

CHAPTER 1

1 Down; 10 Letters

Clue: Affected by uncontrolled emotion

Answer: Hysterical

"I've killed him." The high-pitched shriek from my cell phone cut through my sleepy haze.

My brain struggled to wake up, fighting to distinguish between reality and my dream world.

"I've killed him."

My eyes creased open. My dark bedroom and cozy bed enveloped me. The clock showed one-thirty in the morning. I swallowed a groan and burrowed into my pillow. Please, let this be another dream.

Despite the caller's strident tone, I recognized the voice. It was my current client for my PI job, a wife who wanted comprising pictures of her husband. Since Nevada, where we live, has no-fault divorce, proving infidelity is pointless. However, her husband was obsessed with his public image.

Thaddeus Reilly has spent his entire life painting himself as a friendly, generous all-around good guy deeply concerned with his fellow people. I don't know if that's true, but I have proof he's not faithful to his wife. My client planned to blackmail her husband into giving her a better divorce settlement than the one in their prenup.

Whatever she was paying Crawford, my boss, it wasn't enough to balance out the grief she'd caused me in the past five days.

For a moment I was tempted to tell her she had the wrong number. That I was not Tracy Rae Belden the PI. Then, the small corner of my brain that houses my sense of responsibility woke up and answered.

"Lorelei?" I whispered her name, hoping Kevin Tanner, my husband, had somehow slept through the ringing phone.

"You have to help me." Her quivering voice bordered on hysteria. "He's dead."

"Calm down. Who did you kill?" Her husband, Thaddeus Reilly, was really the only option, but I wanted to hear it from her.

"Thaddeus." Her rising wail ended an octave higher than it started.

I winced at the crescendo and pulled the phone away from my ear.

"He's dead. You have to come. You're the only one I can count on for support."

Shock coursed through me. Not at the violence between the couple, but hearing that I was her support system. She'd known me for five days.

This woman needed to re-examine her decision making, or find new friends, or possibly buy them with her divorce settlement.

I raked a hand through my short brown, spiky hair and wondered if I should take a look at my life choices. Then I rolled over and caught sight of Kevin as he slid from under the cover and reached for his jeans.

Nah, I'd stick with my decisions.

Kevin is twenty-nine-years-old to my thirty-six. He's charming, unfailingly polite, and easy-going. Together we are living proof that opposites attract.

I raised a brow. "Going somewhere?"

"You're not driving over there alone."

"Is that the chauffer?" Lorelei's breathless but slightly more controlled voice sounded over the phone. "Bring him. He can help move the body."

Kevin's smile dazzled even in the dark bedroom. "Lorelei and I agree on something. I'm coming."

The comment that made him smile fueled my irritation to a flame. I'd introduced my husband to Lorelei twice. Admittedly, his six-foot-one-inch frame topped by curly black hair and sapphire eyes would distract anyone. However, he deserved more respect than to have this self-absorbed entitled twat refer to him as a chauffeur.

Kevin, now fully-dressed and tying his shoes, chuckled at my gritted teeth and obvious irritation.

I decided to put aside the issue and refocus on my client. "Did you call police?"

"You need to come over right away." She spoke in a commanding tone, completely ignoring my question. "I don't know what to do."

"Call. The. Police." I gripped the phone in a choke hold. "If you don't, I will. Tell me you're going to phone 9-1-1."

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"Fine. I will." Her long-suffering tone was akin to a teenager on the verge of a tantrum. "Be here in ten minutes. Hurry."

The call ended as quickly as it began.

Why did I not believe she'd do as I asked?

I stuck my tongue out at the cell phone. Childish, I know. Putting the phone on my nightstand I stood and pointed at my husband. "I want it on record that you heard me tell her to call the authorities."

He held up his hand. "Duly noted and so sworn."

"This is serious."

"She's right." A disembodied voice spoke through our bedroom door. Marcus, our twelve-year-old Korean foster son, has a finer nose for crime and murder than any bloodhound alive. "Accessory to murder after the fact is a felony. TR could do hard time if she's convicted."

I swallowed a groan. Still in my pajamas, I strode across the floor and flung the door open to meet my son's serious gaze. "What are you doing awake at one-thirty on a Monday morning?"

His straight black hair, black eyes, and golden skin sent a wave of affection through me even as I fought to be stern.

"I'll vouch for you, too." Marcus, who'd grown up on the streets until four years ago when I took him in, pointed at me. "It's better to have two witnesses, even if we're both related to you. I just finished an on-line game with Steve when I heard your phone. It's not a school night. Remember? The teachers have an all-day seminar tomorrow."

The segue from crime to mundane reality was typical of the boy. "You have way more days off from school than I did as a child."

I would have said more but the sound of a key turning in the front door of our loft apartment distracted me.

Kevin wiggled his phone in the air. "I called Mrs. Colchester to stay with Marcus while we're gone."

Mrs. Colchester is the seventy-something landlady of our apartment building. Her unit is on the main floor. She's also as big a crime junkie as my son.

Of course, she has a key to the place. Our friend, Jack Rabi, has a key. Kevin's former roommate, Jimbo and his boyfriend, Nathan have keys. Sometimes I think everyone has a key to our apartment.

The doorknob turned and the older woman sailed in on a cheery smile. "Hello, ducks. Another case gone wrong, what?"

Her British accent added an international flavor to our little family. "I hope we didn't wake you, Mrs. C."

"Wasn't asleep, was I?" She scuttled across the living room in a bee-line for the sectional sofa. Her ever-present slippers made an odd contrast to her ankle length dress displaying the Union Jack. "Be sure to take your jackets. The lad on the telly says it's the coldest May in Nevada's history. He called for a chilly, damp night."

Were Kevin and I the only people who'd been asleep? Although, Mrs. C I could understand. She's a night owl. I was betting either sports or the British royal family was the reason for her wideawake expression.

She waved a hand as she fluffed a pillow and unfolded a light blanket. "There's naught to compare to the parades and pomp of the crown, eh? The mounted troops. The horse drawn coaches."

That answered my question. Not that I could say which member of the British royal family had been married or buried. Not that it mattered to me.

They were a world away from our home in Langsdale, Nevada, a resort town three hours north of Las Vegas. With a population of twenty-five thousand, the town's specially designed golf

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courses, five-star gourmet eateries, and eclectic art galleries make it a draw for the constant influx of tourists both local and international.

The presence of money, greed, and passion also kept me in steady demand as a PI. Which is good, because that and our handyman business is what pays the rent. I also create crossword puzzles and sell them to on-line sites, but that money is hardly enough to keep me in my flavored coffee.

Marcus had inched his way into our bedroom with a covetous eye on our bed, well the pillow topped mattress and luxurious linens Kevin had brought to the marriage last month. "Can I sleep in your bed until you get back? I could have nightmares worrying about you two."

As if a boy who made a rule of watching creature features suffered nightmares from anything.

I rolled my eyes at his transparent ploy as I retrieved my jeans and tee-shirt and slipped into the bathroom to get dressed.

"Sure." Kevin barely had time to get the word out before Marcus launched himself at the bed.

Moments later, Kevin and I stood in the doorway as Mrs. C waved us goodbye from her position on the sofa. "Ta-ta, dears.

I'll make breakfast in the morning and we'll have a nice coze about your latest snafu. I do hope it's another dead body."

On that ghoulish note, I waved goodbye and shut the door.

Moments later, my hubby and I were driving down the streets of Langsdale in the Great White Beast. Kevin's only boy toy is his nineteen-sixty-seven pearly white Cadillac convertible with a red interior. He's buying it on payments from his mechanic.

I let myself relax in the luxurious interior. I refuse to admit how much I love the comfortable ride. "How much do you want to bet Lorelei hasn't called the police?"

Kevin snorted. "That's a sucker bet if I ever heard one. Grandma Feilen didn't raise no fool."

Did I mention that Kevin was born into a clan of international con artists? His charm, intelligence, and commanding personality made his family millions. The man can sell sand in the desert. His only flaw, for their purposes, was his conscience.

It tripped him up in a major con when he was eighteen. His morals cost the family a fortune. When you throw in a dead body, and a frame for murder, things got interesting. That's how he and I met. You might guess things didn't end well for the

family, but he and I became besties. Ten years later, we're married.

The memories drifted through my mind as the nightlights of town rolled by outside the warm interior of the car. I couldn't count how many tourists came and went on a daily basis. Too bad, Lorelei and Thaddeus Reilly were constant residents.

I shook my head. "How did I get picked for this assignment?"

"Clean living." Kevin slid me a sideways glance then laughed at his own joke.

Mrs. C spent fifty years running from a murder that it turned out, she hadn't committed. Marcus was a former street urchin who had done anything to survive until he tried to steal my wallet and Kevin spent his entire childhood scamming people. Compared to them I had, mostly, walked the straight and narrow road.

"I hate divorce cases," I groused. "I'd rather have a..."

My words trailed away as the reason for our nighttime ride struck me.

"You weren't going to say murder, were you?"

I met his teasing look and tried not to smile. "Of course not. I would never say that."

"Uh-hunh."

Lorelei's address was on the upcoming block. The area remained suspiciously quiet. There wasn't one telltale flash of police lights and no sound of an approaching siren.

Though I'd expected nothing else, a proverbial storm cloud complete with lightning flashes, settled around me.

Kevin turned the corner onto a dark street, empty of any traffic but us. Although it was May and Christmas was several months in the past, only one thought came to mind: Silent night, deadly night.

If that woman had tried to move the body, we were all in trouble.