

## **Dreams Awakened**

by Brenda Weathers Hargroves

Normally, Liz wouldn't have given entering her home a second thought, but this time was different. She recalled pulling into the driveway but didn't remember moving from the car to the door. As she fumbled around in her purse for her keys, dread slowly seeped into her being. After Alan's mid-December funeral, she'd spent the last two weeks at her daughter and son-in-law's Atlanta home, spoiled and entertained by efforts made to help her overcome her grief.

Spending time with her family during the holiday season offered comfort, but the sorrow and loneliness that haunted her took precedence. Though the last few months of caring for him had been filled with distress, her heart sank at the thought of his absence. Grateful for the agreeable southern weather, she often found herself seated alone on the patio, listening to the upbeat chatter coming from inside the house.

But now she faced the painful truth. She would never again step into her New Jersey home and receive a warm welcome from the man she'd been married to for over forty years. A welcome that, thanks to early onset Alzheimer's, slowly shrank from affectionate hugs and kisses to faint recognition.

She stepped inside and, from habit, called out, "I'm home." Though used to not always getting a response, she acknowledged the difference between the silence then and in the past. Before, she always headed into the living room for results of the coin toss. Alan, her friend, lover, and now companion, who looked perfectly healthy at 70 years old, would be seated in front of the television in their black leather recliner. Upon seeing her, his eyes would either brighten or remain neutral, depending on his recollection at that moment.

Acknowledging the solitude of her surroundings, Liz, instead, headed for the bedroom.

Anxiety about returning to an empty house, coupled with stress from flight delays, had made for a long, exhausting day. Quickly changing into her nightclothes, she told herself she'd unpack in the morning. After tumbling into bed and stretching her arm across pillows arranged on Alan's side of the bed, she settled in. The pretense of embracing her husband afforded consolation.

Liz woke to beckoning sunshine, surprised that she had slept straight through the night and so late. That hadn't occurred in a while, but then again, sleeping in one's own bed always proved more restful.

Bathroom routine completed, Liz headed to the kitchen for much-needed morning coffee. Before realizing it, she pulled out two cups. With a sigh, she reached up to place one back on the cabinet shelf.

The doorbell startled her. Who could be stopping by at 10:00am? For that matter, who knew she was home?

"I'll get it, honey." No, she hadn't lost her mind. Repeating prior small habits somehow made her feel better.

Liz's neighbor, Yvette, stood at the door, hazel eyes hidden by bright-colored glasses, an exaggerated amount of blush dotting her freckled cheeks and a silly hat propped on top of thick brown curls. The paper horn she blew into made an ear-piercing sound.

"Happy New Year!"

Liz recalled Alan's enthusiasm at the beginning of each year, always excited about what the coming months might bring. Although she'd seen happier times, Liz couldn't help but smile.

"Same to you, Yvette."

"I noticed your lights on last night. Was gonna come over, but when I looked again your house was dark."

“I went to bed early.” A knot rose in her throat. “Coming home to an empty house was hard.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m glad. Come on in. Want coffee?”

“Uh, huh.”

Yvette and Chad purchased the house next door when Liz's elderly neighbors relocated to Florida. The couple recently had their first child, so Yvette did free-lance work from home for a social media marketing firm.

Liz had grown fond of her young neighbors. Always pleasant and helpful, they were exceptionally kind and patient with Alan, even as his condition worsened. Having someone close by she could call on without feeling like it was an imposition made Liz’s life easier. And although she hadn’t yet made the offer, she secretly looked forward to babysitting. Minding their child might give her renewed purpose.

Coffee poured, they settled at the kitchen table. Yvette started the conversation quietly asking, “So, how are you doing?”

The knot returned. “Better, I guess.” Liz attempted a smile. “Spending time with my family helped.” She hesitated, wringing her hands. “It’s just that I’ve been taking care of Alan for so long I don’t know what to do with myself now that he’s gone.”

Yvette grinned. “I have an idea.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?” Liz tried to muster some of her young friend’s enthusiasm.

“Chad’s taking the baby to his mom’s tomorrow afternoon. He said I need some ‘me’ time. I’m going to make a vision board. Why don’t you come over and make one too?”

Liz scowled. “Thanks honey, but I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, I don’t have a vision.”

“Maybe going through the process will help you discover something.”

“Nah.”

“Oh, come on.” She added teasingly, “I’ll make that dip you like.”

After experiencing a moment of shame that food would be the deciding factor, Liz sighed, then gave in. “What should I bring?”

“Nothing. I have all the supplies we’ll need.”

“I don’t know why I let you talk me into this.”

“It’ll be fun.”

“Right.”

#

After showering and dressing, Liz took a long look at herself in the mirror, contemplating the woman staring back.

Not bad for pushing 65. Still shapely, her complexion wrinkleless due to a meticulous skincare routine, curly brown hair with gray highlights (what she liked to call them) and clear polished manicured nails

She grinned, recalling how Alan used to tease her when he caught her admiring herself. The half-hearted smile, however, didn’t overshadow the sadness her eyes revealed.

Several well-meaning friends and family members had assured her the empty feeling would eventually pass. The day would come when memories of Alan would simply evoke a smile. She could only hope their words of consolation would ring true.

“Oh well. Mustn’t keep Yvette waiting.” She left the house with little enthusiasm.

Yvette flung the door open before her neighbor rang the bell. It was as though she had no intention of giving Liz the chance to change her mind and back out.

“Come on in. Everything is waiting for us in the dining room.”

Gladys Knight’s voice floated through surround-sound speakers. An inviting charcuterie board filled with slices of prosciutto and salami, several types of cheese, crackers, cashews, strawberries, cherries, broccoli and cauliflower florets, along with the coaxing dip, occupied one place setting. The rest of the table held a stack of magazines, glue sticks, scissors, various colored highlighters, and several sheets of poster board.

“You didn’t tell me you were expecting other people.” Liz protested, not up to socializing.

“I’m not. This is all for us,” Yvette reassured. “You can create your board and get drunk as a skunk while doing so. At least, that’s what I plan to do.” She grinned. “I don’t have to go anywhere afterwards and all you have to do is walk next door.” A wink followed. “Be right back.”

Liz retreated to the kitchen and returned with two wine goblets. Liz felt the tension ease as she popped a slice of cheese into her mouth. The afternoon might prove enjoyable after all.

For the next two hours, they ate, drank, and occasionally spoke while creating their vision boards. The background music consisted of a mix of female singers that besides Gladys, included Patti LaBelle, Dianne Reeves, Cassandra Wilson, Diana Krall and a voice Liz was not familiar with.

“Who’s that?”

“Samara Joy. She’s new to the scene. I loved her music the first time I heard it.”

“Her style is distinctive.”

Yvette grinned. “She’s on tour and will be in our area next month. We should go see her.”

Why not? Yvette couldn’t remember the last time she’d attended a live concert. “That sounds like a great idea. I’ll get tickets. My treat.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist. It’ll be something fun for me to look forward to.”

Liz smiled. “Atta girl.”

They raised their glasses, sealing the deal with a toast.

#

After completing their boards and indulging themselves to their fill, Liz stood to leave. “I had a wonderful time. Thank you for insisting we do this.”

“I did too. I’m going to hang my board in my office, so I can look at it every day.”

Once back at her house, Liz plopped down on her sofa and placed her creation on the table in front of her. Though slightly inebriated, she marveled at how the images and words she’d chosen reflected dreams to fill the void in her life.

Grateful she and Alan had smartly saved for retirement, the freedom to do anything now presented itself. She visualized herself traveling. Possibly moving to a foreign country for a while and teaching English. She pictured herself trying out the recipes she’d been gathering for years and becoming a famous food critic. Well, maybe not famous. But more important, the possibilities were endless.

The last few years had been challenging, but she did the best she could to make her husband’s life comfortable. He died feeling loved and well cared for. In one of his last fluid moments, he thanked her and made her promise to enjoy the rest of her life when he was no

longer there. She'd almost forgotten that vow.

Determined to gain control of the strangling emotions surrounding her loss, she silently swore to keep her word. Confident Alan would approve of however she spent the time she had left, Liz rose, headed to her bedroom and strategically hung her vision board, positioned to stare back at her every waking morning.