

Bound to Die

Chapter One

Somehow Tori knew it was not over yet. She might easily have concluded that the unknowable gods had completed their work, turning her into a thirty-six-year-old widow, and then, as of the end of the week, an unemployed thirty-six-year-old widow. Yet she sensed, merely by looking around her, the truth of her grandfather's favorite saying.

The old man was always cheerful and matter-of-fact in maintaining that "...things always look darkest just before they turn completely black."

They all looked like strangers to her now, these people who milled around, beers in hand, squinting into the late-afternoon sunshine on the day of the carnage. Tori McMillan knew many of them, had even been friends with some of them. But now they seemed like clones, or impostors emerged from pods into a world she now barely recognized.

The only exception was Max Tuten who, regrettably, looked and sounded just the same. "Like I've been saying, Tori. If there's anything you need, well..."

She looked up at her boss, a tall man two years her junior, with short, dark hair and tortoiseshell glasses. He looked out of place at the Western-style gathering, wearing khaki slacks and golf shirt, more like a fraternity brother than an assistant general counsel.

She said, "How about a job, Max?"

He looked disappointed and hurt. "We've talked about that, Tori. I mean, things haven't worked out the way any of us wanted, but..." He waved his hands in vague futility, looking around as if for support from the small gathering. "I mean, we're giving you a generous package and all."

That was one way of putting it, she supposed. An equally valid view was that they were paying her a large sum not to sue them under the Family Leave Act. Tori sipped from a plastic glass of club soda. "Tell me again, Max. Why, exactly, am I here? Why am I supposed to schmooze all these people from other companies? Most of them aren't even attorneys."

"Your next job wouldn't have to be as a lawyer."

"I like working as a lawyer."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to talk to these people. You could make some contacts."

Tori drained her glass. "Go away, Max. Just go."

Max looked at his watch. "I guess I'd better get going. I've got to go over some figures for that presentation tomorrow..."

Tori had already lost what little interest she'd had in the conversation. She was again adrift, in those minutes before her now-unfamiliar world went insane.

"Hi, Tori." She looked up to see a tall, middle-aged man, looking awkward in jeans and denim shirt. It took Tori a moment to recognize Larry Stevens, a software engineer from Sattex, her own company.

"Hi, Larry."

The kindly, bespectacled man squeezed Tori's hand. "I'm terribly sorry about Ben."

"Thank you." An awkward silence followed. Nobody—not even the outgoing Larry—ever knew what to say next.

Larry looked at himself. "I feel like an idiot, dressed like this. Whose idea was this

Western-theme event, anyway?"

"I don't know."

He shook his head. "A faux Western barbecue at a state park in a Washington, D.C. suburb—I guess it's a natural for a seminar on marketing database software to aerospace companies." He changed the subject.

"Is Max here?"

Tori shifted uncomfortably on the hay bale that served as her seat. "He just left."

"Too bad. I like to watch him schmooze, in his eager, puppy-dog sort of way." Larry smiled. He knew, as everyone did, that Tori's scheming, upwardly mobile boss had lusted after her for years.

"So how are you coping?" Larry asked. "I'm surprised to see you here—not too many legal eagles around."

"Max brought me here to job-hunt."

Larry looked shocked. "What the hell—"

"They're letting me go, Larry. I took a couple of months off to...be with Ben. When I got back, my job had been filled and now he doesn't know what to do with me. There are people here from Oracle, Microsoft—places I might look."

"That sucks," Larry said, looking genuinely angry. "Sattex is a big company. There ought to be a place for you there."

Tori shrugged. She knew she should have felt outrage. It would have been nice to feel something. Anything, other than the overpowering grief.

"Are you...in touch with Cindy?" Larry looked uncomfortable and dutiful in mentioning his ex-wife. But he was the reason the two women had met, when he had worked with Tori years ago. Until recently, Cindy had also worked at Sattex.

"I haven't heard from her," she answered, suddenly astonished to realize how little contact she'd had with her best friend during the past few months. It had been disappointing but not totally unexpected when so many of her friends had gradually drifted away during the long nightmare of Ben's illness. But *Cindy*...

She hadn't even attended the funeral.

"Well," Larry said suddenly, "Take care of yourself. And good luck." He patted her hand.

Tori wandered through the crowd in the state-park pavilion, nodding to people she knew, accepting condolences. She was numb to it all. She knew she should talk, to someone. To Cindy.

She walked to the edge of the pavilion, which was bordered by a large food service trailer and a portable bar. Then she glanced past the trailer and froze. Walking up the path leading from the parking lot, incredibly, was Cindy Stevens.

But, somehow, *not* Cindy Stevens.

Cindy, a tall woman with short blond hair, walked with grim determination toward the pavilion. What on earth was she doing here?

"Cindy!" Tori shouted. Her friend ignored her.

Tori looked at her friend's face and realized that she had been right. Something—everything—was wrong. This place. These people. Cindy, most of all.

And the gods had not finished.

Witnesses would later recall hearing someone scream *before* Cindy Stevens pulled the gun from her purse. The scream came from Tori, who scrambled through the crowd toward Cindy, but was blocked by rows of picnic tables and by the trailer.

Two people had been hit before the crowd reacted to the half-dozen shots with screams and flight. Tori, blocked now by the crush of the fleeing crowd, watched in horror as Cindy looked around, then shot a third person. Blood sprayed from a woman's neck as she reeled backward.

Perhaps a dozen people were trapped as Cindy, gun in hand, moved relentlessly toward the corner created by the trailer and the bar. Several people fled into the trailer. Most were forced to simply hit the floor where they were.

A woman tried to climb over the bar. Cindy Stevens calmly shot her three times. Then, after looking around briefly, she walked back through the pavilion toward the parking lot. No one followed.

FBI Special Agent Nolan Bertelson sat in front of the television in his family room, tie loosened, soda in hand. His day at the Silver Spring Resident Office had been a string of miserable events: a bank robbery in Takoma Park; a diplomat jailed for DUI in Rockville; carping superiors; a mountain of paperwork; appearing to testify in a kidnapping case, then having the trial postponed.

"Dad, can I stay over at Jenny's?" a teenage voice called from the kitchen.

Without looking he asked, "What does Mom say?" No response. His daughter hadn't asked her mother. Bertelson turned his attention back to the television, sitting up as he saw the image of bodies being carried from what looked like a picnic area. He reached for the remote and turned up the volume; there had been a multiple murder at a state park, at a barbecue for a software industry group. He was about to turn the volume up further when the cell phone inside his jacket pocket trilled.

He fumbled with the jacket, which lay next to him on the sofa, finally extracting the phone from an inside pocket.

"Bertelson."

"This is Temple," said the whispery voice that made Bertelson's pulse quicken. He got up and took the phone with him into the bathroom.

"Have you heard about the software group killings?" Temple asked.

"Yes. I've got the TV on right now."

"We've got a problem. All four victims are Bound."

"*What?*" The FBI agent nearly dropped the phone.

"The killer is a woman named Cynthia Stevens. Her ex-husband was one of the victims."

"That means," Bertelson said, thinking quickly, "security must have been breached."

"Exactly. You need to get on the case immediately, Nolan."

"It's not my jurisdiction."

"You'll be brought in."

"All right. Then what?"

"Find Cynthia Stevens," said the voice he knew only as Temple. "At all costs."