cut her hair even shorter. Her

friend, Sam, had shaved hers on one side. Liz was tempted to do the same, but she doubted Lucy would approve.

While she dressed, Liz tried to compose a concise explanation of why she could no longer be Lucy's doctor. In her capacity as chief of surgery, Liz had often lectured the junior staff about the pitfalls of treating close friends and relatives. Emotional involvement could compromise objectivity, especially when a doctor was under pressure to make a quick medical decision. Training doctors to think under any conditions was supposedly the purpose of all those brutal, long shifts, but they were a thing of the past. Now, residency programs limited the number of hours a physician could be on duty, supposedly for patient safety. Liz didn't completely approve, but since she was no longer responsible for training young doctors, it didn't matter.

She put on a T-shirt and shorts although the September morning was cool. Summer in Maine was too brief, and wearing summer clothes allowed at least the pretense of holding back the season. She shrugged on a hoodie for additional warmth.

When she came into the kitchen, the single-serve coffee maker was dribbling dark liquid into her favorite cup. "I waited until I heard your feet on the stairs," Lucy said, bringing the cup to the table. "I didn't want your coffee to get cold." Liz bent to thank Lucy with a kiss and decided to nibble her ear too. "Stop," said Lucy, raising her shoulder in defense. "Don't think you can seduce your way out of this conversation."

"Lucy, we've talked about this," said Liz, sitting down at the table. "Obviously, you weren't paying attention."

"I guess not," Lucy said, looking reflective. "I heard what you said, but I didn't want to believe it. You're the best doctor I ever had. I don't want to lose you. I trust you, Liz. You even kept my secret when I was dating your best friend."

"Your medical history is no one's business. You thought the adoption was sealed, so why would you expect your daughter to show up?"

"I should have told Erika about Emily. She was hurt when she found out."

"But she got over it quickly. She was always so reasonable."

"Unlike you. You're so darn stubborn. Liz, please. Can't you make an exception for me?" Lucy's lower lip protruded slightly. At such moments, the confident pastor and insightful therapist vanished, and Liz could see a much younger Lucy.

"No, Lucy, and you know why. You don't always like my medical advice. Why is this such a big deal?"

"It makes me feel safe to have you as my doctor. Maggie always said she felt protected from the cancer because you were there."

"I'm a doctor, not a guardian angel," said Liz, scowling as she stirred cream into her coffee. "I hope she remembers to get her screenings without me nagging her." When she looked up, she saw Lucy looking at her with concern. "I know, I have to forgive her, and I'm working on it. Having an affair with a man was the one thing I couldn't forgive."

"She was only trying to get your attention."

"No, she wasn't. She was trying to get back at me for kissing you."

"People's motives for having an affair are complicated. Maybe she did want to punish you. More likely she felt unappreciated or worried that her looks were fading. Maybe she needed the attention of a younger person as an ego-boost. That's not uncommon at our age. Maybe she just needed sex."

"I doubt that. The tamoxifen suppresses her hormones. And if it was sex she wanted, I was more than willing to provide it."

"Whatever her reasons, sleeping with that man was a bad choice. She knew she was using him and hurting you, which was why she asked me for absolution. She probably hoped it would make the guilt go away, but it doesn't work like that."

"But that's what they taught us. The priest says the magic words, and your sins are forgiven...just like that." Liz snapped her fingers for emphasis. "White hair or no, Maggie is still the good Catholic girl I knew in college."

"We're all stuck with baggage from our childhood. We might spend a lifetime processing it."

"Processing it," Liz repeated with disgust, "sounds like meat." Liz got up and took two hard-boiled eggs out of the refrigerator. "Want one?"

Lucy shook her head. "I don't have a lot of time this morning, and I have to call Ginny back. Who should I ask to do my physical?"

"Cathy said she'd take you as a patient. You like Cathy. You've seen her when I wasn't available." Lucy pouted. "Oh, please, Lucy. This is the way it is. Stop giving me a hard time!"

Lucy composed her face and looked perfectly adult again. "All right, you're no longer an option, but Ginny asked if I wanted to wait until the new doctor comes. What new doctor?"

"I've been interviewing candidates to join the practice. I've pretty much narrowed it down to one person. She's a New Yorker too. Probably why we clicked."

Lucy put down her coffee cup and stared. "You're hiring a new doctor? Are you thinking of retiring?"

"No, not yet." Liz cracked a hard-boiled egg on the tabletop and carefully peeled it into a napkin. "You think I'd do something that big and not talk to you about it?"

"You're not the world's best communicator. I don't expect you to tell me everything, but yes, I would expect you to tell me something that important."

"When I'm ready to retire, you'll be the first to know. We need more help. Cathy is cutting back on her hours. She's overwhelmed with two teenagers, each involved in different activities. With all the new construction in Hobbs, we have an influx of new people. I thought of hiring another PA, but eventually, I will retire, so hiring another physician makes more sense." Liz paused, realizing she was explaining her reasoning to herself as much as to Lucy, who was listening with her usual deep attention. "She's an internist with impressive credentials, but her group practice was absorbed into a big health network. She says she's done with the bureaucracy and wants to leave New York."

"Sounds like you," Lucy observed.

"Yes, except I was older when I decided to leave the rat race. She's only fifty, which makes her young enough to replace me when I finally do retire."

"And when will that be?"

Liz shrugged. "Maybe when you retire."

"I don't have to retire until I'm seventy. I'm only fifty-seven."

"Uh huh." Liz cracked open the other egg and peeled it. "Would you be willing to come to dinner with Dr. Hsu...to give me your opinion as a shrink?"

Lucy gave her a sharp look. "Liz, I asked you to stop using that word. It's disrespectful. Just because I agreed to marry you doesn't mean you can backslide. I don't intend to spend my time with you doing behavior modification."

"Sorry," said Liz and bit into the egg.

"When is this dinner?"

"Next Tuesday. We're eating at Nathan's. I know you like that place. I thought I told you."

"No, you didn't, but I wish you would tell me what's going on, so I don't always find out at the last minute. You need to open your mouth and talk." Lucy tapped her fingers to her thumb to imitate lips moving.

"I know, but I'm used to keeping my mouth shut for professional reasons."

"So am I, but there are some things you need to discuss with your partner. Sex isn't the only way to express love." Liz imagined Lucy giving the same practical advice to couples during marital counseling. "What time is this dinner date?"

"Seven. Afterwards, you can come back with me and stay the night."

"Liz, I appreciate your hospitality, but I need to be at home sometimes. I do have a home, remember?"

"After we get married, we'll live here, of course."

"Of course!" Lucy repeated with faux shock. "When did we decide that?"

"We didn't, but we need to talk about where we're going to live. Don't we?"

"Yes, we do. And then, we will decide together."

Liz got up to get another cup of coffee. "I see you're wearing your engagement ring today. Is this funeral a dress-up occasion?"

"No more than usual. I put on your grandmother's ring because I have that vestry meeting today." Lucy extended her fingers to admire the huge, showy diamond. "I'm hoping the glitter attracts enough attention to prompt some questions. Then, I'll casually explain that we're engaged."

"You're staging an engagement announcement? Isn't that rather devious?"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't want to make a big thing of it."

"Afraid of their judgment?"

"Maybe a little. People were fond of Erika. They're fond of you too, but some people might think it's too soon. I want to ease them into the idea." Lucy looked at her phone. "Liz, I need to go. Come to my house tonight." Liz deadpanned while Lucy studied her face. "Yes, I know. You hate sleeping in the queen-sized bed," said Lucy, "but Liz, you built that bed, and it's very comfortable. I can find you in it, not like that king-sized monstrosity you have upstairs. Come over when you finish your office hours. Okay?"

Liz knew that this small compromise would earn her a few points. "Okay."

She was rewarded with an extended kiss. When their lips parted, Lucy added a quick peck. "See you later, sexy thing. Be good. Or at least, try."

Melissa Morgenstern watched the priest head to her SUV. Lucy wore her collar under her cardigan. Off to work, Melissa assumed. Lucy had been spending most nights with the doctor, probably because the location was more private than her own house on the beach. Set far back from the road, Liz's place was hidden from their few neighbors by dense trees. Most of the time, Melissa treasured the quiet and solitude of the pine forest, but she often missed the expansive view of the salt marsh from her mother's house in town.

After watching Lucy's car head down the driveway, Melissa reluctantly returned her eyes to her laptop. What the ladies did next door was none of

her business, but Melissa often envied their neighbors because they seemed to know exactly what they wanted. Clearly, it was each other, which was confirmed by Liz's adoring look whenever Lucy came into the room.

Melissa wished Courtney would look at her that way. Occasionally she did when they made love, but otherwise, she carefully controlled where her eyes fell and their expression, especially when her daughter was nearby. Ironically, Kaylee seemed more relaxed about her mother's relationship with a woman than she was. Young people had grown up seeing gays and lesbians on TV, in the news, everywhere. No wonder they didn't consider it strange.

Of course, Melissa knew the position of assistant principal of a small-town elementary school was a sensitive one, but in public, Courtney acted like she hardly knew her. Courtney was her first closeted girlfriend. Not that Melissa put a sign on her office door declaring her sexual preference, but everyone at her law firm knew. Before the virus had ended socializing, Melissa had always invited her girlfriends to the holiday office party. When her clients brought their spouses to a dinner meeting, Melissa always brought her partner too...if she had one. Even the clients from conservative states, who made no secret of their politics, seemed fine with sharing a meal with a lesbian couple. It probably helped that Melissa and her girlfriends were indistinguishable from other professional women and didn't look especially gay.

There were some places where Courtney felt at ease. Her landlord occasionally invited them over for a couple's night. Liz's culinary repertoire was considerably more sophisticated than Courtney's. Melissa's palate had been spoiled by client dinners at Boston's top-drawer restaurants. Courtney's meals were prepared with love, and the cuisine in the local restaurants was honest and tasty, but it was fun to get dressed up and enjoy a fancy dinner. Occasionally, Melissa cooked a gourmet recipe she found online, but Courtney did most of the cooking. She said she didn't mind because it had become a habit when she was married.

Melissa felt a hand over hers. "Mind if I sit with you while Kaylee

showers?” Courtney’s brown eyes smiled warmly. Her blond hair was still a little damp from the shower. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“No, I was just looking over my schedule for today.”

“I’m so glad they’re letting you work from home again. Now that you don’t have to get up before sunrise to catch the train, I can sleep longer too.”

“It’s not generosity on their part. The spike in infections forced them. Mike wasn’t happy about letting me work remotely, but the train is crowded, and people don’t always wear a mask. He finally admitted that working from home makes no difference in the business I bring into the firm.”

“Well, if he ever asks me, I’ll tell him I’ve never seen anyone work so hard.” Melissa basked in Courtney’s generous loyalty—one of her most endearing traits. “I only wish we had more space for you to work.”

“I could move back to my mother’s. She gave me a room to use as an office.”

Courtney squeezed her hand. “No, I like having you here, especially because you’re home when Kaylee gets off the bus. She’s a teenager now. I trust her, but you know how it works at that age.” She studied Melissa’s face. “You miss all the space you used to have in your mother’s house, don’t you?”

Melissa shrugged. “Funny. I was just thinking about the view of the salt marsh.” She saw a flicker of anxiety in Courtney’s eyes. “Don’t worry. I’m not moving back in with Mom. With Jack there, I’d feel like an intruder in their love nest.”

“Doug is finally paying child support again. Maybe we should start looking for a bigger place.”

The idea of more room was appealing, but Melissa finally had her finances under control, now that she didn’t have to commute every day. She patted Courtney’s hand. “Let’s wait until the summer people are gone and the rents come down. You seem much calmer about money since you moved in here.”

“I am. I’ve even caught up on my student loan and saved a few dollars. Liz won’t take money for rent. We’re not going to get a better deal than this.”

"So, let's sit tight and see what happens. Right now, everything is in flux." Melissa sat back and sighed, realizing how uncomfortable uncertainty made her. She was a planner and liked to know what exactly was coming next. "Lucy is always telling me to relax and go with the flow. I'd love to, except I can't even see which way the flow is going."

"I know what you mean. Since I left my marriage, everything has been chaotic. For years, I packed lunch for Doug and me, and we headed to school together. On the way, we'd drop Kaylee off, first at daycare, then at school. The routine was boring at times, but I knew one day would be pretty much like the last." Courtney's blond brows dipped to the base of her nose. "Isn't it strange how things go along smoothly for years, and then everything gets shaken up?"

"I'm not a big fan of change, but sometimes, it's a good thing."

A quick smile came to Courtney's face. "Really? Name one good thing about it."

Melissa knew exactly what she was angling to hear. "We got together."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Sometimes, I think you're not sure."

"For a while there, I wasn't. Everything seemed to be against us. Mike wanted me back in the office. You needed a place to live. Mom wouldn't let us move in with her. Then Doug showed up."

Courtney had been studying her face while she spoke. "You're still worried about the bi thing, aren't you?"

Melissa squirmed a little. She didn't want to lie to Courtney's face. "I'm getting there."

"Just because I've been attracted to men in the past doesn't mean I want to be with one now. I'm with you, only you." Courtney frowned. "I'm sorry I ever told you."

"After Doug showed up, it was kind of obvious."

"Melissa, I hate labels. We label kids in school to make sure they get the right services, but then it sticks for the rest of their lives."

"If you hate labels, why do you insist on calling yourself bi? Why not just say you're gay?"

“Because it’s not my truth!” Courtney protested. She pulled back the hand that had been gently stroking Melissa’s.

The door to the sleeping nook slid open, “Mom, when are we going to leave?” Kaylee was all dressed for school and looked impatient.

Courtney spun around to look in Kaylee’s direction. Melissa hoped the girl hadn’t heard them talking. Living in such a tight space made private conversations difficult. “We should talk about this when we’re alone,” whispered Melissa.

“I think that would be a good idea. I have to go,” said Courtney, still sounding annoyed.

When she got up, Melissa reached out to grab her wrist before she could get away. “Courtney, don’t be angry.”

“I have to go,” Courtney repeated, pulling away, but she came back to land a cold kiss on Melissa’s cheek. “See you later.”

Melissa listened to their feet on the stairs into the garage. She felt bad sending Courtney off to school after an argument. What a shitty way to start the day. Melissa wondered why she had mentioned Doug. Courtney’s ex could be annoying at times, especially when he was reminiscing about their marriage, but otherwise, the guy couldn’t be nicer. He always spoke to Melissa respectfully. He seemed to genuinely care about his daughter. Now that he lived nearby, he often took Kaylee for weekends, providing his ex-wife and her new lover with some much-needed privacy. So, why did Courtney get prickly whenever he came up in conversation? She didn’t seem to have feelings for him except wishing he would go away.

Melissa wondered why Courtney couldn’t just say she loved women now. Melissa had to concede it was a selfish wish, which had more to do with her own insecurity than anything Courtney was doing. She hadn’t shown the least interest in Doug or any other man. Arguing about a label was stupid. It changed nothing and only put Courtney on edge.

She hated to add to Courtney’s stress, especially when things at school were already so crazy. People had been demonstrating against the mask mandate even before the new term had opened. In another state, a

protestor had threatened the school board members with a gun. When the report was broadcast on the evening news, Courtney was white with terror. She tried to hide her worry, but it was obviously taking a toll. Now, Melissa had added to her burden with a stupid argument about being bi. Courtney would be busy when she got to school, but Melissa texted her a red heart, hoping she would see it on her break.

Before digging into the morning's tasks, Melissa poured herself another cup of coffee. Harriet Keene had finally sent over the paperwork for Hobbs Family Practice. Drafting the agreement shouldn't have taken so long, but a corporate agreement with so many contingencies was out of Harriet's wheelhouse. She mostly handled business permits and real estate transactions; sometimes, simple wills and divorces. There was time pressure on finalizing the contracts now that Liz was ready to hire a new doctor. Melissa reviewed the places where she'd stuck sticky notes, finding she still had questions for Liz. She glanced out the window. The big Ford pickup still sat in the driveway, which meant Liz hadn't left for the office yet, so Melissa called her.

"Hey, Liz. I'm reviewing the contracts for the practice. Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions?"

There was a slight hesitation. "Sure, but I don't have a lot of time. I'll open the door through the garage for you."

Liz appeared at the door wearing khakis, a perfectly ironed button-down shirt, and a blazer, but her feet were bare. "Come in," she said, opening the door wider. Liz was the consummate hostess. The fact that she didn't offer Melissa a cup of coffee meant that she really was pressed for time.

"The orange tags are my questions for you," explained Melissa handing her the documents.

"Come into my office." While Liz flipped through the pages, Melissa studied the photographs and awards on the walls. She knew that her neighbor hadn't always been the senior doctor at Hobbs Family Practice. In a former life, she'd been a famous surgeon and well-known author. "Yes, I

want the real property to become part of the assets of the corporation when I leave the practice.” Liz flipped to the next tag. “Yes, I want the corporation to be bound by the succession plan.” She looked up. “Is that it?”

“The blue tags are for Harriet.”

Liz slid the papers across her desk. “Tell her I’ll set something up for later in the week.”

“Okay. Can you give me a clue what it’s about, so I don’t look stupid when she asks me?”

“She knows. But I’ll tell you. You know all my other business.” Liz looked at her through her brows. “You know that Lucy and I are engaged.”

“Yes, but I’ve kept it to myself, like you asked.”

“That’s good because I haven’t even told my friends. I only told Harriet because she’s my lawyer. She keeps pushing me to draw up a prenup like the one I had with my first wife. Admittedly, it made the divorce go smoothly, but I don’t feel I need one with Lucy.”

In her work as a trust attorney, Melissa was known for her expertise in financial planning, but because of the age difference and Liz’s professional success, Melissa looked up to her. She was flattered to be asked for her advice. “Does Lucy have significant assets?” Melissa asked.

“She does. After she recovered the earnings her agent embezzled, she found a legitimate financial advisor, who really grew her investments. Her wife left her well off, and the beach house is worth quit a bit, as you might expect. Erika had an insurance policy to pay off the mortgage, so Lucy owns it free and clear. Yes, I would call her assets significant.”

“She has a daughter, and I assume you have heirs. Prenups are a good idea for people with wealth. Better to sort things out when there is good will between the parties.”

“I know all the reasonable arguments, and I was willing to listen to Harriet when I married my first wife because I wasn’t really sure. I have absolutely no doubts about marrying Lucy.”

“That’s how you feel now,” Melissa cautioned. “As you know, situations can change. Feelings can change.”

"I want to enter this relationship in good faith, and I think Lucy feels the same."

Melissa found herself crossing her arms on her chest, mirroring Liz's posture. "If you're both so certain, why not do a prenup?"

"I want Lucy to know I trust her...and she can trust me, no ifs, ands, or buts."

Melissa studied Liz's resolute face. "I could make lots of arguments that might change your mind, but it sounds like you've already decided."

"Yes, I guess I have," she said, nodding. "Thanks, Melissa. You've been very helpful."

"But I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did. You let me think out loud, but you need to leave now, because I have to go," said Liz briskly.

By now, Melissa knew Liz well enough not to be offended by the abrupt dismissal. Besides, it was probably time for Melissa to be at her makeshift desk in the garage apartment. When she checked her phone to see if there were any messages, she saw one from Courtney—a string of red hearts.

Brenda Harrison could feel her wife's eyes on her while she buttoned her shirt. She flipped up the collar and looped the regulation navy tie around her neck. "I guess seeing me in my uniform doesn't bother you anymore."

"No, I've accepted it. It's part of you...like having blond hair and blue eyes...and being white."

"I can change being a cop, but I can't change being white."

"White is how God made you, and I wouldn't ask you to give up your job because you love being a cop. That's why I tried to talk you out of resigning. And aren't you glad Olivia wouldn't go along with it, especially now that your heart is almost back to normal?"

"I would have lost all that pension money. I owe Olivia for refusing my resignation."

"Sometimes, she can be decent," Cherie said, idly smoothing the bedsheet with her hands. Brenda admired her wife's attempt at kindness toward the town manager, especially knowing how much she disliked her.

“Olivia is not my favorite person,” said Brenda, engaging Cherie’s gaze in the mirror, “but she has her moments, like all of us.”

“I still don’t trust her.” Cherie wasn’t alone in her skepticism. As the former CEO of the big hedge fund she’d founded, Olivia Enright was used to getting her way. Pushy, overbearing behavior never went over well with Mainers, who were mostly ‘live-and-let-live’ people. Most of the residents of Hobbs were “from away” but tried to learn the local customs. Not Olivia. She thought she was superior and made sure everyone knew it.

“She saved my job,” said Brenda, thinking back to when her COVID-related heart problems first surfaced. At first, she wouldn’t listen to Liz, who was hopeful that she would recover. Everyone tried to talk her out of quitting her job, but only Olivia had the power to prevent her resignation. No matter how much Olivia annoyed her, Brenda would always be grateful. “And I’m one of the lucky ones. Many COVID long haulers are still out of commission. Liz says they may never get better. Scary.”

“We’re just beginning to see how big a problem that will be. We’ve been so busy handling the outbreaks, we haven’t had time to think about the long-term effects. I don’t know how we’ll deal with all those chronic cases.” Cherie got out of bed and put a robe over her nightgown. She mocked a shiver. “It’s right chilly this morning. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to move to Maine?”

“Because your father was a Mainer, and he wanted to die at home.”

“Yes, exactly. Daddy was so homesick for this place, but he’s gone now, so why did I stay?”

“Because Liz gave you a good job.”

Cherie’s full lips curved into a sly smile. “You know that’s not the reason.”

“You stayed because you love me.”

“Damn right, I do,” said Cherie, standing on her toes to give Brenda a kiss. “Come downstairs, Chief Harrison, and your wife will make you a nice big breakfast with all the fixings.”

“You don’t need to do that. It’s your day off. You could have slept in today.”

"I know, but I don't want my Brenda heading off to work without a good breakfast in her belly." She gave Brenda's midriff a gentle poke. "Which is getting more impressive by the day. I see you've moved your belt a notch. Come down, and I'll fry you up a couple of eggs. And how about that nice ham I made the other night? Mmm. I think I'll make some for myself too. Maybe a nice ham-and-cheese omelet. What do you say?"

Brenda smiled, watching Cherie's face as she concocted the breakfast menu. Her wife was the most natural cook she'd ever met. All she had to do was taste a dish, and she knew exactly how to make it.

After Cherie left, Brenda carefully adjusted her tie and inserted the Hobbs Police tie pin. She snapped on her epaulets and threaded through the cross belt. Finally, she put on her collar insignia and stood back to inspect her image in the mirror. She always tried to look sharp to set an example for her officers.

This uniform wasn't NYPD blue like Brenda and generations of Harrisons before her had worn, but Hobbs PD gray made her equally proud, especially the collar stars and sleeve chevrons designating her rank as chief of police. She'd had to work her way up from patrol officer, even though she'd made lieutenant before she took retirement and left New York. She hadn't minded because she'd been looking for a lower-stress job, and that's how they did things in Hobbs.

Brenda thought of how close she'd come to giving up the uniform and even her life. She had never felt so sick in her life. For a while, she'd needed an oxygen tank to breathe. Fortunately, Liz and Cherie took good care of her. Cherie still felt guilty because she'd been an asymptomatic carrier, who'd infected Brenda and her father before she knew. Emphysema had left Jean-Paul Bois vulnerable, so the disease took him fast. Cherie would probably never forgive herself for her part in his death or giving Brenda the virus.

"Brenda! Are you coming down soon?" shouted Cherie up the stairs. The tantalizing smell of coffee wafting up from the kitchen made Brenda crave a cup. She grabbed her service shoes from the closet and hurried downstairs.

Cherie was pouring her a cup of coffee when she came into the kitchen. "Two eggs or three?"

"Two's plenty. How come everyone's worried about cholesterol except you?"

"You don't get much cholesterol from food. Eggs are okay."

Brenda sat back in her chair. "I like eggs, so that makes me happy. It's nice to have a doctor in the house."

"I'm not a doctor, just a physician's assistant," Cherie gently corrected. "I don't know half of what Liz carries around in that brain of hers." Cherie gave Brenda a kiss on the top of the head. "Honey, you need a dye job. Your dark roots looked cool, but now, they're coming in gray."

"I'll do it this weekend. It grows so fast in the summer."

"I just want my hero to look her best. Don't you have those departmental awards coming up? Your photo will be in the paper. Olivia worries about how her people look to the public."

"I'm not one of her 'people,'" muttered Brenda.

"She's the town manager and you report to her, so yes you are."

Cherie didn't need any encouragement in her dislike of Olivia, so Brenda changed the subject.

"When is Liz hiring that new doctor?"

"Sounds like soon. One of the candidates is doing per diem work this week."

"You really don't mind having two doctors to support?"

Cherie shrugged. "I'll have more patients, but that's good. It means the practice is growing and my job is more secure. For a while there, when we had to close the office during the lockdown, I was worried I might be let go."

"But Liz kept paying everyone. She's a real mensch."

"A what?"

Brenda was surprised. She thought everyone knew that word. "It's Yiddish for a decent person who does the right thing."

"That's Liz all right." Cherie looked up from beating the bowl of eggs. "Mensch. Huh? I'm picking up a lot of those New York words from you."

"Maybe I'll learn to speak New Orleans."

"That's good. When we start our family, I want it to represent both of us."

"Cherie..." Brenda tried to think of a gentle way to say that starting a family in their fifties wasn't a good idea.

"Yes, I know. You think I'm too old to carry a baby, but I'm healthy and still fertile. Cathy says if that's what we want to do, we should get going."

This topic was even more volatile than Olivia's high-and-mighty attitude. Brenda decided to let it go.

Cherie sang softly as she watched the omelet cook. She always had a tune in her head. Just hearing her voice in her house could bring a smile to Brenda's face. After Marcia died and during all those years alone, Brenda never thought she'd meet anyone special again. And then, there was gorgeous, sexy, smart Cherie to love her. Brenda wasn't an especially religious person, but she murmured a little prayer of gratitude.

Sam McKinnon combed back her chestnut hair with her fingers. Feeling daring, she'd let it grow long on one side and shaved the other. While her hair remained the original color, and she was young enough to carry it off, she figured she might as well experiment. It might be her last chance before she looked ridiculous. At sixty, she knew she was already pushing it.

"How long will you be working on the renovation of Liz's office?" Olivia asked, pouring Sam a cup of coffee.

"I have no idea."

"That's an informative answer," Oliva said, topping off her own coffee. "Surely, you know, and you're not telling me for some reason I can't even guess."

"There is a reason, which is, I don't know myself. Building materials are in short supply. Many of the things we need are on backorder. No one can give me any information." Sam hated defending herself to Olivia, whose penetrating blue eyes sometimes made her feel like she was back in grade school.