

CHAPTER 1

2 Across; 9 Letters;

Clue: Attendance without being asked

Answer: Uninvited

The forecast for my wedding day was clear, with no crime on the horizon.

Though my PI job has interfered with my plans more than once, today had arrived with no cases and, even better, no dead bodies. With *my* luck there was no telling how the day would end, but for now, life was good.

Langsdale, Nevada, a resort town three hours north of Las Vegas, brings in a lot of cash from the rich tourists. Money. Passion. Greed. It all adds up to violence and crime. Fortunately, in early April the city has half the heat of summer and half the tourists, which means less crime.

As a faint breeze rolled in off the desert and cooled my cheeks, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Tracy Rae Belden. Five-nine. Thirty-six. Short, brown hair. Gray eyes. Able to disappear in a crowd without trying. Moderately slim. Okay, I used to be slender. You know what? Let's move on to my husband-to-be.

Kevin Lee Tanner. Six-foot-two. Twenty-eight. Curly black hair. Sapphire eyes. Born with the build and looks of a Greek god. Charming. Loving. Perfect.

Just the thought of him made me smile. Is it any wonder I denied my feeling for him? How could I believe what I felt for Kevin and what he felt for me was real?

No more. After ten years as besties, today was the day.

Outside the small tent set up as my dressing room, lay the Bianco Botanical Garden along with assorted friends and relatives. All of us were waiting for the big moment, which would happen as soon as the minister showed up.

"Are you ready yet?" A flap of the tent let in a world full of attitude in the shape of Marcus, my twelve-year-old Korean foster son. His straight, black hair seemed to reflect the sun even inside the tent. He looked me up and down with a critical eye. "What took so long? You look like you always do."

I gave him with a flat look. "Thanks for the compliment."

"No, you look okay." He looked me over again. "Pretty good. I mean *really* good. I guess."

So much for the designer dress I'd borrowed from a friend. "Please, stop. You'll give me a swelled head."

Marcus smiled up at me. "Kevin's going to marry you no matter what you wear. We're buds. He won't leave me."

"Yeah, that was my big worry, too." I studied my son's smug expression with an upwelling of affection. "This day is all about you."

The boy plopped down on a wicker chair. "Took you long enough to marry him. Now, he gets to live with me all the time."

Can we say self-centered? That was only one of the joys I'd signed on for when I'd taken Marcus, a former street urchin, into my home and heart three years ago. I'd never regretted my decision for a minute.

I couldn't stop a smile. Today everything held a glow. "Is everyone seated? We can begin anytime."

Marcus grimaced. "The minister hasn't showed up yet. When did he call you?"

"Twenty minutes ago. He was half-a-mile from the main gate." The front entrance is an eight-minute walk from the Japanese section where the wedding pavilion had been set up. I gestured in what I thought was the correct direction, but it was a wild guess. "The man should have been here by now."

"You got lost." Marcus never let anything slide.

"I was distracted with thoughts of the wedding." I refused to admit to my well-known challenge when it came to directions. "Besides, there are a lot of paths in this place."

"Sure, there are." Marcus's solemn agreement bordered on patronizing.

Was it petty of me to be comforted that the minister might be as bad with directions as me?

"If he's not lost, he could be dead." A hopeful ember gleamed in my son's black eyes. "He blabbed about a confession and someone killed him."

"Interesting scenario, except we're not Catholic and he's not a priest." The boy's melodramatic theory was a side-effect of his fascination, really an obsession, with my cases. "There will be no murder on my wedding day. Nor at my wedding."

"There's always hope."

I wanted to find the minister and get married without any further talk of crime. I couldn't stand around waiting. Time to take control. "It's twenty minutes until the ceremony is due to begin. Let's go find him."

Marcus jumped to feet. "Kevin went to look, too. Rabi must be searching, too. He disappeared. Bet we find the guy first."

I grabbed ahold of my son's arm as he headed for the front tent flap. "Too many people that way. I don't want to talk to everyone. Let's slip out the back."

I'd tied up one of the rear flaps to let the breeze in. We crept behind a row of hedges without any of the guests noticing.

The stubble of brown grass had yet to recover from a long winter and a late spring. Manicured designs of pebbles wound past the Japanese statues and shrines. Colorful flags marked the route.

At the moment, the usually calming aura slid right off my growing frustration.

"The main entrance is that way." Marcus pointed to the left. "Kevin went to the English Garden. The first stop. I saw Rabi walk toward the Japanese shrine."

"Let's check this path." I started walking as I spoke. "The outcrop up on the right overlooks this whole section."

I was semi-confident of where I was going. Kevin, Marcus, and I were regular attendees on the garden's free days.

Marcus turned around and looked the way we'd come. After a few seconds, he resumed walking. He must have seen my puzzled expression. "I read in a western that when cowboys left their

camp, they studied the area so they could recognize it when they walked toward it. You should do that."

"Good advice." After three years together, the boy still underestimates my total lack of directional capability. I've tried every trick in the book. My best hope of returning to my own wedding in time was Marcus.

The rising slope of the ground obscured the rock garden and pond that lay in this direction. With each step, the raised voices of two men became increasingly clear.

Marcus's body stiffened. "That's Rabi."

I'd recognized Rabi's voice at the same instant. His stern tone calm command contrasted with an angry warble from a second man. "Rabi can handle himself."

Jack Rabi, in his mid-fifties, used to pick up packages for my now defunct full-time job. A black man with skin so dry it looks almost ashen, he has slightly more meat on his tall frame than a cadaver. His shoulder-length black hair is always perfectly waved and glistens as if it's been oiled.

Within a week of moving in with me, Marcus knew Rabi's entire life history, including his twenty-two years with Special Ops.

The second man's strident tone interrupted my thoughts.

Rabi's answer held a sharp edge.

I frowned at the exchange. I couldn't imagine what would provoke Rabi enough to raise his voice.

Rabi not only had more fighting skills than I could comprehend, he was unflappable. When helping on my cases, he'd faced a gunfight, a showdown with a killer, and more than one breaking-and-entering with a slightly raised eyebrow.

Several steps ahead, an ornate metal fence stretched along the top of the rise. Designed to match the Japanese architecture the wrought iron stood almost four feet tall. The open style allowed a complete view of the surrounding area.

I hurried past the row of trees blocking my view. Some people call me nosy. I prefer to think of myself as inquisitive. In the next breath, I clasped the warm bars of the fence the with both hands.

The slight outcrop looked down on the back of the Japanese Shinto shrine where Rabi and another man stood toe-to-toe. Marcus and I were on an outcropping above the men and twenty yards away. Focused on each other, neither man noticed us.

The men faced each other by a shallow pond, roughly twenty feet wide. Sharp edged blocks, dangerously beautiful, were set

along the water's edge. The large, roughhewn stones of emerald green and deep bronze reflected the climbing sun.

"Ed." Rabi's commanding tone sounded over the growl of an angry voice. "Emerson, stop!"

The name shocked me. I'd been so focused on Rabi I'd barely looked at his opponent. Now, the other man's familiar face hit home.

Edward Emerson was the leading candidate in the race for the governor's mansion in November. A popular state senator and a decorated veteran from his deployment in the Middle East, he was favored to win the primary in a few weeks.

Emerson was a barrel-chested man, with a solid build reminiscent of a once muscular athlete going to fat. In a swift move that belied his bulk, he feinted to one side then grabbed the slimmer, taller Rabi by the neck, all but throttling him. "The squad... being killed. Help."

I had to concentrate to make out the guttural words.

Marcus cocked his head to one side. "Choking a guy is a strange way to ask for help."

Rabi swept his arms up and out breaking the man's hold. He grabbed the shorter man's arms. "Calm. Down."

"The guys from Special Ops are dead." Emerson struggled without success to free himself from Rabi's grip. "All supposed accidents."

Three years ago, a veteran from the local VFW organized regular poker games for veterans of Special Ops in Nevada. Rabi and a few others got together every three or four months. Though their ages varied from forty to seventy, their common experiences bound them together. Rabi missed the January session for Marcus's championship baseball game.

"You. Me." The other man barked out the words in a harsh tone. "Only ones left."

Rabi shook him. "You insisted on meeting. Here. Today. Said a reporter was out to destroy you."

The politician raked a hand through his hair. He tried to look in several directions at once. "He knows about the mission. You *told* him. It could only be you. You're jealous of my success. You betrayed me."

"You know better." In the face of the man's growing rage, Rabi remained unmoved. "Tell me about Special Ops."

"I tried to contact the others. See if you talked to them. If you set me up with the press." Emerson's eyes held a

feverish, obsessed look. "Nobody answered. E-mails, calls, texts. Nothing."

"Probably thought you were crazy." Even as I muttered the accusation, Emerson's words struck an odd note. Even in the face of crazy, the other veterans would have given him a hearing.

"Listen to me." Emerson wrenched himself backward, breaking Rabi's grip. "He may be killing us."

Rabi shook his head, his shoulder length waves glinted in the sun. "Name."

"Jason Ixta, works for some on-line tabloid." Emerson fisted his hands. "We're being picked off."

I gave an unladylike snort. I was trying to track the guy's story, but his wild talk and thoughts of my wedding warred for control of my brain.

Rabi slowly stepped back. "A disappearance at sea. A slip off a cliff. A car missing a turn. Accidents."

"Three deaths in three months." The other man's voice skyrocketed toward the hysterical. "That's not coincidence."

It felt disloyal to Rabi, but I agreed with Emerson. Crawford, my PI boss man, had been on the police force for twenty-five years. First a uniform cop, then a detective. His

never-ending supply of stories has left me wary of coincidences, especially when it involves dead bodies.

"They were trained." Emerson remained undaunted by Rabi's disbelief. "Fleming climbed mountains all over the world. He didn't make mistakes."

Marcus, with his face pressed up against the railings, didn't shift one iota. "Actually, that's why they're called accidents. People get careless."

That was the other side of the argument.

As the wind shifted and my designer dress caressed my legs, my own priorities returned full force. Though I had sympathy for Emerson's obvious fear, I had a wedding to attend, one that couldn't go one without me. My groom was waiting for me, hopefully with the minister.

I put my hand on my son's shoulder. "We have to get back. Kevin has surely found the minister by now. He's going to wonder where I am."

Marcus's frowned. "We can't just leave."

"We can't help Emerson." Not that I wasn't curious, but I'd waited a lifetime to find the man of my dreams. Today was my day.

I told my puzzle creating brain to stay out of the argument, but the black-and-white grid of a crossword puzzle formed in my mind. Twin lists, Across and Down, were clearly demarcated.

Did I mention that one of my three jobs is creating crossword puzzles? The money barely keeps me in flavored coffee, but that's the one that feeds my soul.

Except I was not going to get involved. I was getting married. In a few hours, I'd be on my honeymoon.

Rabi held up a hand, palm out. "I can't help -- "

Emerson's impatient roar echoed off the trees. He bull-rushed Rabi. Head down, the larger, heavier man rammed straight into Rabi's chest.

I heard my son gasp even as I saw Rabi twist his skeletal frame clear of the attack. Quick and tough, Rabi was rarely caught off guard. Though Emerson caught him a glancing blow, Rabi stayed on his feet.

In a heartbeat, Rabi was behind the other man. Taking advantage of his position, he wrapped one arm around Emerson's neck then locked it in place with a firm grip. A chokehold. Almost impossible to break as long as the grip held.

Rabi's grip would hold until the crack of doom.

Emerson struggled ineffectually until lack of oxygen slowly sapped his strength.

I held my breath as I watched our friend choke the leading candidate for governor of Nevada.

Rabi released his grip and eased his friend to the ground. He stepped away, waiting until Emerson recovered and cast him a stern look. "Don't think to force me."

The steely tone in Rabi's voice cut through the air.

Marcus shook his head at the warning in our friend's voice. "Rabi doesn't like to be pushed."

No, he does not. I silently agreed. Emerson stood to lose any sympathy he hoped to gain. If the man had been deployed with Rabi, he had to know that tactic would only put his former comrade's back up.

Though my feet and my heart itched to return to the wedding tent, I had to concede that Emerson must be desperate to try to force the issue.

Scared to death one might say.

Crossword clue: What makes a man so desperate?

Possible answer: A killer.