

## Chapter 1

August 13, 2004 is etched on my heart and soul, like a gang tattoo on an inner city youth. Two intricately carved oak coffins flash before my eyes, each covered with beautiful, long stemmed white lilies – my mom’s favorite. The coffins were as empty as the void in my heart caused by the loss of my parents. As my stomach tightened with each wave of memory, I sat back in my chair, sighed, and let the tears flow. No matter your age, when life makes you an orphan, you feel vulnerable and abandoned.

So why was my stupid computer insisting upon displaying that date? I had seen incorrect dates on my computer twice before. Both were unsolved cases, each with families who searched for closure and resolution. One was a kidnapped child and the other a kindergarten teacher’s murder. And both times I had been able to solve the case, bring the child home and expose the murderers.

This was different. I couldn’t find anything on the Internet about the date: August 13, 2004. In the past I found articles that touched me. The kidnapped child reminded me of my best friend who had been kidnapped and killed when I was a child. The murder of a kindergarten teacher? Well, it didn’t get more personal than that.

My name is Liza Wilcox and I’m a kindergarten teacher. I love to teach, but after one-hundred and eighty days with four and five year olds, I relish my summer break. Just to be able to sleep in an extra hour, put my feet up and read a book that doesn’t have more pictures than words, and actually spend time in the yard at my townhouse without even a thought about lesson plans is wonderful.

In the last few months I’ve found an added passion. When my computer displays an incorrect date, I research it on the Internet and find a case that connects with me. I investigate and search for answers. I’ve been lucky. Twice I’ve been able to solve the cases with only minor danger to myself.

Of course, I had help. Justin Weaver, an ex-student and computer genius, searches the Internet for answers and information about the case and the people involved. And then there’s Sheriff Tom Owens. He’s the current love of my life as well as my teacher in self-defense and gun marksmanship.

This date is different. I haven’t been able to find anything about August 13, 2004 that I connect with. But it still haunts me. It’s the date my parents were killed in an airplane crash. My dad was a pilot and they were on their way back from an eco-rally, as both my parents were ardent environmentalists. Their plane was caught in a freak weather system and went down. Nothing was left of the plane except a mangled mess of metal. I’d seen the crash pictures and the images were still fresh, even though it has been over three years. There was nothing suspicious about the accident. Maybe Justin could find out more about the date.

I dialed his number and he answered on the first ring. “Hello, Teach.”

“Hi, Justin.”

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I’m having trouble looking something up on the Internet again.”

“Teach, some day I’ll give you a lesson in how to research things.”

“Why?” I laughed. “I’ve got you.”

“That’s true and there is no one better. What are you looking up?”

“August 13, 2004.”

“Another date? We’ve got another case already?” His voice elevated with excitement.

“I don’t know.”

“How’d you get the date? You’re not at your computer at school and that’s how we got the last two cases.”

“I know. I checked my school email, like you taught me, and I got an email with that date but with no message. When I tried to reply, it got bounced back as undeliverable. So I ignored it and then I got another email with the same date.”

“Someone has a very sophisticated system if they can alter the date on an email and block any reply. If you give me the address, I can do some research.”

“I don’t think that’s important. I’d just like you to look into the date. I can’t find anything.”

“Okay, Teach. The date was August 13, 2004, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll surf and see what I can find.”

“Thanks, Justin.”

“You’re welcome. Super Cyber Sidekick away!”

I closed my phone and chuckled. That’s the nickname Tom had given him. Justin had it spray-painted on both sides of his wheelchair, right on top of the red flames already there. Justin has such a great attitude. He doesn’t see his wheelchair as a disability, but a chance to go faster and quicker than everyone else. He hasn’t walked since he was injured in a soccer accident many years ago.

The phone rang and Shelby, my Sheltie, went crazy barking.

“Quiet, Shelby,” I yelled, which made her just bark more. Sometimes I wonder why I ever took in the scrawny stray who wandered into my garage a few years ago.

I checked the caller ID. Jordan. I had not talked to my younger sister in months, and before that it had been at least a year. Two sisters couldn’t be more different, in appearance and beliefs. Where I am barely five-feet tall and carry a few extra pounds, she is tall and built like a runway model. My hair is red, wavy and uncontrollable, while hers is blonde, short, and always cut in the latest style. She is Vogue, I am Good Housekeeping. And we always end up in an argument. What did she want, I wondered?

“Hello.” I said, tentatively, as I pet Shelby to keep her quiet.

“Hi, Sis. I hear you still have that yappy dog.”

“Yes.”

“Leave it to you to pick up a stray, nurse it back to health, and keep it.”

“Shelby’s a great companion,” I said and pushed Shelby away from the phone.

“Yeah, but she’s so noisy.”

“Just when the phone rings, or the doorbell chimes, or anyone goes by on a bike, skateboard, or scooter.”

“That’s about all the time, Sis.” She laughed. “How are you?”

“Fine. What do you want?”

“Do I have to have a reason to call you?” She grumbled.

“No, of course not. I’m sorry. How are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“Still incarcerating the bad guys?” My sister is an assistant District Attorney in New York.

“Of course. Are you still teaching the rug-rats?”

“Yes. Except it’s summer vacation.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

The conversation lolled. My sister and I don’t have much in common and we rarely agree on anything. She thinks I’m too easy on people, I think she’s too hard. It’s probably a product of our jobs, but it doesn’t help us get along.

“How’s your new boyfriend?” she asked.

“Tom’s fine.”

“I’m glad you’ve got a boyfriend who’s a cop. Maybe it will change your ideas about people.”

“I doubt it, Jordan.”

“Do you and he have as many arguments about people as you and I do?”

“No, we try to avoid the subject.”

She laughed. “That’s probably a very good idea.”

I laughed, too. And then heard silence on the other side of the phone. “Why’d you call, Jordan? Is something wrong?”

“No, not really.” She sighed heavily.

“Then what’s up?”

“I’ve just been thinking about mom and dad lately.”

“I know. It’s close to the anniversary of their deaths. I’m thinking about them too.”

“I still miss them, Liza.”

“I do too, Jordan.”

“Remember how mom used to play dress-up with us?”

“Yes. You always looked better in the dresses than I did.”

“True, but you looked better in dad’s suits. Mom used to say that together we made a great couple,” Jordan laughed. “And dad always tried to get me to play basketball with him.”

“I played.”

“Yeah, you were a much better son than me.”

I sighed, as I remembered all the wonderful times I spent with my dad. It was true. If Jordan was the girl in the family, I was the boy. Jordan shopped and I fished.

“They sure liked to cruise, didn’t they?”

“Well, they went every year. If it was July you knew Mom and Dad would be on a cruise ship bound for the Mexican Riviera. They always had a good time.”

“Do you remember the last time?”

“Of course. Mom called the day she and Dad got back. They’d had another great time.”

“Mom called me, too.”

I hadn’t known Mom called Jordan. My mother hated the phone, and the fact she’d called both of us the day after they’d returned from their cruise was bizarre.

Jordan interrupted my thoughts. “Did Mom tell you she and dad met someone from our old hometown in Texas on the cruise?”

“No. She didn’t say anything about it. Who’d they meet?”

“I don’t know, she never said. Well, I’ve got to go.”

“It was nice talking to you, Jordan.”

“You too, Sis. Will you visit their graves on the anniversary?”

“No,” I shook my head. “They’re not there anyway.”

“I’m going.”

“Take a bouquet of flowers for me, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Goodbye, Jordan. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Goodbye, Sis.”

I hung up the phone, moved to the couch and lay down. Thinking about my parents’ deaths was depressing. I put my head on the pillow and closed my eyes.

My sister and I were both born in Cartena, Texas, a small community north of Dallas. We lived there until I was three years old and Jordan was one, then moved to sunny California and settled in San Ramon. I don’t remember much about the Texas place, except we had a huge house, a pool, and a basketball court. My dad spent hours teaching me how to dribble on that court. To this day, I can still slam-dunk a basketball better than most. One day, Mom came home from her teaching job at a local elementary school, we packed our things, and left.

Several years later I asked my mom why we left and she said Dad was offered a new job. My dad was a lawyer and my mom a schoolteacher. Mom said Dad took the job in California because it was a much larger law firm than the one in Texas. He made partner two years later, so I guess it was a good move. It was funny; he also started using his given name, William, instead of his nickname. In Texas, he was Billy. I guess the nickname was too casual for the California firm. And because he used his “more formal” name, so did my mom. She went from Jojo to Joyce. They pranced around the new house and pretended they were royalty. I smiled as I remembered how much my mom and dad had loved each other. They’d never been afraid to show it, either. Dad was always kissing Mom; she’d push him away and then smile and wink at him.

My phone rang again and I picked it up quickly, my stomach knotted up with anticipation. Hopefully Justin had found other incidents to go with the date. When I saw who was calling, the knots turned to butterflies. It was remarkable how my body reacted to just his name.

“Hello, Tom.” I sat up and put my feet on the table next to the couch.

“Hello, honey. Are you enjoying being home?”

“Yes.” I sighed internally. It’s amazing how his slow soothing speech always made me feel relaxed and excited at the same time.

“Ready to come back?” Tom asked.

“Not quite yet,” I said.

“But I miss you,” he complained.

“Sheriffs should not whine.” I told him, although my mind flashed to the many days and nights I’d been held by his muscular arms, laid my head on his broad shoulders and got lost in his beautiful glistening blue eyes. My pulse spiked with the memories. I missed him too.

“But we do. When we don’t get what we want.”

“We all can’t get what we want when we want it.”

“I usually do.”

“Well, this time I’m afraid you don’t.”

“Maybe I’ll take a vacation and come to your house.”

“You’re always welcome here, love.”

“Thanks. Is my dog welcome, too?”

“Of course, but usually you don’t bring Duke. What’s up?”

“Well, he lost his job as a police dog and is spending all his time at home.”

Duke had been shot during a robbery several months earlier. It took quite a while for him to recover but the last I heard, he was back at work. He was a huge German Shepherd and seemed to love going to work with Tom. However, during one of the last calls I’d gotten from Tom, he’d been trying to corral a new K-9 puppy. “Has Chase returned from police-dog school?”

“No, he’s not due back for several months.”

“Then why isn’t Duke patrolling?”

“Frankly, I don’t know, he just doesn’t want to. I put him in the car and he rides around just fine. But if I need to get out and apprehend someone, he refuses to come with me. I lost a perp last week because I was too busy trying to get him out of the car rather than catching the burglar.” Tom sighed loudly. “I think he needs a doggy psychiatrist.”

I laughed. “I don’t know, maybe he does. He seemed fine last time I was there.”

“I know. This all happened after you left.”

“I’m sorry, Tom. I know how much you liked having Duke patrol with you.”

“Yeah, but I guess it’s time for him to retire.”

“Are you going to get another patrol dog?”

“No. I’m going to let Chase go with one of my other officers. Being the chief, mostly I do paperwork these days, anyway.”

“It sounds like you’re bored.”

“Yeah. I like chasing the bad guys, not filling out the paperwork to incarcerate them.”

“Somebody’s got to do it.”

“I know, I just wish it wasn’t me.”

My phone beeped. Justin. “Hey Tom, I’ve got another call. Can I call you back?”

“Later tonight, okay? I’ve got to go to court this afternoon and testify. It’s another part of my job I don’t like.”

“I’ll call you tonight.”

“Talk to you later, honey.”

“Bye, love.”

I clicked over and Justin said, “What took you so long?”

“I was talking to Tom and it takes me a while to figure out how to switch between people on this phone.”

“How’s the sheriff doing?”

“He’s fine,” I said quickly, wanting to know what Justin had found on the Internet. “How did your research go?”

“It’s funny. I’ve never seen a day so boring. I’ve been through newspapers, journals, and magazines both in our country and abroad. Nothing much happened on that date. There was an earthquake in Argentina, a couple bank robberies in the Midwest, and lots of gang activities in LA but nothing which struck me. And there certainly wasn’t anything I thought you’d have a connection to, either. Nothing,” Justin hesitated and then continued, “except your parents’ plane crash.”

Justin knew about my parents. He was fourteen when their plane went down. He came over every day and sat with me and we talked, not necessarily about my parents but about events happening in the world and with his life. It was nice to concentrate on something besides my grief. I’ve known Justin since he was five years old and his parents moved in across the street from me. I taught him in kindergarten and we have been close ever since.

“Teach? Are you there?” Justin said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m here.”

“Thinking about your mom and dad?”

“Yes.”

“It’s getting close to the anniversary of their death.”

“Yes. You couldn’t find anything for August 13, 2004?”

“Well, I did find something but I’m not sure it’s important.”

“What did you find?”

“An obituary for a man.”

People die all the time. If I started looking at the obituary section of the paper, I’d have a million cases to solve. “Who?”

“His name was Adam Sherman and he died on a cruise ship a few weeks earlier. It took his wife that long to get his body released from a Mexican coroner, organize the funeral services, and get the information into the newspaper.”

“Was it the cruise my mom and dad were on?”

“I think so. Did they ever tell you someone died on their cruise?”

“No.”

“I don’t know if it’s important or not, but that’s all I can find for the date.”

“Was there anything suspicious about his death?”

“Not really. He got sick and died. It wasn’t like he was shot, stabbed or fell overboard.”

“Well thanks, Justin.”

“Do you want me to keep looking?”

“No, that’s all right.”

“I feel like the Super Cyber Sidekick has let you down.”

“Never, Justin.”

“If you want me to investigate Adam Sherman, let me know.”

“No, I don’t think it means anything.”

“All right. Goodbye, Teach.”

“Goodbye. Justin and thanks.”

I closed the phone and set it on the table. My computer beeped again. I had forgotten to turn it off, I was so busy talking to Jordan, Tom, and then Justin. I went over to the kitchen table and pushed the space bar. The computer said I had a new email. My finger hesitated. Did I really want to see it? Maybe it was just another unwanted ad for Viagra or something from a bank in South America. I pressed the key.

The new email was from the identical undeliverable address with the same date: August 13, 2004. I closed my eyes and clicked the button to open the mail. My stomach tied up in knots again and I felt like I would vomit. Slowly I opened my eyes. No message again, just an attachment.

I opened it. Staring back at me was a picture I’d never seen: my mom and dad with another couple, all smiling and holding on to each other. Under the picture was typed: William, Joyce, Adam, and Betsy having the time of their lives.

Adam?

Was Adam the Adam Sherman in the obituary? And did his death have anything to do with my parents or their death on August 13, 2004?