

Chapter 1

My stomach tightened in uneasy anticipation as I pondered two questions: Can someone's destiny be set eight months in advance? And if so, can it be altered? I sat down on the couch in my townhouse, took a deep breath, dialed the number and heard three rings, four clicks and the same low monotone voice.

"You have reached the library research division. If a file has been started, please punch in your four-digit code."

The uneasiness turned to angry bats, frantic to fight their way out of my chest as I offered up a silent prayer; please let there be some new information. I pushed in the four numbers.

"April 15, 2010. A rodeo star's entire family was brutally murdered today. The police have no suspects. Updates to this event will be entered into the library as they occur."

Silence. Two clicks. A dial tone. The sound echoed through my body and stabbed my heart. How could there be no new information? No city. No names. And how can I stop that family from being killed five months from now?

Not one update in three months. Every Saturday I call, but my hopes deteriorate as I hear the same words. I first heard the recording in the beginning of August when I received a phone message slip in a Texas hotel when I went to visit my parent's grave. Since then, I've spent two weeks in Gainesville with my fiancé, Tom Owens, who took over the office of Chief of Police a few months ago when the city established their own police department and stopped using the County Sheriff's Department. I have also started a new school year with twenty five-year-olds and six four-year-olds in my Kindergarten class, made it through Back-to-School Night, survived Halloween, completed the students' first report card, and enjoyed a Thanksgiving Feast in my classroom.

The phone rang. My body responded to the caller ID with butterfly summersaults in my stomach, love in my heart, and a tingling in other parts. Tom Owens is a several inches taller than my five-foot inch frame with broad shoulders and the most beautiful, glistening blue eyes. I glanced down at the exquisite platinum ring on my left hand and my heart swelled. With a solitary diamond in the center and two smaller stones on each side, it still takes my breath away.

"Hello, Tom." I put my feet up on the couch to get comfortable.

"Hello, Liza. How was your class feast?"

"Wonderful. All of the kids brought something to share and we ate fruit salad, turkey sandwiches, chips and milk."

"Did you like it better than what you did last year?" Tom asked, always interested in my students and job.

"Stone Soup is fun but I've done it for the last few years so I needed a change."

He laughed. "Honey, your middle name should be change. I bet you rearrange your classroom every year and change the curriculum."

"I leave some the same," I told him, as I idly twisted my long red hair into a ponytail.

"Which? The room or the curriculum?"

This year I moved the front of the classroom to where the side was last year, started a new math program, and rearranged my writing and reading centers. And now it was time to change the subject.

“How’s Duke doing?” I asked, knowing that bringing up his own dog would lead to a discussion of mine and then on to other things.

“He’s a great dog and he loves staying home and not being rushed out and into my squad car every day but he misses Shelby. He’s got no one to run around in the pine trees with when she’s not around. By the way, I don’t hear your dog. She’s usually yapping away.”

“She’s at Justin’s house. Ever since she stayed there when we were on the cruise last summer, Justin’s mom takes her for a walk or to her house for a visit at least once a week.”

“Sounds like they need to get their own dog.”

“No, it works out well for both of us, so don’t mention it.”

“How is your Super Cyber Sidekick doing in school this year?”

“Justin has seven classes, three of which are Advanced Placement, and his report card didn’t have a single ‘B’ on it.”

“Then it’s a good thing you haven’t given him any assignments. He wouldn’t have time to do both.”

“Oh, he’d find time to help me. He likes to investigate the cold cases, too.”

“Then no strange dates on your computer to send you on a new adventure?”

Tom was referring to the last three cases I investigated. On the first, my school computer kept starting up with a May 19, 1998 date instead of the correct one. No matter what the computer technicians from the district office did, it still returned to that old date. After a suggestion about that date from a friend, I did some research on the Internet and found that on that date a child was kidnapped, so during spring break, I investigated the event. Eventually, I tangled with a clown camp and ended up on the wrong side of a gun, but I found the kidnapped girl, Jessie McGowan, and met Tom. On the second case, the date December 20 appeared after months of date-free problems on my computer. That date represented a kindergarten teacher who had been killed in Oregon, so during winter break I unraveled the mystery behind an eating contest and an entire corrupt town dependent upon drugs for its survival. Of course, my car was totaled in an accident, I was arrested and I fell in and got lost in an abandoned mine. But after all that, I found the teacher’s killers and got to enjoy a hot and yummy treat called Apple Pots.

My last adventure was more personal. The strange date came via an email and was accompanied by a picture of my parents on their last vacation cruise before I thought they were killed in a plane crash. Last summer, Tom and I took that same cruise, where I was threatened, several of my parents’ old cruising buddies were killed, and Tom asked me to marry him. In the end, the killers were caught and I found out my dad was still alive. Although since he’s wanted by the FBI as an eco-terrorist, Tom and I don’t discuss him. After all, Tom is a cop and would have to arrest my dad if they ever met.

“Hello?” Tom interrupted my reminiscence.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about those last three cases. Do you realize that that we’ve only known each other for eight months and we’re already engaged?”

“Love me?”

“Of course.”

“Then time has nothing to do with it.”

“True. So what did you ask before I faded away?”

“Any more wrong computer dates?”

“Nope, my computers at school and home are weird date free.”

I heard him sigh with relief. I hadn’t told him about the library message yet.

“That’s good,” he said.

“Can I ask you a weird question?”

“Sure, love. What?”

“Do you believe in destiny?”

“Like me and you meeting?” he said with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Yes, that, but also do you believe that a person’s destiny is set and can’t be changed?”

“Oh, no, I think it changes every day, maybe even several times a day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being a cop, I’ve seen it too many times. A mother takes an extra five minutes to unload the dishwasher before she leaves her house. It’s her teenager’s job and she never does it, but one morning she does and she misses being in a five-car pileup on the freeway.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But maybe it was her destiny to miss the accident.”

“Maybe, but every time an airplane goes down, you hear about people who missed the flight and those that got on at the last minute. I think we change our fate in many ways every day. Destiny is a moving target – as soon as you get close, it moves.”

“I suppose.” I glanced down at the yellow notepad I kept on the coffee table in case I ever needed to write something down when the message changed or gave me more information. It was blank – the way it had been for months. It sent a chill up my spine knowing an entire family would die and I was no closer to finding them and stopping it.

“What’s the matter?” Tom asked. Sometimes his sensitive nature was so tuned to my emotions that it was difficult to hide anything from him.

“Nothing. I was thinking about my dad,” I mentioned the one subject that he won’t discuss.

“Okay, we’re not talking about your dad,” Tom’s tone deepened. “He’s a fugitive that’s wanted by the FBI. I don’t want to know anything about him.”

“Sorry.” I felt more than a little guilty, but rationalized that, since I believed an entire family would be murdered, trying to stop it wasn’t something Tom would want me to get involved in.

“That’s okay,” he backpedaled. “It’s a gut reaction when you talk about your dad.”

“Do you still plan to come to my house the Wednesday before Thanksgiving?” I asked.

“Yep, I have court Monday and Tuesday. I should be there by noon on Wednesday.”

“I always look forward to the time we spend together.” A smile slid across my face as I thought about the days and nights with Tom.

“Me too, this hopping back and forth on the weekends gets old.”

“You could always quit and take a job in San Ramon,” I suggested as I picked up the blank pad and started doodling on it. Our banter about who is going to move usually goes on until someone gives up. I’m getting pretty good at it by now.

“You could always quit and take a job with the Gainsville Unified School District,” he suggested, then added before I could speak, “I heard three Gainsville teachers are retiring at the end of this school year.”

“I saw a big board that said the San Ramon Police Department is hiring. A man with your experience ought to get a job right away,” I countered.

“Okay, let’s agree to disagree on this point.” He blew out a breath, frustration evident in his voice.

“What a good idea.” I love it when he gives in first. “I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“If I can get out of court early on Tuesday, I’ll come then,” he said.

“You’re welcome anytime, Tom.”

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too,” I told him. “Will I talk to you tomorrow?”

“Probably not until Monday. I’ve got firearms training tomorrow from the crack of dawn until late.”

“On a Sunday?” I asked.

“Yeah, well, it’s the only day we can all get together. I’ll try to call you during our lunch break.”

“Don’t stress about it. Starting Wednesday we’ll be together for several days.”

“Goodbye, honey,” he said.

“Goodbye, love.” I hung up the phone, glancing at the pad where I had written the date, April 15, 2010, over and over again. In big letters, small letters, cursive, and even bubble letters.

I thought about what he said about destiny. How could a family be predestined to be extinguished? Wouldn’t everything they do every day change that fate? And since I had no idea which family, which city, or which rodeo – how would I stop it?”

The doorbell rang and I heard several barks. When I opened the door, my sable and white Shetland sheepdog, Shelby, pranced in, wagged her tail, jumped up and down, and barked.

“Settle down, girl.” I stroked her rough long-haired coat that was in need of a good brushing.

Behind her, Justin did a wheelie with his wheelchair. Although he will be nineteen on his next birthday and has been wheelchair bound since a soccer accident five years ago, he still has the exuberance of a young boy. He exercises every day, so his big bulk barely fits into his chair. It was probably time for him to get a new one.

“Howdy, Teach,” he said as he pulled out the triangular blocks I kept next to the door. He slid them onto the stairs and rolled into my house.

“Did your mom enjoy her visit with Shelby?”

“It cracks me up.” Justin laughed. “She’s always complained about how much she hates pets – they’re too messy, dirty, destructive, and noisy. Shelby is all those things and more, yet Mom dotes on her like she’s a princess.”

I closed the door behind them. Shelby quickly went through the dog door panel in my sliding glass door and ran into the backyard, barking the entire way.

“Does that gray squirrel still torment her?” Justin asked.

“Yes, he waits for her every morning, sits on the fence and squawks. She goes nuts and runs around the yard. He knows that she can’t reach him, so he walks back and forth on the top and taunts her.”

“One of these days he’ll fall off and she’ll get him.”

I laughed. “She wouldn’t know what to do if he did.”

“That’s true. Hey, I looked up some information on rodeos for you, Teach.”

“Great, you want a soda?”

“Sure, I’ll take a non-diet anything you have.” He maneuvered his chair next to the kitchen table.

He knows that I only drink diet Coke, so to have something non-diet in my refrigerator is a little unusual. “I’ve got Coke and root beer. What would you like?”

“What? You never have anything but that yucky diet stuff. I usually end up with lemonade.”

“Tom’s coming Wednesday, so I picked up some others when I was at the drugstore the other day.”

“Thank God you plan to marry someone who doesn’t drink diet soda. Then I’ll always have something I can drink.”

I laughed. “Pick one.”

“I’ll have the root beer. Got any ice cream?”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Stupid question,” he said. “I’ll take a root beer float.”

I fixed us each a float, joined him at the table and set the ice cream and soda between us. Justin can never wait for the ice cream to melt, so I’m constantly adding more soda. I, on the other hand, stir the mixture until it is all melted and then drink it.

“Okay, first off, I have to say, there is a lot more to this rodeo business, than I thought. There are so many different kinds.”

“What do you mean?” I stirred my drink a little faster. I was anxious to drink it since I hadn’t enjoyed a float in a long time.

“Okay, it’s a whole bunch of acronyms – you’ve got the PRCA, CCPRA, IGRA, and the NPRA.”

“What? Wait a minute. Let me get my note pad.” I walked to the coffee table, tore off the top sheet of date doodles, threw it in the trash can under my sink, and sat back at the table. Pen poised for information, I said, “Okay tell me about rodeos.”

“Every state seems to have a professional rodeo association. The CCPRA is California’s; the NPRA is the northwest states, which include Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California, again. Then there is the Henry Picket Rodeo – that’s the Black Rodeo and even the IGR which is the International Gay Rodeo. Not to mention the rodeos who specialize in one event or another, like the PBR, the Professional Bull Riders.”

My head spun but I wrote the information down. Maybe it would make sense later, I thought. “What about the date?”

“The closest rodeo to that date is the one in Oakdale.” Justin took a huge spoonful of ice cream and slid it into his mouth.

“Oakdale?”

“Yeah, it’s in Stanislaus County, about 15 miles northeast of Modesto, at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It’s considered the ‘Cowboy Capitol of the World’ and the gateway to Yosemite National Park.”

“Cowboy Capitol of the World?” I asked as I set down my pen to stir my float and take a sip.

“Oh yeah, they just won that title from Stephenville, Texas, a few years ago. But it’s not just rodeo cowboys, these are real cowboys that work on ranches. Oakdale’s central location in the valley, according to the Cowboy Museum, made it attractive to many young cowhands in the 1950’s and 60’s. During the week they worked on area ranches and entered the rodeo competitions on the weekends. Several of them won rodeo championship titles and brought home awards and acclaim to Oakdale. Again, according to the museum, these rodeo athletes earned over 25 professional world championship titles and countless trips to the National Finals Rodeo.”

“You sound like a commercial,” I told him, spending more time sipping my float than jotting down information.

“Actually, it sounds like a nice place.” Justin took another huge spoonful of ice cream and slid it into his mouth.

“Maybe you can go with me to the rodeo,” I suggested and put another scoop of ice cream into his float.

Justin stared at me, then said, “Thanks for the ice cream but a place with cows, horses, dirt arenas, and cowboys doesn’t sound that cool.”

I laughed. “So when is their rodeo?”

“April 10th and 11th.”

“That fits with the date.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know if it’s the right town.”

“No, I don’t have near enough information.” I glanced at my yellow pad full of acronyms and rodeo events but no real facts about who, what, or why. The only thing I knew was when.

“We never talk about how you get these weird dates, Teach. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, Justin. The first two were probably by chance. If you research any date on the Internet, you will find something that resonates with you.”

“And the last?”

“I think my dad sent it, even though he says he didn’t.”

“What about the new date?”

“I don’t get it at all. A date in the future? How can I stop something from happening when I don’t know who it is happening to? And why do *I* get the dates?”

“Well, you did solve the last three cases. So you’re batting one hundred percent, Teach. So, hopefully you’ll get more information before April.”

“That could be too late,” I twisted my hair out of the pony tail and combed it with my fingers. “Maybe I’m supposed to do something now.”

Justin put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re stressing, Teach.”

“There’s a family that will get murdered, Justin.”

“People die every day, Teach.”

“I know that,” I told him. “But it’s not just the family I could save. Consider how one death affects so many people. The opposite is true. If you save one life, it could change the destiny of many. I’ve been thinking a lot about it lately.”

“Are you wondering about how one boating trip changed your family’s destiny?” Justin asked.

I nodded. “If we didn’t go on that trip, then maybe both my parents would still be alive.”

“Maybe, but your family probably wouldn’t have moved to California, and think about all the children, including me, you’ve helped over the years. If you’d stayed in Texas, you might not have become a teacher.”

“Everything is so interconnected, isn’t it?” I said.

“Yes.” Justin slapped the arm on his chair. “Sometimes I think about what if I hadn’t gone to that game or dived for that ball. My life would have been different, but would it have been better?”

“Without you, we wouldn’t have located Jessie or found closure and justice for the Danielle’s family.”

“True, but without you we wouldn’t have even looked into those events,” he added.

“We are getting very philosophical, aren’t we?”

Justin laughed.

We heard a knock at the front door.

Shelby ran in from the backyard barked and jumped on the door.

I opened up to a man dressed in white work overalls embroidered with “Johnson’s Fix-It Shop” over his left pocket. Over his shoulder, I could see a white van on the street with the same logo. It was a local business that I used to fix my dishwasher and washing machine last year. But there was just one thing – I didn’t call them.

I locked eyes with the man and reached out to hug him.

“Hey, don’t do that. The Feds might be watching,” my dad whispered, then smiled.