

LOUISE FOSTER
One Across is Death

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Chapter 1



1 Across; 10 Letters;

Clue: A state of mutual trust and support

Answer: Friendship

“He was dead when I walked in the room.” Edward Ephraim held his hands out at his sides. Uncharacteristic panic threaded through his voice. His sapphire eyes filled with worry as he backed up from the corpse that used to be my co-worker, Jim Feldman.

For the first time since I met Edward three days ago, he had no canned spiel. Of course, it would be hard to explain the dead body at his feet, drilled with three bullet holes and lying in a

pool of blood.

Not that I could blame him for his evident shock. My lungs seized up as my gaze returned to Jim's body. I'd been in Las Vegas for several years, but I'd never seen a dead man, let alone someone I'd spoken to a few hours ago.

Greg, the evening security guard, and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway of the executive meeting room of the Thulton Consolidated Supply firm in Las Vegas, Nevada. He was older, and pale, even for a white guy. He, Jim, and I were supposed to be the first ones here. The only ones here.

The rush of cold air that had washed over me when I opened the door had left goosepimples on my arms. Finding a corpse on the floor hadn't helped my nerves.

My gaze flicked to the guard's belt. No holster. No gun. Everyone knew his assigned weapon always remained locked away in the security office.

Greg's white hair brushed his thick eyebrows as he turned to me. No trace of sorrow colored the older man's gaze. Greg had hated Jim. Costing someone half-a-million-dollar retirement account to your own profit will do that.

The older man backed up. "You're in charge."

Relief. Accusation. Warning. The mix of emotions underlined his words.

"Coward," I muttered. Heavy the brow that wears the crown and all that rot. My promotion was barely four weeks old and this was my reward. I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "I'll call 9-1-1. Don't touch anything."

"I didn't." Edward raised his hands even higher. "Including the gun."

Eying the automatic pistol on the ground, I took his disclaimer with a grain of salt. The room had been locked when Greg opened

the door and I hadn't seen anyone else on this floor.

If Edward didn't kill Jim, who did?

I'm Tracy Rae Belden. White. Twenty-six. Five-nine. Shoulder length brown hair. Gray eyes. Moderately slim, through no fault of my own. I'm told I'm a rising star at Thulton Consolidated Supply Company.

Don't ask me how that happened. I'm not really sure. I can barely get the words out with a straight face. For once in my life, I was in the right place at the right time. Thulton, a family-owned business, was built on the promise it can provide all the equipment needed to raise a building from the foundations to roof and all the fixings in between. Nails. Cabinets. Plumbing. You name it. We'll find it.

After almost a decade of sliding toward bankruptcy, the company hit a lucky streak the last few years. Contracts, zoning judgements, political decisions, all fell in line to aid the company's bankroll.

That's the past. Now, a long hour after finding Jim's body, Edward, Greg, and I are sequestered in a smaller meeting room down the hall. A uniform police officer, Simons by his nametag, eyed us with a watchful gaze. He's a young, earnest, black guy with buzzcut hair and broad shoulders, full of his important role in tonight's play.

While I loitered by the door doing my best to overhear distant conversations, Greg played solitaire with a deck he evidently kept in his pocket for just such an emergency.

Edward stared at the wall without seeing it.

"Get away from the door." Simons advanced toward me while gesturing to the chairs. "Sit down."

Rejoining the two men at a ten-foot-long conference table, I plopped down with an exaggerated sigh. "This feels like

detention all over again.”

Edward, Greg, and I had been interviewed in turn by Fred Pierce, an olive-skinned homicide detective who looked like he'd just rolled out of bed at six o'clock on a Tuesday evening. With tired eyes and a permanent scowl, he appeared ruffled, wrinkled, and ready to make an arrest so he could go home.

I don't think he appreciated having a dead body added to the end of his day.

Deprived of my chance to eavesdrop, I stared at Edward, noting his gorgeous tan. Did I mention he has sapphire eyes, curly black hair, and a chiseled jaw? Imagine a live statue of Apollo with dark hair.

While I couldn't help but admire his good looks, he and his partner from Global Steel had roused my suspicions since I first met them. Besides, I wasn't about to fall for someone so far out of my league.

At the moment, I was more interested in the puzzle of murder in a locked room. “How did you get into the meeting room? Greg had to unlock the door for me.”

“It was unlocked when I arrived.” Edward met my gaze and held it. Surprise laced through his tone.

I raised a brow. “And someone locked it behind you?”

Edward, his frown deepening, shrugged. “They must have. I didn't hear anything. I was staring at Jim's body.”

“Why were you early?” Jim and I had been slotted to set up the room and ensure everything was in place to sign the contracts tonight. Arrive at five. Meeting at six. When Jim didn't meet me in the lobby with the extra key as promised, I'd roused Greg out of the security office.

Edward, as one of the representatives from Global Steel, had been scheduled to arrive with the other attendees any time after

five-thirty.

From the raised voices I'd heard down the hall, my bosses and the legal counsel for both sides rode the elevators up right after the police. Near as I could tell, everyone was accounted for, except Steven Huit.

Edward's co-worker from Global was a no-show.

Suspicious, right? I'd added the fact to the crossword puzzle I was building in my mind. In addition to being an up-and-coming hamster on the business wheel, I create crossword puzzles to keep me on the right side of sane.

A crossword puzzle is perfectly symmetrical. With only one solution, the clues and answers come together in perfect choreography.

One clue. One correct answer. Finished with an exact balance, leaving a sense of fulfillment. Not to mention, the illusion of being in control.

Creating puzzles is too much fun to be work, but the money I earn keeps me in flavored coffee.

I repeated my last question. "Why were you early?"

"I received a message."

At first, I wasn't sure if he answered or if I'd given the response I expected. True or not, what else could he say? But the dawning awareness in his eyes gave my cynical side pause. "On your cell?"

That would leave a record to prove his story.

He shook his head. Resignation shadowed his handsome features. "A messenger came to my hotel room. Steve sent him."

The absent Steve. "They got you good."

He jerked as if I'd tasered him. "You believe me?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. But the case is a bit *too* perfect for my

liking. My ten-year-old niece could have planned a murder and gotten away with it better than you have." I laughed out loud. "A smoking gun and a locked room? All the cops need is a red ribbon taped to your head."

A snort turned into a cough and came from the cop at the door.

"See," I waved a hand at Simons. "Even he agrees with me."

The officer resumed his neutral demeanor. "I'm not allowed to comment on an active investigation, but jail cells aren't filled with geniuses."

"True, but I had higher hopes for Edward." I leaned back in my chair and raised my cup. Frowning to find it empty, I eyed the topic of discussion. "Is Edward your real name?"

"Yes." Surprise blanketed his expression. "Why would you ask that?"

"You don't look like an Edward." Something had been off about this guy since I'd met him. He was too perfect, too polished. "I'm also not convinced you could have achieved this position at the grand age of twenty-two."

"I'm an assistant salesman. Besides, I grew up in the business." He cocked his head to one side. His mouth curled up. "Do you doubt my ability or do you think I'm too young?"

I wagged my hand in the air. "You're convincing. I'll give you that. My head can't find a flaw, but my gut's not buying your story."

His gaze narrowed as he studied me. His response was spot on. Completely believable. "Are you at detecting lies?"

I shrugged. "Let's just say I've told my share of untruths. All for a good cause, of course."

His smile widened. "I'd want details."

"I don't know you that well." My causes usually involved keeping me out of trouble with everyone from my parents, to

teachers, to a few law enforcement officials I met along the way. Nothing serious, I promise. I cupped my chin in my hand and studied him. “Did you kill Jim?”

“No, I didn’t.” A mix of confusion, dawning worry, and absolute sincerity filled Edward’s gaze. “He was dead when I walked in.”

No flares from my gut. “Did you smell any gunpowder when you entered the room?”

His frown deepened. “I never thought about it. I didn’t notice any smell.”

“Neither did I.” That had been one of the first clues I’d tallied for my puzzle. “In a closed room, it should have reeked. Did Pierce ask you about that detail?”

“No.” Edward folded his arms over his chest. Curiosity replaced his confusion. “You?”

“Nope. Greg, did Pierce mention the smell of gunpowder in your interview?” When the older man shook his head, I continued. “Did you smell anything in the room? Cologne? Air freshner? No? Anybody know how long it takes for the smell of gunpowder to dissipate?”

The cop had taken a step toward us, his expression intense and studious. He met my questioning gaze, but remained stony-faced and silent.

Probably didn’t want to admit he didn’t know. Typical man.

“We could find out. Google is your friend.” Edward tapped a rhythm on the polished wooden table. His brow furrowed in thought. “There was blood on the carpet. Seeping from under the body.”

I had noticed that before I shoed the men out of the room and shut the door behind us.

“Jim was killed in that room. He died where he fell. There was

blood splatter behind him.” I tapped my finger on my lips. “You need to come up with another suspect. Pierce looks tired but I don’t take him for a fool.”

Edward’s gaze sharpened. “You overheard something on your fishing expedition. What?”

People talk. They can’t stop themselves. A comment here. A joke there. Details add up. “Pierce came to homicide after ten years in fraud. This is his first solo murder case and he’s determined to make good.”

Though I studied the young man closely, his expression gave away nothing but random curiosity.

I swallowed my disappointment. “Do you or Global Steel have a motive to murder Jim?”

A breeze brushed the hair on my arm. Too late, I realized the door was open.

Pierce marched into the room like a brick wall come to life, knocking over all in its path. He turned on the uniform office. “Conducting a separate interrogation, Simons?”

The younger officer straightened. “Sir, they were talking amongst themselves. Discussing the case.”

“Did you plan to set up a whiteboard for them?” Pierce thrust his wide shoulders forward, forcing the other man back. “You do realize they’re suspects?”

Simons raised his chin. “I thought they might give something away.”

I was congratulating Simons on his quick defense when Pierce’s words struck home.

“Whoa, there.” I grew up on a horse ranch in the hills of Kentucky. Some parts of childhood never leave no matter how far you travel. I jumped to my feet and faced the detective. “I am not a suspect.”

From what I'd seen, Edward was an okay guy. Despite the strong case against him, I even had doubts about his guilt, but I wasn't going down with him. "I have an alibi. I also have no motive to kill Jim."

Pierce rounded on me without hesitation. "Your co-worker was standing in the way of your next promotion. You both applied to be project manager on this contract. A position which involved a bonus, more responsibility, and a high profile in the business. Further, you despised him. You thought he was sexist, obnoxious, and mentally deficient compared to you."

"Only because he was all of those things." That's what panic sounds like. When my brain freezes, my mouth jumps in with no warning or filter. The results aren't pretty and I've had to dig myself out of more holes than I like to admit.

Unfortunately, I haven't found a cure.

Looking at Pierce's triumphant sneer, I might have to redouble my efforts.

Cursing my loose lips and whoever had blabbed to Pierce, I doubted whether my neutral expression served any purpose now. "Points to you for figuring out Jim was a self-serving rat so much quicker than I did. But that doesn't make him worth killing."

The detective turned on me, quick and close enough that I could smell a whiff of garlicky alfredo sauce on his breath. "Then, keep your wild theories to yourself and your nose out of my case."

He was threatening me? Over Pierce's shoulder I saw Edward replace the beginning of a grin with a concerned expression, but laughter danced in his eyes.

Ignoring his amusement, I fisted my hands on my hips. "Threats aren't going to build a case against me when there is none."

“Facts will send you to the pen.” Pierce pointed his finger under my nose. “You have the hots for the pretty boy and you helped him.”

“Neither is true.” I grabbed onto my calm with both hands. This badge heavy cop could make life difficult for me just because he felt like it. “If you get out of your own way long enough to cover the basics, you’d test Edward for gun residue. He hasn’t washed his hands since we arrived. It would either confirm his innocence or his guilt.”

“Do it. Now.” Edward jumped to his feet. “That would prove I didn’t fire the gun.”

Simons glanced at the detective before pointing over his shoulder. “CSI is finishing up in the meeting room. Should I send word?”

Pierce’s thunderous glare froze the uniform officer in place. Then he rounded on me and my supposed partner in crime. “I wasn’t serious before. Now, I think you might be in on it with him.”

I snorted at the thought. “I can’t discuss my co-worker’s murder without arousing suspicion? Or suggest a test that could prove what happened? I want to go home, nothing more.”

Although I wouldn’t mind knowing the truth. My crossword puzzle was barely begun. Despite Pierce’s power, I refused to be intimidated by his petty-minded threat. “The dead man wasn’t worth killing and the living one isn’t worth going to jail over. You need to cover your bases if you want to put him away. Starting with motive. Edward barely new Jim.”

Edward pointed a long arm in my direction. “She’s right. I have no reason to kill him.”

“Except he was about to expose your million-dollar fraud.” Smug satisfaction gleamed in Pierce’s eyes. “I can spot a con in

my sleep. You're a fake. You and your partner, who's nowhere to be found. He and the rest of your gang ran out on you."

Edward's brows rose as if he'd been struck. "Steve and I are here to sign a multi-year contract to supply steel to the Thulton supply company. We have a shipment ready."

Just the right level of outrage. Absolute conviction. All the ingredients needed to sell a lie. Trust me, I've spun enough falsehoods to know the signs.

This guy was good. I had no reason to doubt his story. I also know police are allowed to lie during an investigation, but deception wasn't the vibe I got from Pierce. He sounded confident.

Besides, the detective's accusation regarding this deal jelled with warning signs that had bothered me over the last few days. The rush to sign the contracts. The \$1.5 million dollars upfront for the shipment currently at the warehouse. The appearance of the perfect solution to a problem our company had had for several weeks.

Edward's confidence never faltered. "You think Thulton didn't do their homework? Global Steel is an established company. We've done business all over the world. Check us out. Look at our web-site. Call."

Pierce waved away the defense with a swipe of his meaty paw. "Save it. Global Steel is legit. I'm sure you have the bases covered. Pros do. You're the fake and your victim found out. He stumbled onto the truth through his contacts in Japan. He lived there four years ago. You're too memorable to pull off a good con."

"Japan? Four years ago?" Edward's brow furrowed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

A knock on the door pulled everyone's attention. "Detective Pierce? You need to see this."

A tech, complete with a neon green vest that spelled out CSI, stood in the door, pointing down the hall.

Pierce strode away from Edward. He glared at Simons as he passed. "Keep them here. CSI will be back to test for gun residue. On both of them."

"What about Greg?" I gestured to the old man. "You're going to leave him out?"

"I was at the firing range this afternoon, but I'll do the gun test." The security guard moved another card, without looking up. "Hey, I won."

"Good for you." I eyed the detective until he disappeared from view. Pierce seemed determined to solve this case here and now. "I think this could be a long night."

Edward, still on his feet, eased closer to my side. "I wonder what they found?"

"So do I." My brain was buzzing with possibilities, but I had no ready answer. "They've had the corpse, the gun, and the suspect from the first minute. What about this motive Pierce discovered?"

"He's fishing." The younger man shook his head. "He can't know anything."

I noted he didn't actually deny the facts Pierce had presented.

The detective was right about one thing. Edward was far too good looking to be easily forgotten, by either sex. If he'd been seen or photographed in connection to a fraud, his identity would be easily proven. There couldn't be two such men on the planet.

Simons, who'd followed the others into the hall, walked inside the room. "You two be quiet."

Edward looked at him. "What are going to do? Arrest me if I keep talking?"

I couldn't help but smile. "You could separate us. Move me to a different room."

Greg waved a hand as he dealt out a new game of solitaire. "I'm good."

Simons shook his head. "I'm not moving you without Pierce's okay. Just button it."

To prove he meant business, he frowned before stepping into the hall.

"Sinking ship?" Edward asked with a sardonic look. "Or scheming for information?"

I raised a brow. "It would be smarter to abandon you and the bull's eye on your back. Pierce wants an easy case and you're it. Truth is, I can't see anything from in here."

Edward studied me with a laser intensity. "You're smart, Belden. Smart enough to know when to quit a losing hand. Why is knowing the answers worth courting trouble?"

I did a double take that he'd read me so easily. Confusion filled his tone. But it was the surprise, bordering on shock, in his gaze that caught my attention. I wasn't about to admit to my compulsion to finish the mental crossword puzzle I'd started. "I want to know what's going on. What pulled Pierce away?"

Raised voices drew my attention to the hall in time to see Simons stride toward the elevator, leaving the door vacant.

Without hesitation, I hurried over and stepped into the corridor. The president of my company stood toe-to-toe with Pierce. Pam Nielsen, the vice-president, was at his elbow. Half-a-dozen men and women, co-workers and attorneys, formed a ring several feet behind them.

Arthur Thulton, Sr., the prez, was as solid as Pierce but a few inches taller. Tan from the tennis court, he had the jowls of a bulldog on a head topped by a mane of white hair. "You have

held me and my employees here long enough. I demand you allow us to go home.”

He glanced over the detective’s shoulder and saw me and Edward inching up the corridor.

Thulton flung out his arm like aiming a gun. “There’s the killer. Liar! Thief! Murderer!”

“Nothing personal, but I hope he means you,” I muttered. “I need this job.”

“Unless you’ve embezzled, I imagine you’re safe.” As he spoke, Edward’s neutral expression disappeared.

“Mr. Thulton, I’ve done nothing to your company. Certainly not theft or murder.” A look of pain washed over his attractive features. Puzzlement filled his eyes. “If anything has gone wrong, I assure you I had no hand in it. I’m here to conclude a business deal.”

His sincere tones rang down the corridor. He paused to let the words sink in.

If he’d been a television preacher, I’d have sent him money.

Then, his features melted into worry. “I *am* growing concerned about Steven. He’s never been late for a meeting as long as I’ve known him. Detective Pierce, have you checked his hotel room? I hate to think Steven’s been attacked.”

Pierce’s gaze narrowed, but his scowl didn’t lighten. “I have a BOLO out for your confederate.”

I was willing to bet my next paycheck Steven was no longer in the country.

“I see no reason for me or my employees to stay here.” Thulton addressed Pierce at a full gallop. “We arrived after the murder. We can add nothing to your investigation. Also, Ms. Belden shouldn’t be subjected to the presence of this, this...”

“Alleged killer?” I supplied when his stuttering continued.

Edward nudged me. “Thanks for the alleged.”

“It’s the least I could do.” I whispered as I caught Thulton studying me under his heavy brows. He wasn’t my biggest fan.

Jim, the victim, had been the president’s protégé, even being included in the executive meetings at Thulton’s mega-mansion. Of course, fitting in at that level of society took a fancy car, name brand clothes, and ready cash. Hence the stock trade that lost money for Greg and everyone else except the star of tonight’s murder mystery: Jim.

Thulton crossed his arms across his chest, tightening the seams of his tailored jacket. “Why is she being held with the murderer?”

Edward tsked. “There goes alleged.”

“Is she involved?” Thulton seemed a shade too eager to embrace that possibility.

“Uh-oh,” Edward spoke without moving his mouth, having somehow distanced himself from me by an arm’s length. “You should have insisted on the separate room.”

“Ms. Belden is a material witness.” Pierce’s stern tone left no room for argument. He turned on the prez and the others, letting them know by sheer force of personality who had the power. “The rest of you will remain until I’m satisfied you’re not involved.”

A collective despair seemed to settle over the on-lookers as shoulders slumped. So much for their quick escape.

“As for the killer,” Pierce continued. “No arrests have been made. Mr. Ephraim is considered a witness.”

“For now.” I wasn’t sure if I or Edward added that undertone.

“What about Greg?” I asked, mostly to annoy the detective. “You keep forgetting him. I hate to see him left out.”

Pierce, who’d turned to face Thulton, tightened his shoulders

at my jibe. “These officers will escort you back to the meeting room. You will stay there until I decide to send you home. The police department thanks you for your patience in bringing your colleague’s murderer to justice.”

A prolonged stare down ended with Thulton giving Pierce a sharp nod before my boss turned and met my gaze. “I’m certain Ms. Belden will give you every assistance while maintaining the professionalism and integrity of the company.”

“He should probably wait before he makes that claim.” I gave Thulton a confident nod to cover my comeback, meant only for Edward’s ears.

“You have an issue with authority.” Edward spoke without shifting his gaze off the drama down the hall. Amusement sounded in his voice.

I shook my head. “I have an issue with over-blown arrogant idiots. Many of whom are in positions of authority.”

Pierce gestured for two uniform officers to escort the others away.

I caught the gaze of Thulton’s admin who waggled her brows at me. I so wanted to know what she knew. I chewed my lip. “I wish I could talk to them.”

Simons, who’d been four feet ahead of me and Edward in the hall, spun on his heel. He pointed at the open door. “Get back in the room. Right now.”

I rolled my eyes at his transparent attempt to cover his lapse at our escape.

Pierce however, walked in the opposite direction without a backward glance. He aimed one CSI tech at us with a sharp nod before snagging another tech by the arm. They walked into the executive meeting room deep in conversation.

I wanted to linger, but Simons practically pushed us into the

smaller meeting room. “You realize Pierce already saw us in the hall, right?”

Any response from Simons was cut off by the arrival of a CSI tech in the familiar neon green vest, a slim, white woman with bright green eyes. Arrayed in plastic goggles and latex gloves, she eyed us. “I’m here to do gun residue tests on you three. I’ll need some information.”

She looked about my age, maybe a bit older. She was clearly experienced at her job. The tests were completed with practiced repetition. The cotton swabs and sticky tape from our hands and clothes were marked and bagged. Then, we were three again.

Simons deserted us to stand in the hall. Leaving the door open, he glanced in regularly.

I watched Greg flip cards for his game of solitaire while I mulled over possible scenarios for Jim’s murder. These included him being a spy, a drug runner, or in the Witness Protection Program.

Closer to home, I considered embezzlement but Jim didn’t have access to the accounts. For that, he’d have needed an accomplice. Blackmail was a possibility. If he uncovered a juicy secret at the executive weekends, he might have been worth killing. Had he stooped to extortion to secure his rapid rise through the ranks?

The thought sparked a flare of light in my brain. I chased the connection into the shadows.

Edward eyed me. “You’re thinking so hard *my* head is hurting.”

I planted my feet on the ground. “Jim said something weeks ago about my future, getting better and getting worse.”

Edward spun a pencil on his finger while staring at me. “What did he mean by that?”

I dragged the almost forgotten conversation into the light. “He said he’d be out of my way soon, but I’d still have to answer to him for permits. I thought he was mouthing off. Then, two weeks ago I read about a political committee being formed to oversee future construction permits.”

The connection raised intriguing possibilities.

The man facing me raised a brow. “Did he have political connections?”

“As a matter of fact, he did,” I admitted, still chasing down clues for my crossword puzzle. “Thulton invites a handful of office holders to parties at his estate. Pam Nielsen, the vice-president, is usually the liaison for getting all the permits lined up. She knows several politicians pretty well.”

I’d recently discovered she knew one married state senator much better than the others.

A shadow of resignation crossed Edward’s face. “Except they weren’t standing over the body. I was hoping you’d found a suspect to pass me on the list.”

Edward was another enigma. Was he guilty? Was his presence a motive for the murder? A coincidence? Had someone taken advantage of his presence to frame him?

I shot him a sideways glance. “Where do you think Steven is? Really.”

No reaction. A perfect poker face.

“He cut and run?” I persisted. “Did he have a reason to kill Jim? What game were you playing?”

My rapid-fire questions drew little reaction other than a tapping of his long fingers. A tick I’d noticed earlier when he was thinking.

I felt a twinge of sympathy. “He left you behind.”

I knew it as certainly as I knew I was innocent of Jim’s murder.

Whatever their plan had been, Edward was on his own.

The younger man stared at the far wall, lost in thought. Had he ever been on his own?

The heavy tread of footsteps caused us both to turn.

Pierce strode into the room like a hurricane making landfall, bringing with it wind and fury. “Ms. Belden, I have a few questions for you.”

I didn’t like the light of triumph in his gaze, nor the way he zeroed in on me rather than Edward. “I’m happy to help you any way I can, Detective.”

See? I can be cooperative. The problem is I can’t sustain the effort.

Pierce stopped two feet in front of my chair. Then, he deliberately looked at the security guard, still absorbed in his endless games of solitaire. “Greg, listen up.”

The older man blinked a few times as he looked up at the detective. “What?”

I frowned on the inside, wondering what this was leading to.

Edward eyed me with a worried look.

Satisfaction oozed from Pierce. “Several hours ago, you received a call to turn on a special scent suppressing function that is only available in the executive meeting room. Correct?”

Greg mulled the question for only a moment before nodding slowly. “Yeah. They wanted to get it ready for the meeting.”

I settled my feet more firmly on the plush carpet feeling the ground threatening to give way like quicksand. I knew where this was headed.

“They?” Pierce asked before pinning me with a narrowed gaze. “Specifically, who called in the request?”

The security guard turned to me with an apologetic shrug as he pointed a gnarly finger at me. “Tracy called it in.”

“Hours ago.” Pierce repeated, then paused for effect. “She also had the air-conditioning turned lower at that time. Correct?”

Greg’s baggy eyes seemed to droop as I watched. “Yes, she did.”

Okay, I admit this looks bad, but I have an innocent explanation.

Rather than blurt out excuses and apologies, I remained outwardly cool and calm. My mother told me early on that explanations make you look weak. State the facts, leave out the ‘I’m sorry’ and move on. Her advice has helped me save face many times.

Pierce looked down at me, lengthening the silence.

Unfortunately for him, with enough advance warning, I can keep my mouth under control. Especially when it involved saving myself. I also happened to have a police acquaintance.

Crawford was a burly, brick of a man with a battered face. A homicide detective I’d met last year. He’s told me more than once how deadly silence can be as a weapon.

People feel a need to fill the emptiness. Innocent. Guilty. Doesn’t matter. People talk too much. They hand the police the evidence needed to convict them. Details, seemingly innocent, that could be turned against them.

Besides, I don’t like being manipulated. So, I met Pierce stare for silent stare. I had nowhere to go until the detective said the word anyway. I could sit here all night.

“Well, Ms. Belden?” Pierce folded his arms across his chest.

I frowned, pretending confusion. “Well, what? Greg answered your questions.”

“You admit you made those calls? Insisted on those changes?” The detective thrust his shoulders forward. At my nod, he

continued. “A special scent suppressor to dissipate the smell of the gunshots. A colder temperature to disguise the time of death to when you had an alibi.”

“Hardly.” I spoke in a calm tone. “Pam Nielsen, the Vice-president of the company, has a severe allergy to scents. A special air filter was installed in the executive conference room. The cooler air strengthens the effectiveness of the suppressor. Both of those adjustments are standard procedure for any meeting she attends.”

Pierce thrust himself farther into my personal space, hovering over me like a thunder cloud. “Nielsen wasn’t scheduled to be in this meeting. She was invited thirty minutes prior. Not hours ago, when you made those changes.”

I kept my expression locked in a neutral expression. Thulton not telling Nielsen about the meeting ahead of time was harder to explain.

How to make Pierce understand the game-playing between the president and vice-president? They’d known each other since college. Honestly, one was as bad as the other. But would either admit to their childish behavior in front of the detective? Risk bad publicity to save my behind? Fortunately, her allergies were well known.

The truth was Pam *hadn’t* been on the meeting list of attendees. Just as the president hadn’t been invited to the quarterly board meeting last month. Of course, he attended. On time. As she was expected at tonight’s contract signing. I knew she’d be there. She was over my division. So, I’d made the arrangements to take care of her allergies.

“No answer, Ms. Belden?” Pierce taunted me.

As I laid it out for him his expression grew more disbelieving with each word.

As the last word faded, he eyed me with a scornful expression. “I expected better from you.”

That’s what I got for telling the truth. Of course, I could have come up with a better cover story if I’d lied. “Ask anyone. They’ll tell you the same thing.”

“The pair of you.” The detective looked from Edward to me. “In it together. For money? Love? Both? He conned you like he conned your boss. You’re both going to the station.”

“What about Greg?” I pointed at the security guard, partly for a distraction, mostly for the heck of it. The old guy shot me an amused look. “Since I’m in the mix, would you mind telling me what CSI found the last time they called you out of the room? I’d also like details about Edward’s alleged past.”

“You think this is funny?” Pierce sneered. “I’m going to love locking you up.”

“I’m serious.” How could I complete the crossword puzzle my brain was creating without more facts? “Ask Mr. Thulton about Ms. Neilsen. Ask Neilsen, her admin left a message on my desk two days ago.”

Pierce’s eyes narrowed. “Where is it?”

An image of me crushing the post-it-note and throwing it in the hallway dumpster replayed in my mind. “Just ask her or her admin, Suzy. They’ll tell you.”

Surely, they’d tell the truth.

“Get them ready to go.” Pierce barked at Simons as he strode out of the room. “I’ll continue the questioning at the station. The others can be released for now.”

The two of them walked into the corridor together. Pierce paused to discuss something with the uniformed officer.

As my stomach growled, my mind hopped from Neilson, to allergies, to Jim, to motives. Then, my brain locked on a detail.

I pointed at the ceiling. “Neilson started in accounting.”

Edward raised a brow. “Good for her. How does that help?”

“The money you targeted was coming from the emergency fund.” I pierced him with my gaze. “You knew that. When was the last time you checked the totals?”

He eyed me for a nano-second. Judging. Weighing. Deciding. Something in his expression changed. “Last week.”

“Right after the quarter ended.” I pasted a calendar in my mind’s eye. “Three months until the next scheduled audit. How much money could I siphon off if I had access?”

Which, unlike Jim, Nielsen does. Money. Power. Politics. The dead man had dabbled in all three.

“You think I’m innocent?” Edward didn’t sound hopeful, just curious and mildly surprised.

“I’m keeping an open mind.” Ethics aside, I didn’t think he was stupid enough to be caught over the body. He also didn’t seem the type to kill in a fit of temper. If Jim had confronted him about the deal being a scam, Edward would have talked his way out of trouble.

Edward turned his body so Greg couldn’t see either of our faces, nor easily hear our discussion. “Why don’t you walk away? There’s nothing in this for you.”

A desperate confusion blanketed his expression, making him look younger than his twenty-three years.

Why did my asking a few questions throw him into a tailspin? I met his puzzlement with a shrug. Endless curiosity combined with an obsession to finish crossword puzzles, even ones of my own creation, was my normal.

“All right, you two.” Simons burst into the room like a loosed cannonball. “On your feet. We’re taking a ride to the station. Pierce wants to tie this case up. He has big plans for his future.”

“The future.” I sat up as if stung by a bee. A fresh scenario filled my mind. “What if that’s the motive? It could fit.”

Edward’s gaze narrowed. He was the only one listening to me. “What have you got?”

Busy rearranging my clues and my crossword grid, I barely heard him. “This could fill in all the squares in my puzzle.”

Greg looked up from his game. “Can I go back to work?”

“I’ll check with Detective Pierce.” Simons gestured for him to follow. “For now, you’re with us.”

“Let’s go.” I jumped to my feet. As I rushed past him, the young officer did a doubletake.

“The woman’s in a hurry.” Though Edward’s tone was casual, curiosity lay buried behind his words.

When I strode out the door, their footsteps followed close behind me. Again, we three walked into the corridor. Greg brought up the tail end, let’s not forget him.

“Are my co-workers and the lawyers still here?” I asked, marching down the hall.

“By the elevator.” Simons’s heavy tread sounded behind me. “Don’t cause trouble. You’re in my charge.”

“Sure, she is.” Edward’s sarcasm came through clearly.

I ignored them both. The compulsion to find answers and complete my crossword grid consumed me. Politics would make a good title for this one.

Hushed conversation carried around the corner. Pierce’s deep tone over-rode a mix of voices. Relief filled me. The players were gathered.

A strange excitement built in my veins. I didn’t even have a plan. I wasn’t sure what I intended to say, but that was nothing new. I rounded the corner, slowed my steps, and composed my expression.

Silence fell as my co-workers caught sight of me. Their expressions betrayed a mix of sympathy and suspicion, along with relief that they weren't in my shoes.

In a heartbeat, all eyes shifted behind me and to one side. In only three days, I'd grown used to the reaction when Edward entered a room. He drew stares the way a magnet attracted steel. The gazes followed him as he walked to my right.

Simons followed close in his wake.

When Greg didn't join them, I glanced over my shoulder.

He stood behind me, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"You're all here," I said with a sigh of relief. "It's so much easier when everyone is in one place."

The ring of faces swiveled back to me. I had their attention. Including Pierce, who eyed at me with a thunderous glare. He opened his mouth.

"Tracy." Arthur, our illustrious leader, met my gaze with a steely look. "This has been a sorry business. It's in the best interest of everyone to leave it to the police so as to keep the company untouched by scandal."

Translation: Keep your mouth shut, or else.

He carried on without pausing. "We were all taken in by this charlatan. Now, I find he is nothing more than a con artist here to make a quick dollar. Detective Pierce knows the family from his days in Fraud. I've told Pierce you had no part in this scheme. I'm certain Edward acted *alone*."

"I doubt that." Slapping away the offered hand that would save me, I glanced at the young man's resigned expression. He stood by himself, isolated, as if he'd always been on the outside looking in. "Honestly, schemes at this level would require research, preparation, hacking. I'm certain he had help."

"I wasn't referring to other criminals." My save-yourself

president shot me a warning look. “No one in the Thulton fold would aid the cause of a criminal.”

“What about truth? Or justice?” Or the American way? With a nod of respect to Superman, I stopped myself before adding the last phrase. When a muscle jumped in Edward’s jaw, I knew with a sudden, unshakable certainty that he knew what I was thinking. “I’m not talking about fraud. I’ll leave that to the police, though I doubt there will be enough proof to charge Edward with either.”

Thulton blinked at me. “What are your referring to?”

Can anyone say self-centered? I pointed to the executive meeting room where the blood stains would still be damp. “I’m thinking of Jim’s murder.”

My boss moved his bulk toward me, towering over me like a dark-eye vulture. “Edward murdered him. Detective Pierce realizes you’re not involved. The police will release you on my authority. As far as we are concerned that case is over.”

The warning, threat, promise; call it what you will, was clear in his glacial stare. Pierce’s triumphant sneer confirmed his obvious belief that I was now under control. “Is that the royal we? Cuz I never agreed to that decision.”

Arthur leaned back on his heels. He fixed me a stiff smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “You are a valued member of the Thulton family. A talented worker with a promising future and a lot of potential.”

I hated it when people said I have potential. What did that make me now? A failure?

“As tragic as Jim’s loss is... ” Arthur put a hand over his heart to show how devastated he was by the murder. “Life goes on. We must look to our future.”

And the mourning period was over.

Arthur’s benign expression was guilt free. “Your career is

assured. A rising star. The next project manager. Definitely a team player.”

The first time in my life I’m called a team player and it has to be now. Thulton was clueless. I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

Seriously, it was decision time. I counted off the players in the drama. Jim. Arthur. Pamela. Greg. Pierce. Edward.

I had no doubt Edward could look after himself. Sure, the cards were stacked against him. Whatever cadre had brought him to this moment had apparently left him twisting in the wind. They might save him. They might not.

What concern was that of mine?

I fought to look beyond my own erratic impulses and consider my future. The job was somewhat boring, but it paid well and I do like telling people what to do. The career wasn’t what I’d planned, but mostly, I had everything anyone is supposed to want.

I’ve been on the streets with no money and nowhere to go. It’s not fun. It’s scary and lonely.

I followed a charming boy from the hills of Kentucky to the middle of the desert. I wasted years at menial jobs while he spent my money to feed his gambling habit. Then came the day I had a dream of seeing his body parts floating in a cooking pot. And I don’t cook. I left him the next morning. My next stop had been as a maid cleaning up after people. No prospects beyond the next trashed hotel room.

I didn’t want to go back to those days. So, behind my cavalier attitude, my heart was pounding so loud it was drowning out all the clues and crossword puzzle variations my brain could imagine.

I had to wonder at the wisdom of shooting myself in the foot

by trying to find the real killer, even if that should turn out to be Edward. After all, the wheels of justice would turn without me. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut. My future was on the line.

Too bad remaining silent has never been my strong suit.

Sanity urged me to keep my mouth shut. Why go for the road less traveled?

Then, the memory of an old poem surfaced. It was about having to face the woman in the mirror. Sure, I could cash my paycheck and have a comfortable life. But what if my silence let a murderer go free? Even worse, what if an innocent man went to prison for a crime he didn't commit?

What the heck. Who needed a comfortable life with a good job?

I also had to consider my crossword puzzle. Not finishing it would torment me.

The knots in my stomach loosened. My heart calmed. When in doubt, go with your strength. Mine happens to be mouthing off. I pasted on my best I don't care attitude and jumped in.

"Edward may be guilty of something." I waved a hand in his direction. "We all are, but he didn't kill Jim. Neither did I."

I shot a look at Pierce. I wanted to get that part on the record. "Jim was a schmuck. He played up to the people in power. He stole ideas. He took credit for work that wasn't his. I didn't like him. A lot of people didn't, but he knew how to make himself look good."

Pierce strode forward, like a hurricane headed for land. "This isn't a detective novel where you get to make a speech."

Arthur fists were white knuckled. "Listen to the detective, Ms. Belden. This may not end well for you."

I laughed in his face. "I'm sure it won't end well for me by

your standards, but I don't care.”

That was one of the few high cards I had to play.

“Simons!” Pierce threw out his arm and pointed at me.

I looked at him with a flat stare. “Do you think my story will sound better on the evening news when I cast suspicion on this case?”

Actually, depending on the forces that had framed Edward, the case might not fall apart, but I was certain Pierce wasn't prepared to take the risk. Right or wrong, I would find an audience. That was my other high card.

The detective put up his palm to stop Simons's advance. “Fine, if it will help end this charade, I'll let you babble. I'll even read you your rights.”

Which he did.

“You're covered.” I admitted graciously. “We've all heard them. In exchange, I'll point out a few of the basic errors you've already made.”

Pierce's jaw tightened as a purple flush stole up his neck and spread across his face.

“You see, there are a number of people besides Edward or me who had reason to kill Jim.” I half-turned to face Greg. I was sorry, but facts are facts. “Greg lost his retirement on one of Jim's investments. A deal Jim manufactured and sold for a large profit right before the bottom collapsed. That's why Greg is still working. That's why his daughter is a dealer at a casino instead of going to college.”

The old security guard didn't flinch. He just stared back with his hound dog eyes.

I didn't mention him being at the gun range today. If Greg was guilty, I had to admire that piece of priceless planning.

I turned slowly, ignoring the riveted gazes of everyone else in

the room. “Then, there’s Pam Neilsen. Vice President, counting down the days until she retires. A retirement forced on her because Jim stole her idea for the Last Orchid Casino and Hotel and sold it as his own to Arthur and the senior management. That score netted him a promotion, a bonus, and the project manager role.”

Pierce strode forward, thrusting himself into the picture. “Why would she remain silent? Why not call him out?”

“I asked myself the same thing once I realized what he’d done.” I steeled myself to continue. “I saw her making the notes. I knew the ideas were hers. Then, I remembered her affair with a married man. A politician.”

I stumbled onto that tidbit months ago. “I have no proof, but I’m betting Jim did. That’s why you announced your early retirement, isn’t it, Pam? A retirement you don’t want.”

Neilsen met my accusation with a stoic face. She hadn’t succeeded in a man’s business by being faint of heart. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Jim’s ambition wouldn’t stop if he had a fish on the string.” I felt sorry for her, but I knew whereof I spoke. Jim was ruthless. “If he had you, he had your lover as well. A politician is not a pigeon Jim would leave unplucked.”

Pierce crossed arms over his chest. “You’d say anything to protect your boyfriend. Anyone else you’d like to accuse?”

“As a matter of fact, there is at least one more person who had a motive to kill Jim.” I felt a thousand soft pricks on my skin. Fear? Excitement? Nerves? The risk of ruining someone’s life? I may have done that already with my accusations.

I hadn’t liked Jim, but murder is murder. My parents would have understood my compulsion to speak out, even if they hadn’t always appreciated what drove me.

I took a deep breath, braced myself, and hoped my brain held the answers that danced in the shadows.

A slight turn to my right left me facing not the irate detective, but the company prez, Arthur Thulton. “Mr. Thulton had the biggest motive of all to kill Jim. He was about to destroy the company Thulton brought back from bankruptcy.”

“She’s crazy.”

“Insane. What nerve.”

“Saving herself.”

“This is better than the meeting would have been.”

That last was from my coffee buddy.

The shock and awe of the murmured comments played on the background noise on my consciousness. Arthur met my accusation with perfect aplomb and a measure of pity.

“This is a pathetic attempt to save yourself.” The older man shook his lioness head. “Silence her, Detective. I don’t fear the papers. If you repeat one word of this slander, I will sue you.”

I held my ground in the face of his certainty. “It’s not slander if it’s true. Jim had been crawling up the ladder by stepping on people. He cheated Greg out of a five-hundred-thousand-dollar retirement portfolio in order to move in your circles. He tricked Pam Neilsen into exposing secrets that set him blackmailing her to get promotions, projects, and ultimately remove her from the game completely.”

“I’ve admitted nothing of these ridiculous suppositions.” Pam’s scathing tones cut across my words.

I continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “However, Jim realized this business involved work. Why would a man with his charm and ruthless ambition spend his life doing that? His future lay in politics.”

“So what?” Arthur’s tone remained steady. “Jim and I were friends. I know many politicians.”

“Because...” In my mind, the infinitesimal pause stretched out like the tell all moment at the end of a movie. Why hesitate? I’d already burnt every bridge I had at this company. Nothing left but to leap off the cliff.

A slight movement from Edward brought him into my view. His outward demeanor remained unchanged but there was something like an exploding sun in his blue eyes.

Shock. Puzzlement. Disbelief.

He’d faced being accused of murder with less emotion than he was showing now.

I tilted my head to acknowledge him. Had he honestly thought that once I started, I wouldn’t carry through to the end?

How little he knew me.

The exchange, like my hesitation, lasted less than a heartbeat. I locked my gaze on Arthur Thulton. “You feared Jim because you trusted him. You took him into your good old boy game. Introduced him to your politician friends. Call me cynical, but the recent string of successful contracts the Thulton Company has been awarded seems awfully coincidental, almost too easy.”

The pressure against me seemed to ease.

I continued laying out my theory. “The zoning board reclassifies the neighborhood on a build you need. A few tax breaks on international shipments saves you millions of dollars. A few greased palms. A few donations. A word in the correct ear.”

Now the skeptical gazes were turning toward the prez. A dawning awareness that I might not be a mouthy fool trying to save herself. Instead, I just might be right.

Arthur’s control matched Edward’s. It wasn’t like the older man was going to confess.

I kept talking. “Like the rest of us, you underestimated Jim. I’m betting he found out who you’ve been bribing. He cozied up to the politicians by pretending to be on their side and yours. But he was going to take your contacts and use them and you for his own benefit. Nothing like making your mark as a politician by exposing corruption and bribery.”

Another possibility popped into my fevered brain. “Or was he taking the blackmail angle? He could play both sides. Expose a small fry and keep the rest of you on the hook for a part of the profits.”

“Sounds like that the useless turd.” Greg’s growl sounded behind me.

“This time he underestimated his victim. You weren’t about to let him destroy the family firm. You knew his demands would never end.”

A frown darkened Arthur’s expression. “This is slander.”

“Not when Pierce, with help from a real detective, turns up evidence.” That was a bit of a low blow, but I didn’t like the detective getting in my face. “I doubt Jim’s financial records match his salary. As for the gun, it looks like the type the security guards carry. Greg’s is always locked in the security office. No way Edward or I could get ahold of that weapon. Few people could. You have access to everything.”

The prez didn’t respond this time.

I lined up his possible mistakes in my mind. “Did you remember all the security cameras? Did you delete your sign-ons? Did you delete the computer over-ride records? There are a lot of details involved in covering up a crime.”

Okay, I may be speaking from experience. Don’t look at me like that. My slips were on the level of messing with a rival high-school, nothing close to murder.

Finally, thankfully, Pierce's intense gaze shifted to Arthur Thulton.

I let out the breath I'd been holding.



Two days later found me waiting in the police station lobby. With a nod to Agatha Christie, in real life the crime isn't wrapped up neatly in fifteen minutes. The guilty party doesn't break down and confess. Arthur Thulton certainly didn't. He aimed a death stare in my direction, then denied everything.

However, my accusations raised suspicions. Pierce ordered another round of tests for gun residue on several of the principals.

Edward was taken in and held as a suspect. The good news was that Arthur was taken in as well. Pam, Greg, me; we all trooped down to the station. It was a long night.

Crawford, my cop buddy, kept tabs on the case for me. He gave me the tipoff that Edward was being released this morning. He also confirmed Pierce had identified Edward as a member of the Feilen family, an international group of con artists who target wealthy companies and individuals.

They'd worked in Las Vegas many times. Pierce had investigated the Feilen's often, but despite his continued efforts, he'd never been able to gather enough proof to make any arrests. Fraud had files on several members, under numerous aliases,

including Edward. But he'd been younger, disguised. Different eye and hair color. Face and body padded to look heavier. In the heat of his first homicide investigation, Pierce hadn't put it together.

The detective had no better luck this time. Turns out Edward had all the necessary papers needed to sell the steel in the warehouse. No evidence of fraud.

No murder either. The GPS test results found gunpowder residue in only one place: Arthur Thulton's clothes. Police forensic accountants were going through Jim and Arthur's records. Computer specialists had already found a trail of Arthur's keycard entry into the security office and the meeting room.

The whoosh of a door opening pulled me from my thoughts.

A slim, white female officer with a blonde ponytail held the door out of the squad room for Edward. Nodding his thanks, he walked toward the main door, seemingly oblivious to her lingering stare.

As his sweeping gaze found me, Edward stopped short. His eyes widened for a heartbeat, then he recovered and strode toward the door where I stood.

A moment later, we were walking down the sidewalk side-by-side.

He studied me intently, as if I might disappear in a cloud of smoke. "I never thought I'd see you again. Are you looking for more answers?"

"Always," I admitted. "I also wanted to see the white limo whisk you away."

I gestured to the curb, completely devoid of imaginary white limousines.

A smile touched his lips. "Not happening."

“So, I see.” If he was having trouble getting a handle on me, I was equally unsure of him. I decided to fall back on the case. “Thulton Supply Company not only fired me, they barred me from their premises. Greg met me at the door with a box of stuff from my office.”

It might sound crazy, but unemployment was almost a relief. I’ve been broke before. Being a rising star on the ladder of success had so many rules. I’m not the best rule follower, especially the one about keeping my opinions to myself.

Edward’s expression was one of mock sorrow. “Sounds like Arthur’s taking your accusations of murder personally.”

“Weird, right?” The smile I could no longer contain met a matching one from Edward. “You’d think Pam would thank me.”

“For exposing her affair?”

“Some people are so touchy.” I heaved a sigh. “But with Jim dead and Arthur sidelined, looks like she’ll end up in the big office. What about you? How is Global Steel not prosecuting you for false representation? And how do you own that steel?”

“The family owned it. It was put in my name as part of the plan.” Edward studied the people walking by, the small businesses lining the street, even the clouds in the sky as if he’d never seen them before. “Global Steel has money problems. I offered to sign over ownership of the steel to them on the condition they let me walk away.”

I tried to keep a poker face, but my wide eyes and open mouth gave me away. “That’s worth over a million dollars! Doesn’t the family want it back?”

Edward shrugged. “They didn’t pay for it. They never pay for anything.”

Behind his cavalier response, I sensed an abiding unhappiness.

Several realizations struck me in the space of a heartbeat. “This was a test for you, to prove your loyalty.”

A sad weariness weighed down his gaze. A heaviness settled into the lines of his handsome face. He nodded without speaking.

“How long have you been with the Feilens?”

“All my life.” Surprise sparked in his eyes. “The core of the group is a family. My grandmother is the matriarch.”

Shock swept through me. I stumbled and might have gone down only Edward’s strong hands saved me.

A memory flashed in my mind’s eye of a childish argument with my brothers and sister when I was ten years old. My mother had descended on my three older siblings and I with equal ferocity. When my oldest brother objected that he and my sister had been right, my Kentucky bred, righteous mother had shot back. “Right and wrong don’t matter. You were arguing against family.”

Against that background of family first, the scenario Edward painted was hard for my mind or heart to grasp.

“Steven did send you to the conference room early. You know when a message is authentic. You must have codes.” I watched as the facts weighed down on him like a lead weight. I almost didn’t get the next words out. “Did they already know Jim was dead?”

Edward met my gaze head on. “Yes.”

I didn’t ask how they’d known or how he’d found out. He’d obviously been in communication with the Feilens. The questions fell to the wayside. My mind was running on a hamster wheel trying to chase down how anyone could frame a son and grandson for murder.

I am never, well rarely, at a loss for words... until now.

Edward finally took pity on my shocked state and gestured

forward, urging me to start walking. We'd been standing in the middle of the sidewalk since I'd stumbled.

"Don't try to figure it out." He paused to watch a young boy talking to his mother about purple leaves. "I've never understood that mindset. Now, I can quit trying."

His family framed him for murder. My brain spat out the words, but the concept was completely foreign. My stomach growled as if in response. Time to move on. "Do you have plans? Did they feed you breakfast?"

"No," he said. "To both questions."

"Come on." I walked across the parking toward my ten-year-old Chevy. "I know a great diner. We can plan your future, and mine, since I'm unemployed again."

"I have money."

"I'll buy." I was feeling generous. "I have some money saved so, I'm solvent for a while."

"Not pocket money. Seed money." He met my befuddled frown with a calm expression. "In a hidden account. They can't touch it."

I should have figured he'd have a back-up plan. "How much?"

"Eight-hundred-thousand."

He continued walking when my feet failed me.

So much for my emergency fund.

After a few steps, Edward stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Do you want it?"

Shock sizzled through my money conscious brain even as my gut rejected the offer. All I could think of were the countless people who'd lost their fortunes and futures to the Feilen schemes. I shook my head. I couldn't take stolen money. "You're not keeping it?"

Although I didn't want the money, my frugal soul cringed

when he shook his head.

He raised a brow as an ember glowed in his cobalt eyes. “What about Greg?”

“He won’t take a gift, especially not stolen money.” Even as I spoke, my mind leapt several steps ahead of the conversation. “I’m thinking an inheritance.”

Edward caught on instantly. His mouth tilted up. “I can arrange that, but he needs a rich relative.”

“Let’s go with a miner who hit it big in silver. Late 1800’s. Socked away his fortune without telling his family. A private investigator has been hired to clear up old accounts. For a percentage, he finds relatives. He traced the old miner to Greg.”

A look of respect crossed Edward’s face. “The family could use someone with your inventiveness.”

“I have other plans.” I pointed to my battered Chevy, several yards away. “Like getting another job. My stash isn’t quite seven figures.”

Edward stopped in his tracks. “How do you find a job?”

“Seriously?” The guy was a twenty-three-year-old boy scout who’d fallen on the earth ten minutes ago. “Do you have any skills besides conning people?”

He shook his head. “I can *pretend* to be anything: a lawyer, an astronaut, a politician, a preacher. I’m a great preacher. Very sincere.”

His eyes bored into mine. Charming. Tantalizing. Drawing me in. He leaned closer. “I’ve literally sold dirt to ditch-diggers.”

“I believe you.” I stepped away, hoping to fall off his radar.

He laughed and the spell was broken.

“I bet your family is furious at losing you.”

“Yes.” He agreed with no false modesty. “But the trick to a good con is believing your own lies. I can’t do it.”

I turned and walked toward my car. What was I going to do with him? “You’re coordinated. All your limbs are in working order. Someone in Las Vegas is always building something. They need able bodied workers with no skill.”

Edward straightened his shoulders. The lines on his brow disappeared. “Building things. I like that. How old do you have to be to get a job?”

“Sixteen. You’re good.” I fished in my purse for the car keys. I grabbed the keys and stared at him, suddenly suspicious. “Why did you ask?”

“You must have a radar for lies, Tracy.” Edward eyed me with open admiration. “You’re the first person I’ve ever met who didn’t buy my story. My name. My age. You doubted it all.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Get to the point. How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Years?” I automatically rejected his confession. Torn, I studied the chiseled jaw. The broad shoulders. The world-weary expression in his eyes. I couldn’t believe he was that young. Except for the naivete lurking in his eyes and his total inexperience with life outside his bubble. “You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “I’m done lying.”

“Wow.” I was almost nine years older than him. If he’d grown up in a normal family, he might still be in high-school. “I love it when I’m right.”

I think. I took a minute to collect my thoughts. My doubts had stood in the way of any possible attraction, but this would take time to absorb. I pointed toward my car and started walking. “Let’s eat. I think better on a full stomach.”

“That’s it?” Edward’s voice sounded behind me. He hadn’t

moved. “You’re still willing to help me?”

“I’ll give it a shot on one condition.” I spun on my heel to face him. “What’s your real name?”

“Kevin Tanner.”

“You look like a Kevin. I’ll give you that.” I stared at him through a narrowed gaze. “Is it true?”

“I’ve had dozens of names. Ten different birth certificates. I’ve been thinking about this for years.” His smile widened. “I’m starting a new life with a new me. Kevin Tanner doesn’t cheat. He doesn’t lie. He’s a good guy.”

I couldn’t imagine the path that had brought him to this moment. Or the courage it would take to leave behind your family and your world.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m guessing you won’t have a problem getting the ID you need. All the correct papers.” I raised a brow and met his wink with a nod. “Well, Kevin, as Bogie said, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

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