

Web of Deception

Chapter 1

I glanced over at the man asleep next to me and sighed. He wouldn't be happy with me, *again*.

Tom Owens and I met a few years ago. We both felt instant chemistry – all fireworks and explosions. That attraction blossomed into a deep respect and an abiding love. He murmured in his sleep and smiled, which sent my heart racing as warmth spread through my body.

Tom's a stocky man, only a head or so taller than my five-foot frame with wide shoulders, thick muscular arms, and glistening blue eyes that always made the butterflies in my stomach soar with delight. He's a cop, actually the chief of police in Gainesville, a small city nestled in the Sierra Nevada mountains. But it is more than a job to him; it symbolizes the center of his personality. His core embodies valor, integrity, strength, honesty, and the need to see justice prevail, but mostly his never-ending desire to thwart any threat and uphold the law.

As I turned the pages of a magazine, my eyes caught the sparkle of the charming single solitaire in an antique platinum setting nestled against a platinum charger with tiny diamonds surrounding the center stone, which Tom slipped on my finger yesterday. Our wedding was magical, including a Cinderella-style carriage ride, white twinkling lights under a gorgeous night sky and a surrounding of lush garden greenery and color.

The guest list included family and friends but also my dad's, sister's and my FBI protective details because my dad went from being on the FBI's Most Wanted list to a star witness against several eco-terrorists. When someone tried to kidnap me to stop his testimony, the FBI moved into my house to provide protection so Dad wouldn't refuse to testify.

My wedding conveyed a dichotomy of wonder and hazards. Tom recorded his singing of "After the Loving" in his lovely voice which played during our first dance as husband and wife, my teacher friends and Tom's cop friends got along wonderfully, his Aunt Charlotte's monkey actually saved our lives rather than disrupting the reception like she had done at other events, we ate yummy chocolate melting cake for dessert and at the end of the night, everyone moved to the dance floor and sang, "We are Family" and meant it. We also survived an electrical fire, a problem with a foot massage machine which nearly scalded my feet, and a cake explosion.

This morning we are on a plane bound for Las Vegas for our honeymoon. Tom chose this city because he thought it would appeal to the many facets of my personality. I am a series of contradictions. I am Liza Wilcox, kindergarten teacher, prim and proper, respectful and honest. I am also an investigator who looked for and found a kidnapped child, closed a psycho clown camp and a corrupt city, saved an entire rodeo family, and solved the murder of several people, including my mother. He understood those two sides of me but a few weeks ago he discovered a third facet of my identity – Stretch.

My high school best friend, Kenny Martin, gave me the nickname. We met on the first few days of high school, both loners and misfits who found each other. After a horrific experience with the kidnapping and murder of my best friend early in the second grade, I experienced

nightmares and panic attacks so my mom and dad home-schooled me. I had little experience in a classroom or socializing with children my own age.

Kenny came from the home of a mom who chose the worst and most abusive losers as boyfriends, and was often truant and labeled as incorrigible. He moved from school to school each time his mother changed boyfriends. We banded together and became inseparable for four years doing every crazy and risky thing we could – from skydiving to bungee jumping to arriving to our high school senior prom dressed in identical black tuxes and on the back of a Harley Kenny borrowed.

I lost track of him when he and his mom ran away from a particularly abusive boyfriend. He is a corporate lawyer and recently relocated to San Francisco. We reconnected and it brought out the Stretch in me – a fast-talking risk taker who grabbed life with both hands and yanked, consequences be damned. It helped Tom understand my past behaviors and unwavering conviction, even when I was up against corrupt, dangerous and despicable people. Kenny and I are, again, best friends. Although Tom said once, we acted like twins separated at birth who still ended up becoming a counterpart of the other. I agree, Kenny is the other half of my heart and soul and I am Kenny's heart and soul.

Kenny is also headed to Vegas, but not to surprise us with an impromptu visit. My best friend is in serious trouble. He stands on the thin edge of an abyss that I promised to keep him from sliding into again. You see, Kenny, through his computer skills and instincts, finds abuse victims and locates and eliminates their abusers. I don't know how it works but he promised to answer my questions later when he asked me to stop investigating the thirty deaths Justin found a few minutes before I walked down the aisle and into Tom's awaiting arms.

I closed my eyes and remembered the conversation. Even though I was excited and delighted to be marrying Tom, I was unhappy because I couldn't find Kenny the right gift for standing up with me.

"Can I ask for what I want?" Kenny asked.

My mood lightened. "You can have anything I can give you, Kenny."

"Love me?" Kenny asked.

"Of course," I told him, squeezing his hand.

Kenny pulled a chair over and sat in front of me, clasping both my hands in his, and taking a deep breath. My stomach plummeted in trepidation. What did he want?

"The case you're working on right now?"

"The one with the thirty, no make that twenty-seven, dead people?"

Kenny nodded.

"Sure, you want to help me and Justin solve the cases?"

Kenny shook his head, leaned toward me and whispered, "I want you to forget them."

Everything clicked into place, like tumblers on a lock and I realized Kenny's involvement in those deaths. At first, and only for a few seconds, I wondered if my best friend was a killer, but then he explained how he found the victims through different chat rooms and then located the abusers and gave them the evidence of their deeds. If they didn't turn themselves in, and because most of the evidence was obtained illegally, he went to the next logical step.

Kenny stated that everyone has someone who would be affected by the release of the damaging information on the abuse, sometimes it's a family member but other times it's a

corporation or another organization. In the thirty cases Justin found, a few turned themselves into the police, two committed suicide when they received the information and others were murdered.

In the eyes of the law, did this make Kenny responsible for their deaths or not? I wasn't sure, but I knew Tom's opinion. He was already touchy about Kenny and the two men he had admitted to killing. Both were abusive, lowlife scum who attacked Kenny with knives and it shouldn't be Kenny's fault that he took the knife away from the men and returned it to them, several times.

Tom promised me that he wouldn't go after Kenny for those two deaths if I proved that he wasn't involved in the three women viciously stabbed in the weeks before our wedding. And it turned out that the professional assassin after me murdered them. When Kenny killed her while rescuing me, Tom kept his word and we haven't spoken about the two men. But Tom couldn't let thirty deaths go, even if the people were abusers of the worst kind.

So I'm not telling Tom that Kenny is also on his way to Vegas. If I told him, he would end our honeymoon, send Kenny to jail and a girl would be lost. Being between a rock and a hard spot would be easier than being between Kenny and Tom. Both men I loved with all my heart and soul, but in a different way. If the next few days went perfectly, I would help Kenny save a girl and have a honeymoon with Tom.

I heard Tom stir and his eyes slid open.

"Hello, Mrs. Owens." His face brightened with a smile and his eyes glistened with desire.

My own eyes answered his as I leaned over and kissed him. When I pulled back, I said, "Hello, Mr. Owens."

He sat up and asked, "How long have I been asleep?"

"Long enough for me to have read this magazine twice and dog-eared several gifts for Shelby."

Tom laughed. "Your dog doesn't need anything from the SkyMall magazine, Liza."

"But they have cute dog beds with actual warmers in them, and I need an auto safety harness for her so she'll be safe when she rides in the back of your truck."

"Duke lies in the back when he rides with me," Tom said as he sat up and stretched his neck.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I understand how you feel about dogs without harnesses riding in the car, Liza, but Duke rode in my patrol car for five years without a harness so he doesn't like them." When I started to protest, he held up his hand and continued, "Honestly, honey, I tried but he ate it off, twice."

"I realize police dogs have to be able to jump from a vehicle and save the day but he's retired now." Tom's dog got shot a year ago and when he recovered, he wasn't as fast and limped after a long run.

"Yes, but in his mind, he still thinks he is on patrol."

I chuckled, "You can take the dog out of the cop car but not the cop out of the dog?"

Tom chuckled with me, shrugged and said, "Once a cop – always a cop."

"Well, while you've been sleeping, I've been drinking water, so can you let me out so I can use the restroom?" I had given Tom the aisle seat and raised the armrest between us to give him more room. He is a big man and in the little plane seats he looked cramped and uncomfortable when we first sat.

"Sure." He stood and got into the aisle so I could get out. When I moved to go around him he said, "I bet Stretch would let me go with her."

I rolled my eyes. "Liza has too much respect for the rules for that."

“No, she’s more afraid of getting caught.”

“There is that and I don’t think the both of us would fit in those tiny little bathrooms.”

“We could make it work,” he smiled, his eyes glistening with delight.

I knew my man, so I took his hand and called his bluff. “Okay, we can give it a try.”

He pulled back and frowned. “No, go on.”

“Chicken?” I raised my tone and eyebrows in challenge.

“Just go, Liza.”

As I walked away, I heard Tom’s phone play that old-fashioned phone sound that indicates he has a new email.

“Hey, what’s up?” Tom said into the microphone of his phone. He hates to type on his phone so he always uses the speech-to-text feature.

The plane was packed, every seat filled with people looking excited to be going to Vegas. A few dozed, but most talked to their neighbor or read. As a teacher, I loved seeing people read. It was good for them and a good role model for the few kids on the plane. I passed a petite blonde woman, sitting next to a man whose face was turned toward the window and nestled into a pillow. Obviously, he chose to nap, like Tom. She looked familiar and I wondered where I’d seen or met her before. Since I couldn’t place her, I continued to the restroom.

After cramming myself into the miniscule bathroom, I wondered how people had sex in them. Tom’s body alone would find it difficult to maneuver in the tiny cramped space, let alone adding my own.

When I came out of the bathroom, the blonde stood outside of the door. She smiled and said, “We’re not supposed to stand and wait but the three bottled waters I drank while my husband slept hit me at once.”

“My husband took a nap, too. I don’t understand how he can do it. I can’t sleep sitting up in the middle of the day,” I told her.

“It’s the cop in Tony, he can sleep anywhere. I think he spent so much time on stakeouts that he learned to cat nap.”

It hit me as I remembered seeing a picture of her in Art’s wallet. “You’re Special Agent Ardour’s wife?”

She narrowed her eyes and said, “Yes. Do you know Tony?”

“He’s been living at my house for the last few weeks.”

“You’re Liza Wilcox?”

I nodded and held up my hand. “Now, I’m Mrs. Owens, too.”

“That’s right. I’m Patty Ardour.” She extended her hand and as we shook, she glanced up the aisle toward her husband, turned back to me and narrowed her eyes. “Wait, a minute. Are we on vacation or is he still on protective duty?”

“I would say Art is doing both.”

“Art? Who is Art?”

I laughed and told her the story of the Chinese food delivery guy and how I called Tony Art and how it stuck.

“I love when he accidentally, on purpose, forgets to tell me something.” She frowned.

“Knowledge is power,” I told her.

Her frown turned into a big smile. “And there is a spa treatment and new outfit in my future, too.”

She hurried into the bathroom as I made my way down the aisle. It's interesting that Tom wants me to be completely honest with *him*, but he often fails to do the same for me.

I sat in the seat next to Art.

He stirred and murmured, "Where did you go?"

"It's a small plane, Art. She's in the bathroom," I said.

Art immediately sat up and snapped his head toward me.

I finger-waved at him.

He glanced toward the front of the plane.

"Tom told you not to tell me that you are following us on our honeymoon, didn't he?" I asked.

When Art started to look toward the front of the plane again, I added. "It's kind of obvious, Art, and I'm not surprised. My dad won't testify for another month and Tom wouldn't feel like he could protect me by himself. He may be confident of his own abilities but he's not stupid enough to risk my life to stroke his ego."

"I was supposed to keep a low profile so you wouldn't see me." Art frowned.

"Cat's out of the bag now," I said as Patty came back to her seat.

I stood, nodded at them both, and walked back toward my own seat. Halfway there I encountered Maury, another of my FBI entourage. He startled back, glancing toward our seats. I guess he spoke to Tom while I went to the bathroom and didn't see me come out and sit with Art until his wife came back.

I finger-waved at him, went around him and returned to my seat.

I touched Tom on the shoulder and he turned his head, smiled, and got up so I could get into the seat next to him.

When I settled in I asked, "How many?"

"How many what?" His face showed his confusion at my question.

I glared at him.

Suddenly, he understood and sighed. "Art and Maury are on the plane. Ryder is in Vegas checking out the security at the hotel."

"I'm taking three FBI guys on my honeymoon?"

"No, only Art and Maury. Ryder is doing the reconnaissance and then he'll be on a plane to Virginia. He's decided to rejoin the BAU. Seeing those victims you and Justin found made him itch to be back there. He finally convinced his wife that he wasn't happy doing protective detail."

"He's going to be working that case?" I asked as my stomach tied up in knots.

Tom nodded, then sighed. "Liza, there is still a contract out on your life by the eco-terrorist group, not to mention the gang that wants you dead because you closed their drug operation in Clainsworth. I can't keep you safe all by myself."

"So I always will have an FBI entourage, even after Dad testifies?"

"No, once your dad testifies and we are living in Gainesville, then I'll be able to protect you. It's a small community and I have four deputies and three busy-body citizens who call me whenever anything unusual happens in the town. They'd spot an outsider quicker than Art or Maury could."

"So you are not worried about the contract from the gang?"

“Not really. Besides they have short memories and their hierarchy changes with the wind. You’ll be forgotten in a few months when new leadership takes over and their focus switches onto something and someone else.”

We hit turbulence. The plane jerked so the seatbelt light came back on and the flight attendant came on the speaker.

“We’ve hit turbulence and since we’re near the Vegas airport, we would like everyone to please put their tray and seat back into the upright position and return any carry-on luggage that you retrieved during our flight. Please turn off all electronic equipment.”

Several people got up, opened the overhead compartments to put away their bags. We hit another pocket of turbulence and the plane bucked just as a man, two rows ahead of us, tried to put away his briefcase. A paper-wrapped package fell out of the overhead compartment, hit the ground with a thud and we heard glass breaking.

The man cringed and said, “Sorry, I think I broke someone’s souvenir.”

The flight attendant came over, picked up the box and said, “Whose package is this?”

Everyone nearby shrugged their shoulders so she got onto the speaker and asked the question again. No one came forward to claim the package.

Art and Maury marched up the aisle, along with another man, with guns tucked away in shoulder holsters but clearly visible. Could the third man be an air marshal?

Tom put his arm over my chest and growled, “Stay.”

“You think it’s a bomb?” I heard the lady in front of us ask her companion.

My adrenaline spiked as I remembered that we never caught the third brother, Angelo, and his expertise included explosives.