

## Chapter 1

It has been several months since we proved Tom's ex-wife, Pamela, not guilty of the murder of her last three husbands. I spent those long months in an office, bored out of my mind with routine tasks like answering phones and typing reports.

In my life, I have done various things. As a child, I played many roles with my dad. Later, I investigated murders and kidnappings. My favorite role, however, is being a kindergarten teacher. I miss the kids, most of the parents and even the painted handprints that always ended up on my apron during Christmas time. I missed being called Miss Wilcox, although now it would be Mrs. Owens since I was married to Tom.

My current job is the receptionist at the security and investigations firm Kenny and Tom formed. And to say I hate it would put a mild spin on the worst days of my life. I don't think I can do it another day without murdering someone and I'd start with my husband, Tom, followed by Kenny.

Tom is a police officer through and through, from his heart to his soul. He abandoned his career in law enforcement for me after some terrible experiences. First, he arrested my dad, although Dad did later enter witness protection to testify against his former associates in the Ecological Terrorist Group. That time I'd flung his engagement ring at him and called off our wedding.

Several months later, we reconciled, and the wedding planning resumed. Despite the kidnapping attempts, bomb explosion and runaway monkey event, it was a truly amazing day! Then he took Kenny into custody, after I had just gotten him back, after losing track of him for over 10 years.

To me, Kenny was more than just a best friend. He's my rock, discerning truth from falsehood in my words. I need him. He's vital; without him, I'd be someone I wouldn't recognize or like. When Tom arrested Kenny, I walked away from my new husband and began a new life away from everyone and everything I knew and loved. I moved up the coast to the small town of Belle City and began a fresh chapter in my life. Upon leaving prison, Kenny joined me in Belle City and reached out to Tom, and we got back together.

"Liza?" Tom called from his office.

I let out a sigh and wondered why he couldn't use the sophisticated intercom system recently installed by Kenny. Just one slight push of a button and his voice could come out of the small antique box on my desk.

I pressed the bottom on the top of the box. "Yes, Tom. How can I help you?"

“Damn it,” a curse reached me through the door. Then a second later, from the box on my desk. “I keep forgetting about this ridiculous thing.”

“What can I do for you, Tom?” I repeated.

“Do you have the Reynolds report?”

I inhaled deeply, calming my frustration with a highly intelligent man who couldn’t find something, even if it was directly in front of him. “It’s in the credenza behind your desk.”

A mutter of “I looked there,” came from Tom.

Another deep breath. “Remember, you wanted the records ordered by year and then alphabetically rather than a single alphabetical file. It should be under the 2012 section.”

“Oh, I remember. I prefer them to be arranged by date as it simplifies tax time, making it easier to locate the necessary files. Thanks, honey, you’re the best.”

With my head on the desk, I groaned, I was what? The best secretary? That wasn’t anything I ever wanted to be. In fact, that’s not a role I ever let my father make me play, either.

I knew Tom was not as happy as he pretended to be, either. I noticed his expression upon hearing sirens several nights prior. He sprang up, dashed to the window, immediately checking the local community Facebook page. It turned out that someone had defaced the granite marker that declared, “You are entering beautiful Belle City”. He immediately left, bought paint, and fixed the sign. The outline is blue instead of yellow now. The orange graffiti was hard to conceal with light yellow paint.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” came Kenny’s sultry voice through the box.

I lifted my head. He must have come in through the back door to his office since I hadn’t seen him arrive this morning. I figured he was staying over at Sylvia’s house again and wouldn’t stroll in until after ten. The local vet, Sylvia, began her workday at nine. They’d been an item for a couple of months. That was quite something, considering Kenny’s notoriously short attention span in matters of the heart.

“Good morning to you. How is Sylvia, and how may I help you?”

“She’s wonderful, but I’m a little weary this morning.”

“You might be more rested if you actually slept at Sylvia’s house.”

“Where’s the fun in that, Stretch?” A smile was clear in Kenny’s chuckled tone.

That’s the name I received from Kenny when we first met in high school. I’d been taller than him and could reach his top locker.

Sylvia was the single bright light in Kenny's life. It was clear to me he wasn't happy with this current employment arrangement, either. In the past, he was a high-priced corporate lawyer at a prestigious San Francisco firm. He soon stopped most legal work, shifting focus to corporate and individual investigations. You'd think the jobs he did for their investigative company would match, but they didn't. Doing financial analysis and investigating individuals didn't compare to uncovering information on companies and individuals to influence mergers.

Kenny had continued to search websites for abuse victims. Of course, this practice had already led to his arrest by Tom after several deaths resulted from the leverage he gave others against abusers. But even that had slowed and we hadn't investigated one of his cases after our Lake Rainer trip, where we found Pamela's third husband's murderer.

"What can I do for you, Kenny?" I repeated my earlier question.

"I've been searching the financials for the Davidson case, and neither of them shows any unusual deposits or expenditures. And they don't have any secret accounts either. Only two dull individuals who despise each other enough to fabricate stories about each other."

"They both want that house."

"Yep, they do," Kenny chuckled.

"I wonder why?" Ignoring Kenny's chuckle I continued, "Okay, if you send me the information, I'll type it up for Tom. Their lawyers can fight it out at the divorce hearing."

"Thanks, Stretch. I need a nap."

"Kenny," I said, "I knew that's why you bought that comfy couch for your office."

"I'm always planning, Stretch. Good night and don't bother me unless the building is on fire."

I chuckled. Having the building on fire would be a highlight of this day.

As I typed, I thought of George and Sally Davidson. They lived in a beautiful, 4000-square-foot house on a hill overlooking the beach. He was a heart surgeon; she, a successful real estate agent. They had it all. Their ten-year marriage ended as they made accusations of cheating, hidden money and assets by each against the other. Arguments ensued because the trust between them had completely disintegrated. Thankfully, children weren't involved because I could see the two of them using those youngsters to get back at the other.

Eleven o'clock – two reports typed, and I answered a call to set up a new appointment.

Noon – ate my peanut butter and jelly sandwich at my desk. Tom was on a conference call with one of the Davidson lawyers and Kenny was still asleep.

One o'clock – spent twenty minutes talking to a gentleman trying to sell me an extended warranty for a car I crashed several years ago. I didn't tell him that, otherwise we would have stopped talking.

Two o'clock – Kenny woke up and staggered into the front office. He was using Sylvia's shampoo more than his own since he spent more nights at her house. The aroma of Hawaiian cookies clung to Kenny. It was amazing!

He stretched, yawned, and announced, "I think I'll walk Zoie to her favorite dog park. She needs exercise. Do you and Penny want to join me? We could bring Duke, too."

I put my chin in my hand, propped it on the desk, and stared at him.

He rolled his eyes. "I know, Zoie becomes neurotic at the dog park because an idiot must have buried chicken or rib bones before planting the grass there."

"And...?" I prompted him to continue.

"Penny runs around frantically until she's exhausted and usually pulls a muscle in one of her legs."

I prompted him further with "And...?"

"Duke walks the fence line in protection mode and won't let anyone else into the enclosed park."

"So..."

He sighed and headed back toward his office. "I'll run financials."

As he walked, I said, "When you sneak out the back door, I expect a carton of chocolate ice cream to be in my refrigerator when I get home since you'll be out earlier than me."

"You got it, Stretch." Kenny closed his office door.

And so, the day continued....

Three o'clock – the phone rang.

"Owens and Martin Security and Investigations. How may I help you?"

"I have a pizza delivery. Can you give me the address?"

I recognized my dad's voice, even behind his hideous British accent. "I'm sorry, but no one here ordered a pizza."

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll check the delivery information."

Then, I pressed the small red button on our phone system after hanging up. I appreciate Kenny knows and loves all the most high-tech toys. The following call's signal would be scrambled,

resulting in only white noise for any listener. This would prevent location tracking of either party. There were still Dad's companions who would have dearly loved to find out his whereabouts and stop his testimony against them.

A few seconds later, the phone rang, and I answered, "Hi Dad."

"If you sounded any more bored, I'd swear you were asleep, Bobby," my dad said through a chuckle.

"You don't sound any better, Dad."

"This new city is hot and boring. They keep telling me it's a dry heat, but the temperature is unbearable."

"I thought this placement would be temporary and the last one?"

"It would be if they were competent and could find a certain friend of mine."

"Now, you know what you've always said. If you need a job screwed up, call ...," I began.

My dad concluded, "The local authority."

"But if you really want it to be screwed up ..."

"Call the Feds."

Dad and I chuckled together.

"Which of your friends haven't they been able to track?"

"Gary Orland."

"They've been aware of his location twice already."

Gary Orland was one of my dad's associates in the eco-terrorist group. A short man, barely a few inches taller than my five-foot frame and twice as wide. He was an arrogant, chauvinistic bully, a classic case of Napoleon complex, quick to anger when challenged or when things didn't go his way. He wanted to be emperor of the world and he didn't care who he stepped on or crushed into the ground to get there.

"Yeah, with you at Lake Rainer working a gambling angle and then again in New Orleans trying to purchase a girl, I wish they had caught him in New Orleans along with the other degenerates who were trafficking underage girls."

"They narrowly missed him near the lake, and the decision in New Orleans was unfortunate: release him or compromise everything. They didn't have a choice."

"Yeah, but it would have been nice to have him in a cage," my dad grunted.

"Tom would agree with you, Dad."

“We disagree on many things, but we both agree on removing the degenerates. How are you *feeling?*”

I sighed, understanding the emphasis on the last word. “You know I’m safe from full blown panic episodes with Tom around.”

“Even minor attacks are hard on your body, Liza. Did you do what I asked you to do?”

“I visited a local doctor and then had a conversation with a psychiatrist who repeatedly inquired about my feelings, making me want to stomp on him.”

“As long as you controlled that impulse. Did he prescribe any meds?”

“Yes, I take a small pill every day.”

“And are you feeling better?”

I sighed again because he was right. Dad usually was. I feel calmer and my emotions are more controlled.

“I mentioned to you that your mom had the same problems.”

“That’s the only reason I went to the doctor, Dad. I assumed the anxiety and panic attacks all stemmed from having my best friend, Sandy, kidnapped and murdered when I was young. When I knew it could be genetic, I visited the doctor. I wish you’d have told me about Mom earlier.”

“Mental health issues just aren’t something people my generation talks about. It’s tabletop conversation for your generation, but mine keeps it very close to the vest. We’re nearing our time limit, Bobby,” my dad reminded me. Anyone listening wouldn’t mind a short period of white noise, but a longer duration would prompt them to examine the call more closely.

“I love you, Dad. Will I see you again soon?”

“I love you, too. Thanksgiving is just around the corner so I’ll make sure the Feds get me to your house.”

“Okay.”

“Bye, Bobby.”

I placed the phone back on the receiver and pushed the red button a second time.

Four o’clock – a call from a different telemarketer who was also selling vehicle warranties. I spent twenty minutes in a friendly conversation before I had to tell the gentleman that I had wrecked that automobile a year ago.

At about five o’clock, Tom came out of his office.

“Why don’t the Davidsons end their whole antagonistic situation by shooting each other?”

“You’re advocating murder,” I chuckled.

“It would be less messy and quicker to resolve than their divorce is going to be.” He perched his stocky five-foot ten-inch frame on the edge of my desk. “You ready to go home?”

Today he wore denim jeans, a green polo shirt, and his cowboy boots. He’s adopted this as a uniform of sorts, changing only the color of his shirt daily. I preferred him in blue hues since they matched his eyes so well. I smiled. “What do you have in mind?”

“Dinner, given that I skipped lunch and am starving.” He leaned down and kissed me.

I felt the warmth of the kiss envelop me, as usual. When he pulled back, I spoke. “We haven’t christened Kenny’s couch yet.”

“Ah, there’s the Stretch that I love so much,” he chuckled, then his stomach growled audibly.

I laughed. “At least it’s not my stomach this time.”

At home, a marvelous dinner was prepared by Tom, consisting of pan-fried steaks, several pounds of sauteed mushrooms, sweet potato fries, and fresh grilled asparagus. The man certainly knows how to cook!

Once we’d eaten, he remarked. “I’m stuffed. How about a stroll? We can ask Kenny if he’d like to join us and bring Zoie.”

Shelby, my Sheltie, slept curled in her bed. Was it worth riling her up in the evening? She’d bark throughout the whole trip. Duke, Tom’s former K-9 officer, would spend the stroll guarding us, looking for any possible threat. The relentless scavenger, Zoie, would search for food everywhere, even digging six feet deep.

When I sighed, a chuckle escaped Tom’s lips. “Maybe not.”

“I need to move; I’ve been sitting all day. Let’s go for a stroll, no dogs, and have dessert at O’Malley’s.”

He reached out his hand to me and I stood up. “Do you need a sweater?”

“You understand me so completely,” I smiled and grabbed a sweater. It was still fall, so the daytime warmth contrasted with evening coolness in this coastal town.

O’Malley’s, a Belle City institution for over a century, is a genuine Irish pub. It has Irish landscape pictures on the walls and soccer on four large-screen TVs. It’s a small place, just twelve feet wide and twenty feet long. The entire right side boasts a large wooden bar, adorned with pewter beer mugs and liquor bottles of various shapes and sizes. Six tables stood to the left.

As I walked through the curtains that kept the heat and bugs out, the owner, Grady, yelled. “Angel, how are you?”

“I feel fabulous now that I’m thinking about dessert.”

Grady chuckled, came around and enveloped me in a bug hug. The man, standing just under six feet tall, was powerfully built. Years of lifting beer and liquor cases, starting at sixteen, had given him his physique, not a gym.

“Why can’t anyone call you by your right name?” Tom simultaneously grumbled and growled.

Behind us stormed in Brandon, who roared, “We’ve got a big problem.”