

Chapter 1

I ran my fingers down the chain and stopped when I reached the beautiful solitaire diamond mounted in an antique platinum setting. Anxiety swarmed like angry bees in my stomach every time I thought of the ring and its history – it had gone more rounds than a prizefighter.

Shelby's long auburn fur felt silky and smooth under my touch. She looked up, licked my hand, and set her head on my leg. I sighed. "I know girl, I miss Tom, too."

Gainesville's Chief of Police Tom Owens and I met only a few years ago and it was instant electrified chemistry. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel his muscular arms surround me and experience the pulse of desire that spiked through my body when I thought of him.

The last round was a few weeks ago when my sister Jordan called to suggest a weekend at the beach. We had talked frequently since Tom shattered my heart and I threw his ring at him but I was still surprised that she wanted to spend time together since, over the years, we have grown into totally diverse people. Her job as a district attorney in New York makes her see the world and most of its people as scum. My job as a kindergarten teacher in the Bay Area of California makes me see the good in people. Most people wouldn't even guess that we were sisters since her tall runway model's body, high cheek boned face, and designer clothes are in total contrast to my five-foot stature, rounded face and clothes bought at Target. Simply stated, Jordan is *Vogue* with its high fashion and beautiful people and I am *Ladies' Home Journal* with its flatten your belly tips and articles on how to be a best friend.

Our dad surprised us by joining our weekend trip. Instead of being in prison and topping the FBI's most wanted list, he was guarded by two agents and was their star witness against several radical members of his eco-terrorist group.

I leaned my head back against the chair, grabbed a blanket from the wicker chest that I used as a table on my back porch and remembered the events that changed my life's path *again*.

"Hey, Dad," Jordan, had called as she tied the sleeves of her Guess dark blue zippered hoodie around her waist.

"Yes?" Dad turned his head. The hair at his temples seemed grayer since I saw him last but his bright blue eyes glistened and the smile on his face warmed my heart.

"Let's go for a run down the beach."

Dad laughed, kissed me on the forehead, and slipped off his Birkenstock sandals to run in his bare feet. “That’s a great idea. I can’t wait to see the Feds trying to keep up with us, especially in those suits.”

Dad and Jordan took off down the beach. The suits jogged behind them. I closed my eyes to soak up the sun, feel the wind on my cheeks, and tried to *not* think. But I couldn’t keep my mind from Tom. I missed the man, I missed his laughter and love and I was miserable without him. But I couldn’t call him. How do you take back – I hate you?

I remembered all the times we sat entwined together, me in front with my head snuggled on his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around me. We might be on the deck at his house in the mountains, my back porch, and even on the balcony when we went on that Mexican cruise. It felt so real I could almost feel him. God, I missed his arms around me.

“Love me, honey?” his voice in my head said.

I laughed.

“Do you?” his voice asked again.

“You know I do,” I answered to the wind and the waves.

I felt something being slipped onto the finger of my left hand. I looked down and saw Tom’s ring.

He pulled me close, brushed his cheek against mine and said, “You’ve got four weeks to organize a wedding, honey. Don’t you think you’d better get started?”

I jerked my body around and saw Tom. He was dressed simply in blue jeans, red T-shirt, and cowboy boots. His blue eyes were bright and my pulse kicked up a bit, as it always did when his body was near mine. But the surprise, then elation quickly died as my anger spiked. My stomach clenched as I raised my hand.

A slow smile slid across Tom's face as he leaned in for a kiss.

I poked him in the chest and growled, “You broke my heart.”

Poke.

“No, amend that, you shattered my heart. You knew how much it would hurt me and you didn't care.”

Tom's eyes widened with each stab of my finger. “I didn't have a choice . . .,” he began.

I interrupted and kept poking. “You knew how much having my dad back in my life had meant to me but you still arrested him and took him away from me.”

“I am a cop, Liza. What did you expect that I would do? Let a man who was number three on the FBI's Most Wanted List just walk away?” His voice elevated on the last few words, more out of incredulity than anger.

“You made me an orphan *again*, Tom. Just when I had started to feel whole again, you stuck in a knife and ripped away part of my heart.” I poked him again.

Tom stiffened as he narrowed his eyes at me. Now his anger rose to the surface, but I didn't care.

When I started to poke him again, he grabbed my hand and said, “Liza, stop.”

“Fine.” I pulled my hand away as I stood. Then I slipped the ring off my finger and tossed it back to him.

He caught it with one hand and grabbed my wrist with his other. “Didn't you just say that you loved me?”

I looked into the eyes of the man who held my heart and said, “I do love you.”

His face lit up.

Then I ripped my hand from his grasp and said, “I just don't happen to like you.”

I stormed up the path that led to the condo we had rented, swung open the porch door and slammed it behind me.

Tom was smart – he hadn't followed me. No doubt he hoped I would cool off, forgive him, we would be engaged again and I would be knee deep in planning our wedding. Fat chance!

I paced around the bedroom, fighting between tears of regret for the loss of someone I loved and escalating anger at the same man. “How dare he just show up, thinking I would so easily forget what he had done? He hadn't cared how it would affect me to lose my dad again. He had only been concerned about what he needed to do because he was a cop. Those needs were more important than mine. How had I ever fallen in love with someone so selfish? And then he shows up, slides on that ring and tells me I better get started planning a wedding. Who the hell does he think he is? He is so controlling. How had I ever fallen in love with such a control freak?” I threw my hands in the air in exasperation.

“Liza?” Jordan interrupted my ranting.

“What?” I barked.

Jordan flinched at my tone, then growled her own words. “Don't bite my head off! I am not the one you are mad at.”

I slumped down on the bed and said, “Sorry.”

Jordan sat down next to me, put her arm around me, and said, “Dad's making spaghetti for dinner.”

“Is Tom gone?”

“Nope, but it was great to finally meet him. It’s always nice when you can finally put a face with the name. Although I thought he’d be taller.”

I glared at her.

She cringed. “Well, I did. He’s two or three inches shorter than me, Sis.”

“You’re five-ten, Jordan. A lot of people are shorter than you.”

“Not men and especially not cops.” She shrugged, then continued, “Dad made the introductions. Tom’s in the kitchen with him. They are discussing whether to make a white or red sauce and which spices to use.”

I put my head in my hands. Of course Tom wouldn't leave. The man possessed more sticking power than anyone I knew. He even stayed two years after Pamela, his ex-wife, had announced that she didn't love him and planned on resuming her single lifestyle just so she could finish school and their son Michael would be a little older when they got a divorce.

When I didn't get up to move, my sister asked, “You plan on hiding in here or coming out?”

“I don't hide from anyone,” I told her as I brushed past her and out the door.

When I came out into the dining room, Dad asked, “What do you think, Liza? White or red sauce?”

I knew he didn't expect an answer since my usual choice was that I didn't care, so I said, “I would prefer just some butter and garlic on mine, thanks.”

Both men stared at me. It was probably the first time I expressed an opinion about food around either man. Usually I just let them decide and I ate.

“I can do that,” my dad said slowly. He and Tom exchanged glances. Tom shrugged and I walked over to the couch, picked up the paranormal novel I was reading, and snuggled with the blanket. It was a great novel about a woman who is a ghost. She is spending her afterlife jumping in and out of people and experiencing life. Her creed was fly high, fast, and free – take what you want and never look back! And right now, that sounded like a good doctrine to adopt.

When Dad announced that dinner was ready, I filled a plate, poured a tall glass of iced tea and went back to my couch and book.

Dad and Tom talked about food and recipes. Jordan joined in the conversation when Dad talked about the testimony he would give in several months. They all seemed to be getting along so well and enjoying each other's company. Dad even opened a second bottle of wine – a clear indicator that he was comfortable and happy. Every time they laughed, the knot in my stomach tightened but I ignored them all.

My cell phone rang and Jordan picked it up.

“Hello,” she said, “Yes, she's here.” then to me she said, “There’s someone on the phone for you, Sis.”

I left my couch, took the phone and said, “Hello?”

“Surprise, Stretch,” he said.

“Kenny?” I squealed.

“I'm kicking sand into the water, want to join me?”

A huge smile slid across my face and my heart lifted. “I am on my way.”

I pushed the end call button, threw the phone onto the counter and ran toward the sliding glass door.

As I left the house I heard my Dad say, “Kenny's back in Liza's life?”

“Great,” Jordan huffed, “I was just finally starting to have a place in my sister’s life. Now, I've been replaced again.”

“Who the hell is Kenny?” Tom asked.