

CHAPTER ONE

Thirty-eight. Far too young for my level of success. That's what the critics loved to proclaim. But over twenty years of intense study and hard work had led to this moment of triumph. Right here. Right now.

So where was the joy?

I stood on a raised platform as the crowds gathered in the gallery below. Couples strolled arm in arm through the open doors, while individuals wove their way through the mass of people and gazed at my paintings showcased on the walls. The art collectors. The curious. And the art critics. Always the critics.

I watched for Don's sandy blonde hair and classic good looks among the crowd. No sign of him. He was late. To distract myself, I focused on the murmurs below.

"She's done it again."

"Yes, the atmosphere...the energy. Liz never disappoints."

"I heard this one is drawing collectors from New York and London."

I let the hint of a smile grace my lips and listened.

"And I didn't think the extravagance of her last art show could be topped."

"It was the event of the season, for sure, but I think she has outdone even that one."

"Yes, lavish, even by LA standards."

My smile froze. Were they talking about my actual paintings—or referring to the opulence surrounding my show?

No. I wouldn't second guess myself. Not tonight. Let that task stay with the critics.

Beneath the lights of the spacious gallery, the luscious colors and rich textures of my abstract paintings embraced the walls. The massive painting closest to me pulled up a vivid memory of inspiration, the very birth of its creation.

I had stood alone on the beach. Waves of sea-green and turquoise roiled and tumbled, at times flashing translucent in the sunlight, at times fringed with opaque foamy white, submitting finally, reluctantly, to be engulfed and lost in the depths of cobalt blue below.

I sighed. Surely the onlookers sensed the emotional impact through my use of color and technique?

Music from the live string quartet flowed through the room and eased my moment of self-doubt. Champagne corks popped. Plates of elegant appetizers beckoned. Perhaps nerves had overtaken me. I hoped the festive mood would drive away my emptiness.

I glanced at the entrance. Where *was* Don? Surely he had forgiven me and moved past our argument. Not like it was our first. He knew the importance of the July summer show. And I wanted him by my side.

Time to mingle with guests. I squared my shoulders, added a confident smile and stepped down into the crowd. I wove my way through the throng of onlookers, fellow artists, patrons, collectors, critics and the curious, expertly following a path of least resistance. I paused to speak to those who expected recognition for their presence. I knew who they were and what they wanted in return.

At last I came face to face with my agent, Robert Dubois.

He handed me a glass of champagne and raised his in a toast, smiling that Cheshire cat smile of his. “To an impressive turnout, my dear Liz.”

I returned the toast and noticed he wore his favorite extravagantly brocaded silk vest, in contrast with my sleek black sheath. Robert was never one for subtleties. I touched my glass to his. “Yes, and many thanks to you for that, Robert.”

“Kind of you to say, but you know it’s all about the money for me. When Liz Allender sells art, I make money. So, I love nothing better than to see you sell copious amounts of art.” He winked.

I laughed. Robert was one of the few people who could make me laugh like that, spontaneous and real. “No hidden agendas for you, right?”

He grinned and motioned me closer to tuck a stray strand of platinum hair behind my ear. “I love this upswept coiffure on you. Pure sophistication.” He tilted his head of wavy black hair next to mine. “Together we are ebony and ivory.”

Before I could respond, he shifted his attention over my shoulder and behind me. “Your beloved progenitors have arrived, fashionably late and smiling in rapturous awe that they—and they alone—created you.”

I grinned. “They are my parents. They’re allowed to be proud.” I turned toward them and gave a wave. But when I turned back, Robert had disappeared into the crowd. His taste for the dramatic in all things, appearance or actions, never failed to entertain me. Most likely he noticed a prospective buyer.

“Elizabeth.”

My mother. She insisted on using my full name. She detested the fact that the art

world called her daughter Liz. Her favorite chant included, “I didn’t name you Liz. I named you Elizabeth Rose Allender. People should respect that fact.”

I turned toward my mother’s voice and watched my parents navigate their way through the crowd. Mother looked radiant, as she always did while wearing that prodigious black diamond necklace. I watched the overhead lights dancing off the cut crystals. I wished again that I could convince her to instead wear the rose quartz I had given her, to better complement her complexion. But Mother insisted quartz was too commonplace to wear for a noteworthy occasion.

I returned her light embrace and looked up to see my father grinning, his eyes warm with pride. I inherited my mother’s electric blue eyes, but often wished I had his chocolate brown ones. He leaned down and kissed my forehead. My parents never missed the opening night of my shows. But then, they lived for art.

True patrons, they had made sure I received the best of “all things art” that money could buy in Los Angeles. The best instructors, the best schools, and the most lavish shows.

“So what do you think? Isn’t this the grandest yet?” I whisked two champagne goblets from a tray and handed them to my parents with a flourish. They clinked glasses.

“Everything looks wonderful,” Father agreed.

Mother smiled and nodded. “No doubt. You and Robert have done a fabulous job arranging the show, my dear. You’re sure to catch the attention of the New York and London collectors. By the way,” she said, glancing around the room, “where is your dear Mr. Myers?”

I allowed a slight pout and lied sweetly, “Sadly, Don may not be able to make it this time. Business came up at the last moment.”

“What a shame. You are such a dynamic couple.”

“Well, everyone will just have to be satisfied with the three of us. We make quite the splash, don’t you think?”

We made small talk until my parents became engaged in conversation with a group of acquaintances. I looked toward the entrance. Surely Don would show.

Someone called my name, prompting me to make my way back into the throng. I learned early in my career to mingle and extend myself. People wanted to know me—or at least the person they *thought* they wanted to know. I didn’t mind. I knew the game and its rewards, if I executed it smartly. After all, how many artists could say they supported themselves doing what they loved?

I looked briefly over the heads of those nearest me, to the opposite side of the gallery where a special display had been set up. I started the tradition a few years ago of featuring some of my fellow artists’ work, to support up-and-comers who had, as yet, no gallery to represent them.

But tonight, among the art pieces by my colleagues, hung one of my own new works. Unsigned.

I questioned my own motives for doing this. True, no matter my monetary success, like any other artist I suffered the taunts of my own inner critics, always there to chide me. The occasional art critic’s acidic barbs always caused doubts to rise up. But why my recent desperation to know how others felt about my art?

A shadow momentarily blocked the light at the entrance. I glanced over, hoping to see Don. No luck. I checked the time. An hour had passed. The text I'd sent him had gone unanswered.

Then it hit me. Don's hurtful accusation shouted at me during our latest argument came to mind. "Hell, anyone with enough money can *buy* the success you enjoy." Words spoken in the heat of anger. But they stung, and I'd stormed out in a fit of rage. Perhaps he had planted the seed of skepticism about my success. And it hadn't taken much for it to sprout into a full-grown weed of self-doubt, ready to choke out my confidence. Now I understood my flat emotion tonight and why I had been prompted to add my painting to the display.

I made my way over to the collection and stood before my painting. The canvas went beyond the illumination of energy found in my other pieces. The brooding indigo-black shadows in the background were beginning to be seared away by the intensity of luminous radiance, representing the indomitable spirit of mankind. I believed the painting carried the viewer into the realm of emotional upheaval and utter dismay. But then offered...hope.

More than any of my previous paintings, I knew this piece came from deep within my soul and reached a new level of awareness. But Don's barb made me keenly aware I longed for some type of affirmation that people truly loved my art...that it spoke to them, touched an emotional core deep within them.

I slid behind the panel displaying the canvas and found the small alcove I had created with the folding panels—a place to stand out of sight but hear conversations on the other side. A task more difficult than I imagined, especially with the live string music

in the background. I leaned closer to the panel as a small group stopped to study the paintings, including mine.

“Interesting. The use of color in this piece is so powerful...” a nasally alto said.

A West Coast soprano replied, “Yes—one can always count on Liz to showcase talented artists and intriguing pieces, worthy of conversation.”

“You two and your ‘conversations’ about art,” a throaty male voice said. “It’s simply an exercise to see which of you can outshine the other with your level of expertise.”

“You’re such a cynic, Tom.” The soprano laughed. “And yet, I always see you at Liz’s shows.”

“Well, of course. I’m here to be seen, as much as to see who else is here. We collectors and brokers keep tabs on who’s buying what, you know.”

“Speaking of collecting, what do you think of this one?” Alto asked. “Doesn’t it remind you of Liz’s work? I’d say it’s terribly bold to copy her style, especially when you’re invited to hang in the same show. I’m shocked Liz included it.”

Silence as the small group pondered the piece, until the soprano spoke up.

“Well...it certainly reminds me of Liz’s style, except that this piece doesn’t incorporate her vibrant hues. In fact, the palette used here feels rather...dismal.”

“Dismal. Yes, that’s the word,” Tom said. “I’d add depressing, crude and unsophisticated. I suppose that one bright spot against all the darkness is meant to show us...something. Too ambiguous for me.”

“Maybe it is simply a sad imitation of Liz’s work.”

“No,” Soprano said. “I’m sure this is Liz’s. I’ve studied her paintings. She’s won so many awards—”

Tom interrupted, “I don’t care how many awards she’s won. Look—there’s no signature. I wouldn’t purchase it.”

“Why?” Alto asked.

“Without her signature, it’s just another piece of canvas with paint slathered on it.”

“But what if you liked the piece?”

“Like it? What does that have to do with anything? Do you think I spend this kind of money for art—to hang it on the wall of my home?”

“Surely *some* of her work touches you on an emotional level, speaks to you in some way?”

Tom laughed. “Yeah, I guess you could say it speaks to my investment portfolio.”

I listened to the trio chuckle, my cheeks flushing.

Alto spoke, “So, for people like you, who can actually *afford* her prices, they are strictly an investment.”

Tom’s voice answered as the group began to drift out of hearing range, “Exactly. I only purchase art that is in demand. Nothing sentimental about it.”

I sucked in air. Realized I had been holding my breath. I remembered Robert’s earlier remark about my parents. “And they alone created you.”

Maybe they *had* done more to create my success than I wanted to admit.

The clarity of that thought hit hard. The years of art shows, each one more lavish than the last, the price tags of my artwork rising to incredible numbers. Had my parents and my agent used their influence to bring in people who would pay the higher prices, thus creating a demand?

Had my art become simply a commodity, to be purchased, traded ... or dumped, as needed. Something to round out one's investment portfolio?

My world went into tilt mode. All my insecurities came crashing in around me.

CHAPTER TWO

Focused on the driving need to get through the crowd to my office door, everything blurred in my peripheral vision until I escaped to the privacy I craved, closed the door and slid into my desk chair.

I thought back to all the years spent learning from the best instructors, the hard work of honing my craft. The early awards I'd won—those had been real—were well earned praise. People back then purchased my art, because they emotionally connected with it. They wanted to hang it in their homes or offices where they could see it every day and enjoy it.

But the more recent wildly successful shows, the ever-growing popularity of my work, the staggering prices people were ready to pay to own one of my pieces had brought out the collectors and brokers. They held no passion for my artwork. They only saw dollar signs.

“Don was right,” I said to no one.

I called his number and heard it ring, and ring. Just when I thought it was going to dump me into his voicemail, he answered.

“Liz. What's up?” He sounded distracted, his normal reaction when interrupted while in writing mode.

“Thank goodness you answered. Look, I understand why you didn’t show up tonight, Don. You were right. And I was wrong to get so upset. I want to tell you I’m sorry about everything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our argument the other night...everything.”

“Sure...I said some things out of anger. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I do. But maybe it’s what I needed to hear.”

“What do you mean? What’s happened? You don’t sound yourself.”

“It’s too much to explain over the phone. I want to tell you in person, but I’m stuck here at the show. Is there any way you could stop by? Please?”

A long pause. I chewed my lip as I waited. “I’m sorry I got so angry. Please forgive me, Don.”

A sigh. “I’ve got to finish this scene I’m working on—deadline to meet. But then I can clean up and be there. Give me an hour or so.”

“Sure. And Don...?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

I set my phone down and glanced out the office window to the gallery and the milling crowd. It didn’t matter if New York and London collectors roamed the show tonight. I couldn’t face any of them right now.

I looked at the time. I didn’t want to wait an hour to talk to Don. And now that I thought about it, how damn inconsiderate of me to ask him to get cleaned up and come

running here to me, even if he lived only fifteen minutes away. Besides, Robert would handle anything that came up with the show.

I should go to him. Now.

I shoved the stick shift into third and stabbed the accelerator to the floor, causing the BMW Z4 to fishtail around the curve. The patrons would wonder about my sudden disappearance from the show, but nothing else mattered at the moment except to get to Don as quickly as possible.

My mind kept replaying his angry insult...that anyone with enough money could *buy* success. He may have been more correct than I could ever have guessed. Don would understand my pain at the revelation. He'd had his share of disappointments. Besides, he deserved a better apology than the one offered over the phone. I smiled to myself at the thought.

My car skidded to a stop in front of his place. The worn apartment building sat in a neighborhood that matched its sadness. If my parents knew I ventured into this part of town, they would be alarmed...especially to know Don lived there.

They believed him to be a successful businessman in corporate America, not the struggling screenwriter I knew. His handsome face and trim physique, paired with the right wardrobe, made it easy to convince them of the lie. And Don had set aside his ego to play the part to perfection when in their presence. He had even accepted my monetary support from time to time, telling me he understood my willingness to help a fellow struggling artist was a gesture of support.

I stepped from my sports car into the summer night air, rushed up the steps, then entered the building with the memorized code and took the elevator.

With each floor I passed, a bit of tension eased from my shoulders. Don would have compassion for my dilemma and help me brainstorm a plan of action to win back my artistic confidence.

The elevator dinged, jarring me from my reverie. I hurried along the hall to his apartment. He had mentioned needing to finish writing and then clean up, so most likely he'd be showering by now. I pulled my spare key from my purse, turned the key in the lock, eased open the door and slipped inside.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the semi-darkness. A trio of candles flickered on the coffee table, and Beethoven's Symphony #6, my favorite, played softly. I couldn't stop the smile. How intuitive, Don had anticipated my change of mind and expected me.

I slid off my heels and noiselessly carried them over to the sofa where I deposited them, along with my purse. I hoped to surprise him in the shower.

That's when I heard a woman's soft moan. I froze and held my breath. From the direction of the bedroom came Don's deep murmurs. No mistaking that voice.

A wave of nausea crashed over me as I clutched at the sofa to steady myself. In front of me, in the candlelight, sat a stack of my art sketches loosely piled on the coffee table. And next to the candles sat a woman's purse, with an open checkbook.

CHAPTER THREE

My vision momentarily faltered as I battled the mad desire to rush into the bedroom and confront Don. I clenched and unclenched my hands while sucking in air to calm my breathing.

A quiet voice in my mind urged me to remain cool and look for something to give me the advantage. I moved closer to the coffee table and with trembling hands, picked up the checkbook, then leaned in to examine it in the candlelight. The checkbook belonged to Katy Butler, an art buyer who often purchased pieces from me. A woman I considered a friend.

Up until now I had liked the buxom red-head, whose necklines always exposed just enough flesh to attract attention, but not quite enough to be considered risqué. We both shared a love of art and the competitive game of marketing it. Kindred spirits. It appeared that our tastes ran along the same line with men, as well.

It would be easier if a stranger shared Don's bed. Bad enough to be betrayed by one person, let alone two at the same time. The pain of that treachery tore through me. Made me feel the victim, and I couldn't let them do that to me.

Compelling my mind to focus, I studied the carbon copy of the most recent check. It had been made out with today's date, to Don Myers, for five thousand dollars.

I looked back to the stack of sketches. They were miniature renderings, studies really, detailing the composition, colors and shadows for the creation of my final pieces. Even after completing the final paintings, I could never bear to throw any of them away. Looking at them reminded me of the creative process, the hours of contemplation, experimentation, failures, and starting over, to reach success.

I believed these to be safely tucked away in my large-drawer filing cabinet. And I certainly hadn't given them to Don. It didn't take much detective work to see that he had sold them for a handsome profit—for himself.

Thankfully the buzz of anger in my head helped drown out the amorous sounds emanating from the bedroom. I thumbed through the sketches. Apparently Don had been stealing individual pieces throughout the year, but not often enough that I might notice them missing from my file.

Rage seethed upward, replacing the pain and sense of vulnerability from the physical betrayal. I embraced the power of it and sensed the heat of fury come into my cheeks. Vowing to remain in control, I quietly laid the checkbook on the coffee table, picked up the stack of sketches and one of the candles to light my way.

Later I wouldn't remember walking to the bedroom, but I would never forget the scene I witnessed when I stood in the doorway. Don's hard-muscled back, bathed in the soft glow of the candle I held...the moans of Katy beneath him. Moans I myself had once made—should be making—in response to his caresses.

I sensed my body trembling, but then heard my voice and mused at how calm it sounded, cold even. "To think I trusted you."

The woman let out a gasp and Don slid to his side. Katy grappled to pull the covers to her bosom while Don tugged the sheet up to his waist and stared.

“Shit, Liz. What the hell are you doing sneaking in like that?”

“*Sneaking* in? Using this key you gave me? Oh, I get it. You thought I’d still be at the show, waiting for you.”

The surprise on Don’s face changed to one of guilt. “Baby, this is a simple misunderstanding, that’s all. When you left in a huff the other night, I assumed you were breaking up with me.”

“That’s your excuse—for this?” I said, pointing at Katy. “An argument and you’re ready to end our relationship without even a discussion?”

“One argument among many, and you were damned pissed, if I remember correctly. *You* were the one who stormed out without a discussion.”

“Yes, I was hurt. But the irony is I came here to tell you that you were right that night. Imagine that.”

His guilt changed to a scowl. “It would take some imagination. You—admitting I was right about something.”

The sting of his remark came like a slap to my face. Did he really see me that way? A pain bloomed in my breast. Then I remembered the sketches in my hand and held them up, let the anger flow back in to replace the hurt. “And what’s your excuse for this? Have you been stealing from me all along? Or was this simply some easy money you couldn’t pass up?”

Don’s countenance changed in that one brief moment. His face colored in rage. “*Easy* money? Are you kidding me?”

Katy put her hand on his arm. “Don’t do this. Can’t you see how hurt she is?”

Don shook her hand off and glared at me. “I’ve been silent for too long. There was nothing *easy* about putting up with you in your self-centered, self-absorbed world. I’ve earned every single penny from that sale. Pay-back for dealing with you.”

“Self-centered? Self-absorbed? Is that why I provided you with a new wardrobe and helped with your rent? Because I’ve treated you so terribly?”

Don slid his feet to the floor and something about the fury in that movement made me put the bed between us. As he moved around the foot of the bed toward me, I backed my way to the nearest available escape, the open sliding glass door to the balcony. He pointed at me.

“Hey—you’re the one who didn’t think I was good enough to set foot in your parents’ home without your ‘approval’ on my wardrobe.” His voice sounded odd, tightly controlled. Not the Don I knew.

“That’s not true.”

“Oh yeah? Why is it that I have to pretend to be someone I’m not?”

“It’s not what you think. It’s because I know my parents and how judgmental they can be. I wanted you to have a fair chance, to let them get to know you, and like you.”

“Who are they getting to know? Not the real me.” His voice growled with anger.

“I truly only wanted to help.” I clutched the sketches to my breast and moved into the opening of the balcony. “None of that gave you the right to steal my work.”

“What are you doing? Give me those sketches!” Don stretched out his hand and I instinctively stepped backward.

The candle flared in the open night air. I could see Don grab his boxers from the floor and struggle to yank them on, lose his balance and fall, cursing.

I looked at the artwork, then the candle, and then at Don heading toward me. I held the flame of the candle to the corner of the papers and watched them catch fire as he rushed onto the balcony.

“You crazy bitch! Give me those.” He lunged for the sketches.

I stepped backward and moved the burning candle high between us at face level, fending him off, while holding the papers at arm’s length from him and over the edge of the balcony railing.

“You were right, Don. That’s what I came here to tell you. People no longer buy my art because it touches their heart. It’s all about the money. Even for you.” The papers burned brightly now, the edges turning black, crisping away. I could feel the scorch of it against my hands. “My art has become corrupted. But tonight, I take back control.”

I turned and released the bright sheaf of papers into the night sky. I heard Don yell at me. But I focused on the burning mass as it separated into individual sheets, each floating and turning on the updraft between the buildings...until the flames consumed them entirely and obliterated them into nothing but black ash.

Then the blackness of the night sky ruled again and conquered the bright flares of light, extinguished them. But unlike my unsigned painting still hanging back at the gallery, no bright spirit seared through the darkness this time.

When I turned, the anger on Don’s face had dissolved into stunned realization. I almost felt sorry for him, until Katy joined him. The redhead had wrapped a sheet around her torso and moved to console him. The stab of pain at the reminder of betrayal hit again.

Just moments ago I had wanted to scream at him, slap him, make him feel my pain. But now I sensed my emotions slide away, leaving me empty.

So I could emotionally survive.

I set the candle on a nearby patio table, pulled the spare key from my pocket, and tossed it to the floor. I turned, gave Katy a look of *see what he's capable of?* and without a word, walked through the bedroom, grabbed my purse and shoes from the sofa and let myself out, Don's curses from the bedroom echoing in my ears.

Walking calmly down the hallway, head held high, I wondered at my lack of fear. Don could come after me. I had never seen him so angry. But I didn't run.

In fact, as the elevator door whisked closed, I marveled at how steady my hands were as I punched the down button. How in control I felt, until I caught my reflection in the polished metal and stared—surprised at the tears streaming down my face.