

Prologue

A picture can touch your soul. It can also set it on fire!

Her soft brown eyes penetrated my composure and struck a raw nerve. Danielle Slammers long blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her kindergarten students were gathered around her. She smiled, happy at that single moment in time. Not anymore. Now she was a woman, brutally stabbed to death in a small town in Oregon. At the time of her death, she was thirty-two, unmarried, with a dog, an older sister, and both her parents were dead. A shiver ran up my spine. It could be me. Our stats read the same except my sister is younger. Danielle and my life seemed like parallels, except I was still alive.

Unsolved – unresolved – ignored. It stuck in my craw like day old oatmeal.

Chapter 1

It's a flaw. I know it is. There are so many people who live their lives content in their own little bubble and never get into anyone else's business. Not me.

My name is Liza Wilcox and I'm a fixer. I've always been the person that people come to when they don't understand something or just need to talk or vent. I'm a good listener, keep confidences, and find answers. Sometimes the only way to find them is to nose around. I've been a kindergarten teacher for the last ten years and have found fulfillment in teaching and contentment in sticking my nose into things in my own community.

Last spring, that changed. My frustrating computer wouldn't display the correct date and I was ready to toss it to my students for a lesson in "free exploration" until the day before spring break.

A friend reminded me that the date was the day a child was kidnapped. The young child's angelic face ripped open a part of my soul that had been patched years ago. My own unresolved trauma led me to delve into the bizarre world of a clown cult in search of that missing child.

When I got back to school my computer worked again. I never gave it another thought, assuming that the district's tech team had finally solved the date problem.

That is, until the last day of school.

Instead of June 16th, it read - December 20th.

Immediately I called the District's tech team to complain that their repair hadn't stayed fixed. Several button pushes later, I was connected to the correct department.

"Tech support." The bubbly receptionist answered.

"Hi, this is Liza Wilcox. Someone came out and repaired my computer a few months ago and it's broken again."

"Okay, let me connect you to one of the techs. I'm sure he can help you."

A few seconds later, the tech answered.

"Joe here."

"Hi Joe, this is Liza Wilcox. Someone came out and fixed my computer a few months ago, but it's doing the same thing again."

"Okay. Let me check my records and I can probably walk you through the fix."

I heard keys tapping and paper rustling. Then a few seconds later, he was back.

"What was wrong with your computer again?"

"The date."

"Oh yeah. We couldn't ever figure out why your computer kept changing the date."

"Then who fixed it?"

"I don't know. We didn't."

"Could it fix and then unfix itself?"

"Not likely, unless your battery has a defect in it." I heard more key tapping. "But according to our files, we replaced the battery twice, thinking it was the problem. So that can't be it. The likelihood of three batteries being defective is pretty slim."

"So now what?" I sighed in frustration.

"Well, wait a bit. Maybe it will fix itself again," he gave a small snort.

“Thanks.”

I hung up the phone and stared at my computer. What exactly was going on? The last date had led me to an unsolved case of a kidnapped child and now, this one, to another kindergarten teacher who'd been killed. I'm sure I could pull up any date on the computer and find something that I could connect with. So was all this just chance? Did it really matter? No. I clicked on the icon for the Internet and started my search of Danielle Slammers and her death.

Two days later, my stomach was in knots and my blood pressure had to be at least two hundred over two hundred. I hate computers! I've spent all this time searching the World Wide Web trying to find more information on Danielle. I've seen a million sites that have nothing to do with what I'm looking for and accepted a billion more cookies. If I had those cookies to eat, then my two-day ordeal might have been worth it! But I've found nothing. And since there are no kids around, I'm thinking about giving my laptop to my dog, Shelby. She's part Sheltie and the rest mutt, but she'll dig a hole and make this computer disappear. After all, I'm the person who took her in when she was lost and sick. She'll do anything for me.

This is what I've learned: Danielle Slammers was found stabbed to death on December 20th in a small inn located in Clainsworth, Oregon. She'd been a kindergarten teacher for ten years in Centerville, Oregon, a hundred miles north of Clainsworth. Her hometown newspaper contained quotes about how nice she was and that she loved kids and teaching.

Just then the phone rang. I glanced over at the number readout. The knots in my stomach turned to butterflies and I smiled. It was Tom. During my last adventure, I met Sheriff Tom Owens, the current love of my life -- except we haven't actually used the “L word” yet. He's a stocky man, only a head or so taller than my five-foot slender frame, with taut muscles, broad

shoulders and the most gorgeous blue eyes. A woman could get lost in those eyes, trapped behind the long lashes and spinning in the deepness of them.

“Good morning, Tom,” I put my feet up on the coffee table, took the rubber band out of my long red hair, and leaned my head against the back on the couch. We rarely have short conversations and I may as well be comfortable when I give him the bad news.

“Hello, honey. How were your last days at school?”

I was still trying to get used to his calling me “honey” all the time. “Hectic, as usual.”

“Are you ready for some well-earned rest?” Tom’s voice was soft and full of anticipation.

“It seems to me I don’t get much rest when we’re together.”

He laughed. “That’s because we’ve been playing the weekend hop back and forth to see each other. And I haven’t seen you at all in the last two weeks. Now we’ve got the whole summer to spend together.”

It was as good a time as any to tell him. “I have a few things to do before I come up.”

“Wait a minute..., what’s up?” His tone elevated with a hint of aggravation. “Two days ago you were packing your things for a summer in the mountains. What happened in the last few days?”

“I’ve been having some problems with my computer.”

“Oh, no.” He sighed. “Not that date thing again?”

I hesitated, then continued. “Well, yes.”

“Liza, I know if I tell you not to go, you’re going to do it anyway.”

“I did okay with the clowns, right?”

“That might have been beginner’s luck.”

“I don’t think so, and besides, I saved you from the clowns, remember?”

“I would have eventually gotten away from Bruno and Oscar by myself. They weren’t the brightest men I’ve ever faced.”

“That’s true. But still, I saved you before you could save yourself.”

“Okay.” He let out a deep breath. “I’ll give you that.”

“A concession by the great Sheriff Tom Owens? Miracles happen every day.” I laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

His tone only deepened. “Where are you going and what are you looking into?”

“A kindergarten teacher died in Clainsworth, Oregon.” It wasn’t the whole truth but near enough.

“I can understand your interest, her being a kindergarten teacher and all, but how did she die?”

“In a hotel room.”

“Liza?” I didn’t need to see him to know he was frowning.

“What, no ‘honey’?” I teased.

“How about the entire truth?”

“She was stabbed to death in a hotel room.” There, I’d said it and couldn’t take it back. No answer from Tom. After a minute or so, I continued, “Are you still there?”

“Don’t you think looking into a murder is out of your realm of investigating skills?” he said coolly.

“No, you said yourself that I asked great questions and you even offered to make me your deputy.”

“It’s true, you do have a knack for asking questions that have been overlooked, but investigating a murder can be dangerous.”

“But I have all those new skills you’ve taught me. I can take down an attacker, from the front and back.” I continued before he could interrupt, “although we always seem to end up in bed when we’re practicing those moves. I don’t suppose that will happen if I’m really attacked, will it?” I teased. Maybe getting him to think about being in bed with me might shift the conversation.

He blew out a long exasperated breath. “Liza, you drive me crazy.”

“I know.”

“It’s a good thing that I find you totally captivating and thoroughly irresistible.”

“All true.” I teased.

“Why don’t you give me the name of the teacher and I’ll make some discreet inquiries for you.”

“I didn’t think Sheriff Tom Owens could do ‘discreet.’ It’s a record - two miracles in one day!”

He laughed; it was full and rich. I knew I had won. “How about I just make a few calls for you?”

“That would be great. I like that you’re helping me.”

“If I help, maybe you’ll be home sooner.”

“Would that be my home or yours?”

“What do you think, honey?”

“Well, Gainesville is on the way back from Oregon. I guess I could stop by for a few weeks.”

“That would be nice. How long are you going to be gone?”

“I don’t know. Last time I stayed until I solved the case.”

“That could take all summer.” He sounded irritated again.

“I’ll give it a couple of weeks. If I haven’t figured it out by then, I’ll give it up.”

“That sounds reasonable. What do you know already? I don’t want to duplicate your work.”

“Not much. I’ve spent two days looking for information on the Internet but only know she was a kindergarten teacher and she was killed.”

“I think I can do better than that. I can’t believe that’s all your Super Cyber Sidekick could find?”

I laughed. Justin would like that label. Even at eighteen, he was a computer genius. His skills at finding information about people and places were invaluable during my last escapade. “I haven’t called him yet. I’m not sure I want to get him involved again. I kind of put him in the middle last time.”

“It’s a good thing or I wouldn’t have come up looking for you. That email may have saved both our lives.”

“I suppose.”

“Besides, he loves helping you.”

“That’s because I was his kindergarten teacher. We have a special bond with our students.”

“Oh brother, that sounds pretentious.”

“But true.” I sighed. “Maybe I’ll give him a call after we hang up.”

“Good.”

“I think you just like someone else watching over me besides you.”

“That’s true, too. I’ll make those calls and get back to you.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

“You’re welcome. When you get to my house, I’ll want a proper thank you.”

“I knew you had an ulterior motive but I don’t care. I love that you’re helping me and will also love giving you that proper thank you.”

“Did you notice that you used the word ‘love’ twice in that sentence?”

“Yes. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Goodbye honey.”

After I hung up the phone, I debated whether to make the call or not. Justin Weaver was certainly old enough to help. But he would only be a senior in high school next year. He was a year older than most seniors because he lost a year of school when he was thirteen. He had a soccer accident that left him a paraplegic. I visited him every week during his months of grueling physical therapy sessions, but the feeling in his legs never came back.

My hand quickly dialed Justin’s number because I needed him and his computer expertise. I wouldn’t have brought down the clowns without him. He answered on the first ring, “Hello, Teach.”

“Hi, Justin. How’s your summer going?”

“Lousy. I hate being out of school and away from the school’s high-speed Internet connection.”

“Well, they’re having summer school at your high school. I’m sure I could make a call and see if they could let you have some time in the computer lab.”

“That would be great, Teach.”

“As long as you stay away from hacking into places you’re not welcome.”

He laughed. “They’d never figure out it was me, Teach. You know that.”

I laughed with him. “Justin, there are things that I just don’t want to know about.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“Perfect.”

“So, why’d you call? Are you going out of town and need me to watch that yappy dog of yours?”

“No, but I am going out of town.”

“Another case?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, that’s great. What are we investigating this time? Another kidnapped child? Another clown cult?”

“I don’t really know yet. I haven’t been able to find much on the Internet about the event.”

“How many hours did you waste before calling me?”

“Never mind about that.”

“Give me the information and I’ll see what’s out there.”

I told him about Danielle Slammers and her death.

He let out a deep breath. “Wow, a murder this time. That seems a little risky.”

“More than mind-controlling, drug pushing, kidnapping and murdering clowns?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. This might be a simple mugging.”

“It could be, but I’m going to look into it anyway and see what I can find out.”

“That’s what you do best, Teach.”

“Thanks. And Tom’s going to make a few phone calls, too.”

“The sheriff’s going to help? That’s a surprise. I thought he was against your doing any investigating on your own.”

“There are some things that even the great Sheriff Tom Owens can’t control.”

“That would be you, Teach.”

“He has a new name for you and I think you’re going to like it.”

Justin let out a huge sigh. “What is it?”

“Super Cyber Sidekick.”

“You’re right,” he said, his voice perking up. “I do like it. And I like that the man recognizes my talent. It makes me an official part of your investigations.”

“You were that without the title, Justin.”

“I know, but I still like the title. Maybe I’ll have a t-shirt made with it or add it next to the racing stripes on the side of my wheelchair.”

“What ever you decide, I’ll pay for it.”

“Then I’m definitely having it airbrushed onto my chair.”

“You have it done, I’ll pay the bill.”

“Thanks, Teach.”

“No, thank you. The information you get me is invaluable. I couldn’t investigate anything without you.” Silence. Knowing Justin, he was probably blushing from the compliment. I continued, “Give me a call when you get the information. I’m going to head up to Clainsworth in an hour or so. According to the maps on the Internet, it’s at least an eight hour drive.”

“You got it, Teach. Take care and don’t forget to be careful.”

“I always am.” I hung up the phone, pulled my feet from the coffee table, and went to pack. Not knowing exactly what I’d need, I threw a variety of clothes into my suitcase, from

jeans to a skirt. Then I took a quick shower and put on a pair of black Capris and red short-sleeved top. I stopped, checking my reflection in my closet mirror. At barely five feet tall, the Capris looked more like long pants on me. I'm always cold so that's not a bad thing. The shirt was a little tight across my chest, possibly due to my ancient clothes dryer that only dried clothes when it was set on the highest temperature or my chest - the only thing on my body that still seemed to be growing. I pulled off the shirt; tossed it into the Goodwill bag I kept in my closet and found another in a larger size.

Then I went in search of my gun. I was smart enough to know that investigating a murder was dangerous and the gun might just come in handy, again, this time.