

CHAPTER 1

“Let’s say your opponent wins the initial dice roll, which is a 6-3. She moves one of her back checkers to your bar-point with her six. With her three she moves from your twelve-point. You roll a 6-2. If you hit the blot on your bar-point with your six, what are the chances that your bar-point checker will be hit by your opponent on her next move? Bonus points for telling what move you should make with your two, and, if the checker on your bar-point does get hit, what are the chances you can re-hit the bar-point on your next move?”

I made the opponent’s moves on the magnetic backgammon set I had placed vertically on my desk, so that the dozen or so students in the night-school class could see it. The problem sounded more complicated than it was. In addition, the people attending the class I was calling “Practical Statistics and Odds Calculations for Daily Living,” mostly middle-aged and older, had proven themselves sharp enough to handle it.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Eight-fifteen. Good. The class would be over in fifteen minutes. I went to the corner of the room where Stevie, my two-year-old son, was sacked out on a foam pad I’d brought with me. I didn’t always bring Stevie to my classes, but my husband, Rigo, was attending some sort of function tonight in Los Angeles, and my in-laws were also busy. Fortunately, Stevie was very good at amusing himself with Legos and other toys, and didn’t usually make a fuss. I rearranged the blanket I’d placed over him when he’d fallen asleep.

I looked up when I heard the door open at the other end of the room. A man walked in quietly. I didn’t recognize him at first, perhaps because he wasn’t wearing a suit, but then the way his body flowed when he moved rang a bell. He waved to me without speaking and sat in the back of the room. I gave him a smile. I badly wanted to speak to Kyle Robertson, who, I realized, I hadn’t seen since before Stevie was born, but that would have to wait until the class ended.

This was the last session of the current class. Some of my students liked to stay and chat after class, which was usually fine with me, but tonight I practically pushed them out the door while Kyle sat patiently and did things with his cellphone. When the door finally closed behind the last student I turned to him.

“Kyle. How did you find me?”

“Carol. It’s so good to see you.”

Kyle got up and enfolded me in his arms. He had a strong grip. When we finally let each other go he spoke.

“You’re not the only one with detective skills, you know. I wasn’t sure how to contact you, so I googled ‘Carol Golden.’ When that didn’t give me any useful information, I googled ‘Cynthia Sakai.’ Fortunately, I had your various names cross-referenced with each other. I found Cynthia linked with information about night-school classes in Torrance, and since I happened to be in the neighborhood I figured coming here would be the quickest way of seeing you in person.”

I laughed. “You’re obviously a lot more organized than I am. Of course, I have to use my real name for tax purposes, since I’m being paid for doing this. The IRS doesn’t want to hear about Carol Golden, because she doesn’t have any money.”

Kyle became more serious. “You heard that Seb died?”

Seb was Sebastian Ault, a billionaire entrepreneur who Kyle had worked for. The last time I’d seen him he’d had Alzheimer’s Disease.

“Yes. I read about it in the paper and saw it on TV. I wanted to go to the memorial service, but I was traveling at the time. He had an amazing life.”

“Yes, he did. I’ve been given the job by the Board of Directors of his holding company, which is called Ault Enterprises, and of which I am now a member, of reorganizing his empire—selling off pieces where it makes sense, and consolidating others. Making sure all the parts work together. Because of my close association with Seb for a number of years, I have a better knowledge of his holdings than anyone else.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. But I didn’t come here to brag. I came here because I need your help.”

Kyle had given me assistance when I first had amnesia and didn’t know who I was. He had also helped me stay out of the clutches of the FBI when Rigo disappeared and I was a suspect, and he had equipped me to go looking for him.

“I’ll help you any way I can. But I’m not an expert on conglomerates.”

He gave me a thin smile. “That’s not where I need your expertise. I have what I think is another kind of problem. Two people have been murdered recently in different parts of the country. At first glance it might not appear that there is any connection between them. However, they came to my attention because they were both employees of subsidiaries of Ault Enterprises.”

When Kyle paused I said, “I’m very sorry to hear that. But, as I try to teach in this class, coincidences like that are not particularly rare, and, statistically, they happen a lot.”

“That’s what I thought, at first, even though I decided that thoroughness, humanity, and my curiosity required looking into the murders. I got hold of the police reports and read through them. One thing stood out. In both cases a sign was found beside the body. Both signs said the same thing: ‘Your move.’”

I don’t usually get emotional, but a chill ran up my spine. I looked at Kyle and realized that the same thing must have happened to him when he compared the reports. I immediately had a host of questions, but I also knew that now was not the right time to ask them.

“What would you like me to do?”

“Think of the wording: ‘your move.’ What does that remind you of?”

“A game. You’ve made a move and you tell your opponent it’s his move.”

“Exactly. And who’s the best game player you know.”

I knew where he was going. “I don’t know about the best, but—”

“You’re the best one I know. I remember the story about how you took a certain football player for a bunch of money.”

I smiled at the memory. “All right, I admit it. I’m a con artist.”

“No. You could have taken Seb for a lot, also, but you refused to do so. What you are is the person I need to help me figure out what the game is so that we can identify the killer before he kills again. So far, I haven’t been able to interest the local police in each location by telling them about the similarity. I need to get an organization like the FBI involved. That’s *my* problem, but I also want someone I trust to look at the big picture. That person is you. I’ll pay you—”

“I don’t need your money.”

“I knew you’d say that, but I’m insisting. I want this to be a valid contract, even if it’s only one sentence long. We’ll pay for your expertise and any expenses you have. We’ll even use your correct name unless you’re trying to dodge the IRS.” Kyle glanced at Stevie, who was still asleep in the corner. “And we’ll pay for a babysitter if that becomes necessary. Will you do it?”

I had to laugh at Kyle's insistence. He wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"Of course. My gut tells me you're right about this. And I know something about the difficulty of getting assistance from government organizations. I'll give you all the help I can."