

Taken Off Guard
Taken Trilogy – Book Two

By

Shanna Handel

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Handel, Shanna
Taken Off Guard

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-61258-189-7

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Chapter One

Elizabeth pushed the double jogging stroller up the path to the playground, looking for Lila. She heard Abby giggle and clap her hands, pointing to the swings and saying, “Gacie, Gacie.” Elizabeth smiled at her sister-in-law, Lila, pushing her golden, curly haired baby, Gracie in the swing. Gracie squealed with delight when she saw the twins and her aunt Elizabeth.

“Hi Abby.” Lila laughed at the cousins’ excitement to see one another. She bent down and helped Elizabeth unbuckle Jacob and Abby from the stroller. The twins hurriedly took off for the slides. Elizabeth gave Lila a huge hug. “It’s been over a year and I still can’t believe you live here Lila.” Lila had quit her marketing job in the city to move with her husband back to his small home town when his mother Grace became very ill. Moving from the fast pace of the big city to the slower life of a small town had been an adjustment for sophisticated Lila, but she was thriving.

“I know,” Lila said, stroking the curls on Gracie’s head, “and almost all happy times, too.” Elizabeth teared up, knowing they were both thinking of the passing on of her sweet mother. Grace had tragically passed away just days before her granddaughter was born. Elizabeth took refuge in the knowledge that her mother had been overjoyed that her final time on Earth was spent surrounded by all of her children.

Although it had been almost a year since the matriarch of their family had eternally left this earth, the grief still came in waves for all of the members of the family. The hurt was lessened for everyone when Lila gave birth to her sweet baby girl. Luke name her Grace after his mother, everyone called their little bundle of joy, Gracie.

“I can’t believe she’s going to be one in a few weeks,” Elizabeth said, wiping tears from her eyes.

“I wanted to talk to you about her party, actually,” Lila said, ready to think about happier things. “I was thinking the whole family could use a get together. It’s been a few weeks since Heather and David came to town. Celebrating Gracie’s first birthday with a big party for family and friends as a way for us to honor Grace. I know it was important to your mom that we all spend time together. What do you think?”

Elizabeth was touched. She knew Grace had been a mother figure to Lila, her parents having passed away years ago in a tragic car crash. She had also been waiting for Lila to throw one of her famous parties. In truth, she thought the whole family was hoping the same thing. “I think that’s a great idea, and I would love to help.” Elizabeth gave Lila another huge hug. “What can I do for the party?”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Lila said, laughing. “I want to try to do this party myself, without caterers.” Lila paused, dramatically. Lila usually threw extravagant parties that were fully catered. She did all the planning herself, but never any of the actual food or decorations. Since moving from the big city though, Elizabeth had noticed that Lila was trying to adopt Luke’s small, hometown ways. “That’s where you come in, Elizabeth. You and Cole always do

everything yourselves, and it always comes out so nice. I need you to help me, which hopefully won't mean you end up doing it all while I watch."

It was true that Elizabeth and Cole were do it yourself experts. Elizabeth was a great cook and Cole earned a living with his home renovations and furniture building. "I would be honored to. I'm already dreaming up a menu. Let's get Heather to help us with the decorations. I know she would love that." Elizabeth said.

"Sounds like a plan. Why don't you and Cole come over for dinner tonight and we can call Heather while the guys watch the kids and start planning?" Lila asked excitedly.

"It's a deal." They both turned towards the slide when they heard Jacob crying. "Um- I guess I'd better keep an eye on my kids, too." Elizabeth hurried over to Jacob, relieved that it was just a scratched knee. "All better," she said as she kissed the boo-boo. Jacob hugged her tight around her neck, then ran off to chase his sister.

That night the adults sat around Luke and Lila's dining room table, talking and laughing. Luke would remind everyone to keep it down when they got too loud, as he had just tucked Gracie in for the night an hour before. She was an easy going baby, and slept well, only grouchy if she was woken up out of her heavy sleep.

Elizabeth enjoyed spending time at Luke and Lila's house, and loved seeing her big brother take care of Gracie. If the two of them were home at the same time you could count on them being together. Gracie demanded that he pick her up as soon as he got home, using the baby sign language that Lila was teaching her. He would practically not put her back down again until bedtime.

The twins had fallen asleep on the couch in the living room. After their first few visits to Luke and Lila's house, Cole and Elizabeth had figured out that if they packed pajamas and got the twins settled in for a movie, they would fall asleep, curled up together. The young parents were then able to transfer them from the car to their beds without the twins even stirring. Unlike baby Gracie, there was very little that could wake those two up.

"Now that everyone is asleep, let's go out on your back patio and call Heather." Elizabeth refilled her wine glass and stood up to go outside with Lila. As she was waiting, she saw Lila look at Luke, Luke nod his head slightly, then poured Lila a second glass of wine from the same bottle.

"We will be right back," Lila said, bending down to kiss Luke. Elizabeth grabbed the rest of the bottle and the two women walked out onto the brick patio, closing the screen door quietly. Lila had Luke plant rosebushes all around the patio, creating a beautiful private space. She also had him string white globe lights from a wooden pergola above the two black wrought iron sets of table and chairs, creating the feel of a European outdoor dining area.

They sat down and took a sip of wine, enjoying the breeze. They tried dialing Heather, but the phone went to voicemail. After a few minutes of idle chatter, waiting for Heather to phone back, Elizabeth said, "Lila, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure," said Lila. She was usually such a private person, but had been opening up more since she had Gracie, and moved here. Elizabeth was careful not to push her too far out of her comfort zone, though she no longer had to worry about hugging her too much. Elizabeth's family had cured Lila of her aversion to public displays of affection, and now she was the huggiest one of them all.

"Why does Luke always pour your wine?" Elizabeth blurted out. "And it seems like you never drink unless you are with him. We used to split a bottle between us- at least a bottle, I should say," Elizabeth added.

“Oh, that.” Lila gave a little laugh, as her face blushed a pretty pink. “Well, when I was the head of the marketing firm, I was drinking wine every night to relieve the stress from my day. Sometimes I would drink a little too much and get kind of rude with Luke. He put a stop to it and now I don’t drink wine unless he pours it for me. That way I don’t overdo it.”

Elizabeth had noticed changes in Luke and Lila's relationship over the past years, and was always curious about them. She and Lila had known each other in college, and Lila was a headstrong business woman, who always seemed to get her way. She remembered early in their marriage, Lila would boss Luke around. She was surprised that Luke and Lila had hit it off at her wedding, when they first met. They were such opposites. Her brother had always been the headstrong one in his past relationships. It had seemed out of character to watch him with Lila in those early years. Now though, Lila looked to Luke to do the decision making. As Elizabeth contemplated, she poured herself yet another glass of wine.

“For example, I would be in so much trouble if I did that,” Lila said, nodding towards the almost empty bottle. “I have a two drink maximum, mandated by Luke. Heather has a one drink limit from David, you know how wild she can get.” Lila laughed nervously, suddenly seeming a little uncomfortable around Elizabeth.

Elizabeth felt a pang of jealousy at the mention of Heather’s name. Heather was her other sister-in-law, married to her oldest brother, David. Over the past few months Lila and Heather seemed so close, almost as if they shared a secret, and Elizabeth sometimes felt left out. Feeling brave and a little emotional from the wine, Elizabeth decided to confront Lila.

“What is up with you two girls? It’s like you guys are in some secret society of strong willed women controlled by stronger willed men,” Elizabeth said, sounding ruder than she meant to. Lila had a knowing look on her face, and a small smile started to creep up onto her lips, making Elizabeth feel angry, like Lila was making fun of her. Elizabeth set her glass back on the table, a little too hard. “Fine. You and Heather can have your little secrets, for all I care.”

“Liz,” Lila said, using her college nickname as a term of endearment to calm Elizabeth down. She knew Elizabeth had a temper, and as the youngest child in the family, growing up with two overprotective brothers, could even be a bit bratty at times. “We don’t have a secret society and I am not closer to Heather than you.” Lila leaned over and squeezed Elizabeth into a hug. “We just have something kind of, different, in common with one another.

“Well, what is it?” Elizabeth sniffled, looking up at Lila.

“Liz, it might be weird for you to hear this about your own brother. I always try to respect you and Luke’s privacy. Sometimes it can be tricky being married to your best friend’s big brother.” Elizabeth perked up at the term “best friend.” When Lila lived in the city, she didn’t see Lila much and since she’d been home they had really reconnected.

“I can handle it. If you want to share, that is,” Elizabeth had to remind herself to not be nosy sometimes.

Lila took a deep breath. “You know how Heather and David have, kind of a different relationship?” Lila started slowly. Elizabeth’s eye’s widened. Everyone knew that Heather and David practiced Domestic Discipline, where the husband was in charge of the relationship and spans his wife from time to time. Heather was very open about it. Elizabeth was fascinated by their relationship, but too embarrassed to admit it. She was shocked, and a little bit jealous to hear that her strong willed friend was practicing it, too.

“Are you telling me that is what you two have in common?” Elizabeth said, loudly, practically jumping out of her seat.

“Shush it. You will wake up the baby, and then we will both be in trouble with Luke,” Lila said laughing. “And yes. But in a different way than them. Luke is the head of our household, and I defer to him in the decision making, and I try to follow his lead overall. He was so unhappy when I was running the show. You know how he is. He’s the type of guy that likes to be in charge, and he is such a good leader. Things have been running so much smoother since we made the switch. And, we have both been happier.”

“But does he spank you, like David spanks Heather?” Elizabeth asked, again too loudly, the result of the wine and the shock of Lila’s revelation.

Cole came to the screen door and opened it, looking at his wife, tipsy and loud, on the back patio. “Elizabeth, you are going to have to keep it down out here, girl.” He smiled and laughed, his handsome face looking younger than his age. “Luke just went to check on Gracie and he is going to be upset if you wake up his little princess.”

“It was Lila,” Elizabeth said, giggling. She started to hiccup.

“It’s a good thing that I just loaded the twins up into the car. I think we’d better head out, Elizabeth. Looks like you maybe had one too many glasses of wine.” Cole laughed good naturedly and scooped up Elizabeth from her chair. She squealed as he threw her over his shoulder, her rump in the air, and said, “Bye Lila! Tell Luke thanks for the great evening.” He turned and headed down the stone path that lead around the house to the driveway, whistling.

“Know that this conversation is not over yet, Lila,” Elizabeth said, in an incredibly loud whisper, shaking her fist at Lila as best as she could, her petite frame hanging from Cole’s shoulder.

Cole gently put her in her seat, buckling the seat belt around her and kissing her on the top of her head. “Okay little lady, settle down.” A few minutes down the road and Elizabeth was as sound asleep as the twins.

The next day, Elizabeth woke up, stretching, trying to remember how she had gotten into the bed. Cole must have carried her in last night. Her head ached, reminding her of the wine from last night. She could hear Cole and the twins laughing in the kitchen, the smell of breakfast cooking wafted into the room. She was glad it was Saturday. This would have been a hard day to go to work and teach a classroom full of fourth graders.

She made her way into the kitchen, where Cole was flipping eggs and singing along with the Kids Bop radio station into his spatula. “Ugh, turn it down will you?” Elizabeth said, grumpily, holding her aching head in her hands.

Cole laughed. “Looks like mommy isn’t feeling good this morning kids,” he said as he turned the station up, walking over to Elizabeth and singing loudly.

“Seriously Cole, turn it down,” Elizabeth said as she stomped over to the radio, snapping it off.

Cole stopped laughing and looked at her. “Geez, Elizabeth. If you want to drink wine and have fun with your friends, you can’t take it out on your family the next day.”

Elizabeth knew that Cole was right. Instead of apologizing though, she felt herself become even feistier. She stomped her foot again. “It’s not the wine. You are just too loud in the morning.” The twins looked up quietly at her.

Cole never wanted to fight so, as always, he dropped the subject and redirected his attention to the kids. “Who wants pancakes?” he shouted. The twins cheered, and he went back to the stove, completely ignoring Elizabeth.

Frustrated, she stomped out of the room, and went back to bed.