

## CHAPTER ONE

Randi Sterling squeezed her black F150 king cab into a narrow slot, the only one available in the long row of cars. She made a mental note of the A5 parking lot marker posted high atop a pole at San Diego's Lindbergh Field. Once Southwest 3867 landed and the passengers deplaned, her mother's constant stream of chatter would bleed over into the space reserved in Randi's head for things like what to pick up from the grocery store, which day it was and where she'd parked her truck.

Salt air from the harbor rushed in on a breeze, rustling the thick silver fur around her dog's neck as he sat shotgun, ears perked.

Randi cracked the door, cursing whoever parked their two-seater Mazda over the line. You'd have to have nerves of steel to drive that tiny thing on the freeway. No thank you. It would feel like a speed bump beneath the tires of her four-wheel drive. She'd choose her truck over a sports car any day. You can take the girl out of Colorado, but...

She picked Shane's stuffed monkey, Abu, off the floorboards and placed the toy at his paws. His nose twitched, but his gaze never wavered. She lowered the windows and slung her leather bag over her shoulder. The temp hovered around sixty and the tree above the truck provided abundant shade from the setting sun. "I'll just be a few minutes. Promise."

Airplanes roared overhead. San Diego's Lindbergh Field was infamous for nail-biter landings. Incoming planes flew eerily close to downtown skyscrapers, skimmed the I-5 freeway and boom, wheels down and engines reversed with a thundering thrust. Aircraft shuddered to a stop at the end of the tarmac with the ocean in sight.

Crossing the parking lot, a fuselage above her head gleamed in the telltale Southwest colors of red, blue and orange. The whine of the engine dropped in pitch and the wings tilted as the plane steadied. She imagined her mother inside; checking her lipstick in a compact mirror, making sure her hair was perfect before touchdown and her grand entrance into the terminal. She'd be in an aisle seat, of course, convenient for frequent trips to the lavatory, with a stack of fashion magazines in the seat pocket in front of her, and a yearning to be in first class. Too bad Southwest didn't have first class; her mother was a pro at talking her way up there.

Randi crossed on a green light holding a line of taxis at bay. Her cell jingled as she stepped onto the curb. Too soon to be her mother, unless she'd broken the rules and powered on her phone before the wheels hit the ground. It certainly wouldn't be out of character for her.

The number belonged to Randi's best friend. Dishware clanged in the background of Kira's beachfront restaurant. "Have you picked up your mother yet?"

"Heading into the concourse. I think she just flew over my head."

"How long is she staying?"

Randi reached for the silver Pegasus around her neck. Her good luck charm.

"Excellent question. She didn't say."

"Mistake." Kira laughed. "When my family calls and says they're coming from Austria, that's the first thing I ask."

"She's here to watch her best friend and her dog compete at an agility trial. That's the extent of my knowledge."

"How long since you've seen your mother?"

“Almost a year, I think.” The glass entrance doors slid open. At the arrivals screen Flight 3867 flashed *landed*. Luggage at carousel three.

More banging dishes. “That’s a long time. Do you remember what she looks like?”

“Easy. Sleek mink-colored hair in the latest short style. Neiman Marcus flats or pumps, depending on pants or skirt, topped off by a silky long-sleeved blouse in olive to complement eyes people say resemble mine. My mother has a PhD in sociology, but she’s one of those women who actually believe one cannot be too rich or too thin. She hasn’t done so hot with the rich part, but she’ll always be a clotheshorse.”

“Bring her down to The Surf & Stirrup if you need a break—or a drink.”

“Thanks, but I gotta warn you, I’ve always done my best to be a kind and dutiful daughter, but if she starts harping on me about my ticking clock I might leave her there, and I doubt she’ll do dishes.”

“No worries. She’ll fit right in with the rest of our cougars. We’ll hook her up with some rich young stud and get her off your hands and out of your hair.” Kira loved clichés and claimed her foreigner status allowed her *carte blanche* to use them as much as she damn well pleased.

“I like your plan, but let’s not be hasty with the men thing. That’s what got her into trouble in the first place.”

Randi hung up and made her way toward baggage claim, almost tripping on an errant suitcase. She glanced at her cowboy boots, scuffed and worn. Good thing her mother couldn’t see through the leather to the holes in her socks. Hey, a girl had to have priorities. New jeans, a bottle of good tequila, or a set of guitar strings came before

footwear. Her mother wouldn't understand.

At carousel three, the slanted belt hummed along in a motorized oval, spitting out pieces of luggage from its center with intermittent thumps. Minutes ticked by; people and bags came and went. Randi peered over the sea of heads. No sign of Lee Ann Sterling.

Yesterday, after a prolonged absence touring the country with a trust-fund baby named Jordan, a guy who wore Italian loafers and carried a man purse, her mother had called, out of the blue, saying she was heading to San Diego. Gina Thorton, her oldest and dearest friend, was competing in an important dog agility trial with her lightning fast Border collie, and, her mother added after the fact, it was high time to pay a visit to her daughter too.

Her mother was nothing if not efficient. And she was no wallflower. If she were in the terminal she'd make her presence known. Could she have missed her flight?

Randi's cell rang a second time.

"Honey, where on God's green earth are you?"

"Carousel three. Where are you?"

"Same place. I don't see you. What are you wearing?"

"Jeans and a T-shirt." She plucked the material. "Turquoise."

A woman with a large mesh bag slung over her shoulder, and baring a slight resemblance to her mother, broke through the throng. "Sweetheart!"

Randi's jaw dropped. It couldn't be. Impossible. This woman sounded like her mother, but she was thirty pounds heavier and definitely hadn't hit Neiman Marcus for quite some time. Randi made a concentrated effort to close her mouth. Her mother's hair was grey. A color she always preached had no place on a woman's head. Faded jeans had

replaced her tailored trousers, and her silky olive-colored blouse had morphed into a purple sweatshirt. A small dog with long silky hair and ears way too big for its body, leapt over striped poles. Above the poles, in metallic cursive letters were the words: *On the weekend, papillon and I go barhopping.*

Huh? Brain space filling fast. She'd already forgotten what day it was.

"I'm so happy to see you!" Her mother smothered her in a quick hug before she broke away to brush Randi's bangs from her forehead, eyes flitting over her face in a rapid assessment. "We'll get your hair trimmed while I'm here, okay? My treat."

The shoulder bag made a snuffling noise.

"Whatcha got in there?"

The inhabitant clawed at the mesh sides. Her mother lifted the bag to eye level and the contents let loose a round of earsplitting yaps. Heads swiveled. People stared.

"Meet my pride and joy, Jojo Ann Sterling."

"You got a dog? And you gave it my middle name?"

"*She*, honey, not it. I like the way her name flows off the tongue, don't you? I thought you'd be pleased. It's a high compliment."

Randi crossed her arms. "I don't know. Naming your dog after me is kinda weird." How idiotic is it to feel resentful of something that weighed less than a bread bag? "You don't even like dogs."

"Says who?"

"I've seen you pluck Shane's dog hair from your clothes like you were picking off Lyme-infested ticks."

"Have not."

“Where’s she going to stay? Shane thinks little dogs are squeaky toys. I live in a one-room studio, remember?”

“Jojo’s a tough cookie. She can hold her own.”

“If you would have told me about her over the phone yesterday, I could have found you a room at the Rancho del Zorro Inn. They take small dogs. The rich women wear them like accessories.”

“No, Miranda, I wouldn’t think of it. We all need to be together, you, me and our dogs.”

“Why?”

“Because you changed my way of thinking.”

“Me? How?”

“When I read your article in *WOOF* magazine. Hit me like a ton of bricks.”

Randi slapped her forehead. Classic slapstick cliché. Too bad Kira wasn’t around to see. She would have loved it. “You read my piece? ‘Ways for people and their pooches to bond as a pack’?”

“Of course. Why are you so surprised?”

“I don’t know.” Randi waited until the airport loudspeakers finished garbling the number of a delayed flight. “You and Dad always wanted me to become something sensible, like a lawyer or CFO and go to work for a place with a 401K and a gym membership, remember?”

“Of course I do, but we worry about you having enough money to live on since you only have two semi-jobs instead of one real one. A vet-tech and a journalist? Then when I picked up a copy of your magazine at Petsmart in Phoenix, I started reading and

couldn't put it down. I made a huge traffic jam in the checkout line. Convinced everyone waiting behind me into buying one. In the car on the way back to the hotel, I read bits and pieces at the stoplights—only the red lights of course—and I starting thinking, a dog! What fun! It's about time I had some excitement.” Her mother beamed, cheeks flushed red. “So I called Gina. We got to talking, and I went to Oklahoma. She lined me up with a breeder and before I knew it, Jojo was sleeping on my pillow. I'm even working with an agility trainer. Someday soon Jojo and I will be partners in performance.”

“Wow.” She couldn't for the life of her imagine her mother dashing around in her Jimmy Choos, cueing Jojo over obstacles: “Tunnel! Jump! Weave!”

Of course today she had on neon running shoes. The only thing those matched were the vests worn by the airport's roving security guards.

Her mother set the mesh bag on the ground, unzipped it and plunged a rhinestone leash inside. All the bling had gone to the dog. After a *click* of leash to collar, a silky-haired thing with oversized ears exploded from her confines to land straight-legged, four on the floor, barking like it was her God-given right.

Unbelievable. Her mother had found her canine twin.

Randi yelled to be heard over the yapping. “Why Jojo? Is it short for Jordan?”

“Oh good grief, no.” Her mother scooped the little dog into her arms and the barking turned to happy snuffling noises. “*This* dog is far more loyal than *that* man. He and his motorbus are long gone. Good riddance.” She kissed the top of Jojo's head.

“You'll be happy to hear I have zero time for men in my life. Dogs are far better companions anyway. They don't lie and they don't cheat. Jojo's never done anything bad.”

“Never?”

“Well...there was that one pair of bedroom slippers, but they were uncomfortable anyway.”

This was too much. Her mother had gone and given up style and glamour for dog hair and tacky sweatshirts. Randi focused on the luggage carousel. “How many bags are we looking for?” A clue as to how long this visit would last.

“My light blue Samsonite, and Jojo’s got a duffel bag. Forest green. Her initials are on the side, J.A.S.”

“The dog has her own bag? With initials? What’s in it?”

“Food and stuff.”

“I’ve got plenty of dog food at home, and an extra bowl.”

“I get Jojo’s meals online, hon. There’s a site that mixes it to order.”

“Hold the pickles, add the mustard?” She was trying to be a good daughter and not be a smart-ass, but come on.

Her mother’s brows crinkled in a way that suggested Randi’s sarcasm hadn’t connected. “Essentially, yes. If you want it heavy on the glucosamine and light on the wheat, that’s how they’ll blend it.”

“Okaaayyy.”

“I had to bring my own stuff. Do you have stick-in-the-ground weave poles and a collapsible tunnel?”

Randi checked her watch. Less than ten minutes and her mother was already getting under her skin. On the way to the airport she made a vow this time would be different. She’d be calm and patient and shelve all the hostile feelings she’d harbored

since her mother skipped out on them twenty-five years ago.

“I can’t let Jojo’s training get stale, you know. Plus, the only place she’ll nap is on her leopard-print dog bed. Wait till you see it. It’s adorable.”

“Is all that crap crammed in the duffel too?” There had to be a video cam somewhere, filming for a reality TV show. She spotted the Samsonite and grabbed it by the handle, surprised by how light it was. “Where are all your clothes?”

“Got rid of most of them.” Her mother put Jojo down. The little dog shook herself like a vibrating pool ball. “It’s a good thing I’m not still married to your father.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Her mother swiveled, looking for the exit. “As soon as we find the duffel, we can go. Jojo’s got to pee something fierce. Have you seen him lately?”

A5...A5. She’d parked her truck in section A5. “Seen who?”

“Your father.”

“Briefly. He came out for a few days last month.”

Her mother straightened, brushed the dog hair from the hem of her sweatshirt and ran a hand through her hair. “Still sober, I hope?”

“Far as I know.”

*If she’s so interested in what dad is up to, how about picking up the flippin’ phone and giving him a call?*

“I see it.” Her mother pointed at the conveyor belt. “Let’s grab one of those carrying carts. Then, after Jojo’s potty stop, and as soon as we get into the car, I want to hear what’s going on with you and that handsome boyfriend of yours.”

Randi drew her head back. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Her mother flapped her hand. “I’m talking about Luke.”

Randi put the requisite amount of coins in the slot, inhaled three deep breaths and pulled a cart from the stack. “Luke is my boss. He’s also my landlord. Two things I steer clear of in a romantic relationship. Besides, he’s already attached—I think.”

Her mother scoffed. “He sure smells nice. Like sage, after a rain.”

“How do you know what he smells like?”

“I never forget the scent of a man. Guess I’m like a dog in that respect.”

“When did you, uh, smell him?”

“When you first moved to San Diego. I helped you decorate, remember? We got those cute sunflower curtains for your kitchen at that thrift store by the beach.”

Randi loaded her mother’s bags and pushed the cart toward the automatic doors. “I remember the store, but I don’t remember your meeting Luke.”

“Sure you do. He came over one night to show you how things worked. Heater, sprinklers, stuff like that.” Her mother jogged to catch up. “Set the timer on the irrigation system and showed you how to turn on the furnace. His eyes lit up like a pilot light every time he looked at you.”

“Ugh, Mom. That’s corny.”

“He likes you, honey. Don’t forget you’re pushing thirty.”

“So?”

“High school valedictorian and you can’t pick a guy to save your life.”

*Expand the ribcage. In through the nose, out through the mouth.* They crossed the terminal threshold into fresh air. Randi forced a smile and adopted her best perky tone.

“Remember me telling you about my friend Kira?”

“Oh sure. She owns the restaurant on the beach. The Austrian girl. Goldshlager,  
or something like that.”

“*Godenshamer.*”

“What about her?”

“She’s dying to meet you. How long did you say you’re staying?”

