

*1 Across; 7 Letters;
Clue: An event causing sudden damage or distress.
Answer: Calamity*

CHAPTER 1

"Go away. You're a potential boyfriend, not a hired gun."

Though nerves added an edge to my tone, Kevin Tanner's sapphire eyes held no acrimony. "At least I finally have potential."

After ten years as besties, he and I have been a couple for a few months. I couldn't be happier. I returned his smile with one of my own as I fought to hide my impatience.

Twenty minutes after the appointed time, my contact, a whistleblower with files to share, was a no-show.

Not good.

Not only could it be dangerous for him, the man's tardiness was eating into my getaway weekend. Okay, so this trip was supposed to be strictly business. I can multi-task. Once I got the stolen files from him, I'd overnight them to Crawford, my boss; then, the weekend was mine. Well, mine and Kevin's.

A man matching the client's description started toward me.

I perked up. Then the tide carried him away like an eddy of sand caught in the current. I sighed in disappointment.

So far, Kevin was the only male interested in me. At twenty-eight, he's seven years my junior, part of the reason I'd resisted his advances for so long. He also resembles a six-foot-two-inch black-haired Greek god with a body honed by construction work.

This would be our first weekend away as a couple, but it couldn't start until I collected the documents and got them to safety. The lucrative exchange would pay December's rent and, if I were frugal, buy a few Christmas presents.

The client would be here. He'd been delayed, that's all. I didn't want to think about the alternative, that he might have been caught in the act. That wouldn't be good, for him or for my weekend, but mostly for him.

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"I'm thirty-five, not thirteen. I got this." Tracy Rae Belden on this side of the conversation. Spiky brown hair. Run-of-the-mill gray eyes. Able to blend into a crowd without trying. "Las Vegas is your hometown. Go cheat the casino."

I buried a pang of regret at his ten years of honesty. He could have paid for the entire trip if he'd chosen to use his talents.

"Did that. Broke even." Born to a family of con-artists,

Kevin had been cursed with a conscience. A defect that made him useless to his grifting relatives. "I thought you'd be done by now."

"So did I." Pleased at the impatience underlying his words, I couldn't ignore a growing worry. The client had already wired a big retaining fee to my boss, Crawford. He had no excuse for not showing. "Harrison said no one suspected him. I'm beginning to wonder if the guy got caught."

Kevin froze like a panther who'd sighted prey.

I followed his line of sight. Touching his arm for balance, I stood on my toes. At six-two, he topped me by five inches. "Is it--"

"Not your guy." His narrowed eyes tracked his quarry through the crowd. Curiosity glinted in his gaze. "Someone I once knew."

I craned my neck at a fast-moving female with short brown hair. "You mean that girl in the cute boot-cut jeans?"

He took two steps, then stopped. His hand reached toward me as his eyes remained on the target. "Belden, will you be okay if I - ?"

"I'll be fine." I gave him a shove. "Go."

The crowd swallowed his muscular form in a heartbeat, leaving me wondering who had struck a nerve. Could it be a family member? The acrimonious break with his relatives had cost

the Feilen family big money. From what I knew, they weren't the forgiving type.

With a new worry on my list, I leaned against a pillar disguised as a palm tree, crossed my arms, and studied the crowd. Harrison, the lawyer client, had my description as I had his. His pink tie was the one standout detail. Otherwise, I was trying to find an attorney at a legal convention. Forty-three. Caucasian. Brown hair.

Seriously? The convention at the Aquarius Hotel this week was Legal Aspects of International Business or some such ilk. Dozens of men matching that description had hurried by in the past half-hour. Not one had made a move toward the Blue Nile meeting room, our rendezvous spot.

Crawford, my boss and a former police detective of twenty-five years, hadn't heard from Reginald Harrison this morning. I'd gotten no answer on the guy's cell number.

Fifteen minutes after Kevin left, I resorted to making bets with myself to pass the time. I lost half-a-mil, which summed up my luck with gambling. Even worse, I'd lost Kevin, which summed up my luck with love.

Frustration ate at me. I glared at the convention goers, wondering if the PI manual had a rule on how long I had to wait. I'd memorized a nearby display. A net full of tiny starfish, a small book with a conch shell on the cover, and a miniature

beach bucket, all promoting the benefits of working in Latin America.

"Who are they kidding?" I muttered.

The shifting waves of people gave a glimpse of a dress with a bright Hawaiian print. The woman wearing it walked next to the slim form of a boy. Who would bring a child to a Vegas conference?

I'd left Marcus, my eleven-year-old, Korean, foster son in the care of my friend and apartment manager. I basked in a glow of self-righteousness.

The tide of humanity ebbed again. The gaudy muumuu was wearing pink, fuzzy slippers.

My self-righteous glow wavered. My heart sank. She couldn't. She wouldn't. I didn't want to know, but could there be two old ladies in the world who'd wear those slippers in public?

The crowd parted like the Red Sea. My son's black eyes glittered in excitement as he placed a hand on Mrs. Colchester's arm. His straight black hair and golden hue contrasted with her pale, parchment-like skin. The seventy-plus, white-haired woman shuffled forward doing a slow but determined two-step. Not even her firm grip on my son mollified me.

They were supposed to be in Langsdale, a pricey resort town of twenty-five-thousand souls a fast two-and-a-half-hour drive

north of Vegas.

Silly me, I'd expected one of them would act like an adult. If the client showed up now, followed by villains, my son and Mrs. C would be caught in the line of fire.

A glance showed a few forty-ish men around. None headed my way. Instead, a crowd was gathering at the mouth of the corridor directly behind Marcus and Mrs. C. My gaze returned to the boy and the old woman. Her ever-present, gardenia scent wafted into my nostrils.

"Thank, heavens, we found you." Mrs. C's shrill British accent rose above the background noise. She leaned in close enough to whisper. "Your contact is dead."

The scolding died on my lips.

"He's been murdered." The older woman's tone underscored the final word as if personally offended. She jerked her head in the direction of the growing excitement behind her. "Body in a side alcove, far hall."

I sucked in air as my mind refocused on business. "What makes you think it's my guy?"

"You're in Vegas, luv. Play the odds." Mrs. C's voice held a thread of disdain. The same tone she'd adopted when she'd insisted this case wouldn't be as simple as it sounded. "Middle-aged white male. Brown hair. Brown leather briefcase handcuffed to his wrist."

She sniffed and looked down her nose. "Bit amateurish that."

Though she denied any history with cops or criminals, her terse report had the earmarks of a professional.

My hope withered. "Sounds like Harrison."

Had he been meeting someone else? Had he been caught by his pursuers?

"What are you doing in Vegas? What are you doing in this hotel?" Questioning Mrs. C gave me time to think. Besides, no way was I letting her off the hook. "How did you just *happen* to walk by the body?"

"Kevin's with the dead guy." Marcus grabbed my arm. His brow furrowed. "We saw him through the crowd, but we couldn't keep up with him. He went into the hall marked 'Employees Only'."

The floor dipped beneath my feet.

"By the time we peeked into the alcove, hotel security was on the scene." Marcus's grip tightened. "His hand is covered with blood."

Fear burned through my stomach like a hot coal. "Whose hand?"

"Kevin's." My son jerked my arm. "He's in trouble."

The older woman folded her hands beneath her sagging breasts. She cocked her head toward the far hall. "A bobby is on

the scene. Plainclothes."

I did not like the way this was shaping up. Kevin just happens to follow an old acquaintance into a murder scene with a cop nearby? A setup seemed an easy guess, except no one could have known Kevin was in town. "I'll talk to them. Crawford's time as a Vegas cop should buy some goodwill."

Marcus stepped forward. "I'll come, too."

"You. Two. Stay. Here." I set him firmly on his heels, then reinforced the words with a steady stare at my erstwhile sitter. "We can't afford any mistakes if this is murder."

"Absolutely right." Sounding like Churchill during the blitz, the old woman settled a firm hand on my son's shoulder. "We have to stand together. Give the authorities an inch, and they're bound to get the wrong man."

"Right." Marcus's early years as a street urchin had left him with a strong penchant to blame authorities or run from them. Sometimes both.

Though I usually try to dissuade his mistrust of those in power, I grabbed any excuse to keep these two from interfering. I bent to meet his eyes. "I'm counting on you."

"Don't worry." He leaned close enough to whisper. "I'll keep an eye on her."

Sad fact was, I couldn't say which of them I trusted less. My smile felt forced, but he seemed satisfied. I turned and

walked away. After two steps, I glanced behind me. They were still in place. No telling how long that would last, but I had little choice.

Cutting across the current wasn't as difficult as it would have been moments before. Though the ringing of slots could still be heard, the crime scene was drawing a crowd worthy of a chorus line. A security officer was visible at the mouth of the hall. A dozen feet behind him, Kevin faced a man in a dark suit. To the right was an opening to another hall.

Casino security was stretched thin by the growing crowd. I marched up to a gap on the left side, shouldering aside a woman with a camera.

A chunky security guard thrust an arm in my direction.

Attitude is everything. Without slowing, I flashed my private investigator license. "Crawford sent me."

My certainty gave him pause. I strode by before he realized he didn't know Crawford. Moving at a steady clip, I approached the alcove. Only a few steps into the hall, and I had a clear view of the scene. Mrs. C's description was spot on.

The was corpse slumped against the wall. He looked to be a very old forty-three, but otherwise, Mrs. C's description was spot on. The only details lacking were the wet blood on Harrison's crisp, white shirt and the knife sticking in his chest.

Once past the body, I eyed Kevin. He flashed me a warning look over the head of the man facing him. The guy finished snapping pictures of Kevin's right hand, covered with blood. Then the detective pocketed his phone and clasped his hands behind his back.

Mrs. C's plainclothes cop was five-ten with a squat, square build. Feet set wide to balance his broad shoulders. Head thrown back, so the light reflected off the bald spot in the middle of his light brown hair.

Recognition washed over me. Fred Pierce. The one detective in Vegas who hated me. Okay, maybe not the only one. Pierce had no use for Kevin either.

I'd hoped Mrs. C might be wrong and the guy would be casino security, but my bad luck was running hot.

I raised my chin.

Pierce had to have been in the building to get here so quickly. The suspicion of a setup flared again.

Sucking in a deep breath, I looked for an angle worth playing and came up empty. Pierce was too young to have known Crawford and too old to be impressed by my boss's reputation. Then, there was the guy's animosity. I clenched my jaw and warned my tongue to play nice.

"Belden." Pierce spat out my name without turning around. "I should have known. Where there's one of you, the other

follows, especially with a corpse on the floor.”

“Too bad it’s not yours.” And there went my resolve.

Humor flashed through Kevin’s sapphire eyes then he zeroed in on Pierce. “I told you. When I tried to help the man, he grabbed my hand. Then he died.”

I walked to Kevin’s side, then swiveled to face the detective. With a firm hold on my self-control, I tried again. “Kevin has nothing to do with this man. We’re in town on vacation.”

Pierce leveled a hard stare at me. “It’s never that simple with either of you. You attract trouble. Tell me the truth, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’d sooner cut cards with the devil.” My mouth can’t help itself. “If you’d take one minute to check your facts, you’d know Kevin and I have been in town less than an hour. You’d also know he has no motive to kill your victim.”

Pierce’s sneer was too common to cause concern. However, the triumph in his eyes was worrisome. The guy swung back to Kevin. “Once a criminal, always a criminal.”

Kevin’s blue eyes flashed with the right amount of indignation. “I’ve never been convicted of a crime.”

The disclaimer set off a purple flush in Pierce’s neck that rose like molten lava to his face. Steam would pour out of his ears any second. “You’ve never been caught because your family

is too slippery. You're all guilty."

Looking down from his six-foot-two-inch height, Kevin remained impassive. "I haven't been in contact with my family in almost a decade. I'm a partner in sub-contracting business."

He was telling the truth, but he could have lied as convincingly. He'd been raised by the trickiest con artists to hit Vegas in decades.

Pierce's lips stretched wide. His bared white teeth reminded me of a lion ready to gut an antelope. He rocked on his heels. "Is it a coincidence I was staked out in this hotel?"

Kevin said nothing.

The seconds stretched out as I waited for the lion to quit toying with his prey and go for the kill.

The heavy-boned man leaned into Kevin's face. "A *coincidence* that the woman who entered this hall on the heels of the victim was your twin sister?"