

*23 Down; 7 Letters;
Clue: Frequented by a ghost
Answer: Haunted*

CHAPTER 1

So far, my first foray with Ghosthunters 101 was not only lacking in ethereal spirits, I'd lost a son. While the rest of my group was in the second-floor music room of Rycliffe Castle listening for spirits, I was playing a worried mom and trying to find Marcus, my eleven-year-old Korean foster son.

I'm Tracy Belden, full-time cynic, part-owner of a handyman business, part-time PI, and a lifelong lover and creator of crossword puzzles. At the moment, I lurked in the semi-darkness at the top of the polished staircase.

Electricity interferes with manifestations, so the hall was lit only by the white light of January's full moon. The soft light shining through the intricate stained-glass windows painted dancing colors on the wall, lending an appropriately eerie feel to the evening. The ornate chandelier seemed to glow

with an unearthly light.

The molding along the ceiling and the delicate wood carving spoke to the mining money that had built the four-story house at the height of the silver rush in Langsdale, Nevada.

I was contemplating my next move when a white form glided out of the rear sitting room. The shadowy figure came straight at me. Arms outstretched. White hair shining through the dimness.

My breath caught in my throat. My pulse spiked. Then the figure solidified into Mrs. Colchester, my widowed friend and apartment manager. My relieved smile froze a second later.

The woman looked as white as the ghosts we were hunting. She sped along as if her pink slippers had jet-pack power. Her eyes were glassy and unseeing. Her face was etched with horror.

My heart stuttered as my long legs closed the distance between us. When I reached her, her red, taloned fingernails dug into my arm.

"Is it Marcus?" Fear spread through me at the panic filling her pale green eyes. "Did something happen?"

"Not Marcus, Daniel." Her voice broke on the name. "I killed him decades ago. Why can't the dead stay buried?"

Any thought that she might be putting me on vanished. She was as frightened as I've ever seen her in our seven-year acquaintance. I sputtered for possibly the first time in my

life.

Had I heard right? She'd killed a man?

"I killed him once," she repeated in a low, fast whisper.

"Now he's come back. He's found me."

Her English accent, which had appeared out of nowhere several months ago, deepened as her agitation grew.

An almost over-powering urge to ask about her mysterious past rose up. Regretfully, I swallowed the impulse. "Are you sure you saw a real person? The organizers might be playing a trick."

Before Mrs. C answered, Marcus sprang out of the shadows.

I swallowed a gasp and scowled at the boy. "Where have you been?"

My former street urchin son ignored my question. He had always had a taste for trouble. He'd come hoping to see or hear a real ghost, but given his rabid interest in murder, a corpse would be an acceptable substitute.

"You saw the ghost of a dead guy?" Marcus crowded close.

"Who? Where?"

I cringed at the way his excited voice reverberated through the hushed corridors.

While I'm an actual PI, albeit part-time, I have no desire to solve crimes. My interest is the money it adds to my bottom line. I especially didn't want to mess with a murder. Marcus and

Mrs. C, however, take a morbid and enthusiastic interest in my cases.

Mrs. C put a hand on her thin chest and drew a deep breath.

"Daniel Weatherington. In there." She pointed over her shoulder. She started to turn. "I must face him, clear the air."

"No way." Marcus shifted to block her. "Never go toward trouble."

"Especially dead bodies," I seconded the need for circumspection. With my arm around her thin shoulders, I helped Mrs. C to a padded bench against the wall. In the dim light, her ashen face made her look every day of her seventy-plus years.

The brick walls and brushed fabric wallpaper of the old mansion seemed to have been designed as a backdrop for drama.

"He found me. He wants vengeance." Mrs. C clutched my arm. She shook so much the wrinkled skin on her cheeks and neck quivered. She took a deep breath and appeared to regain control. "I evaded justice once. I won't run again."

She started to rise, as if planning to drift offstage like an aged screen star intent on one, final, dramatic scene.

I stood transfixed. Who was this woman? I'd seen her face down a gunman in a cemetery. Now she was giving up without a fight?

She placed one red-tipped hand over her heart. The parchment-like skin looked transparent in the light shining

through the windows.

"No need for you to get involved." The hushed air seemed to gather around Mrs. C. "I'll speak with the bobbies. I'll tell them everything."

"Seriously?" On my best day, I couldn't get a straight answer from her. Now she was ready to confess to someone else? No way. I had more time invested in her mysterious past than the bobbies, er the police. If anyone deserved answers, it was me.

Marcus, my little force of constant motion, planted himself in front of the older woman. "Smart money says, keep your mouth shut. Don't volunteer nothing."

Though I cringed at the syntax, I seconded his attitude.

She touched his straight, black hair. His golden skin appeared dusky next to her almost translucent hand. "You've always been such a good boy."

Talk about a final scene.

Marcus's black eyes pleaded with me. "We have to save her."

"Mostly from herself," I muttered.

Mrs. C's gaze remained riveted on the door of the sitting room.

I put my hand on her cheek and gently turned her face toward me. Though I hadn't forgotten the "I killed him decades ago" confession, I had to deal with the matter at hand.

"Take a deep breath," I urged in a soft, calm tone. "You've

had a shock, but it's dark. They may have rigged an effect to make the image of a body appear."

Langsdale, a resort town of twenty-five thousand residents, lies three hours north of Las Vegas. The town pulls in upper-crust tourists with attractions that include golf-courses, art galleries, and pricey boutiques to gourmet restaurants and numerous concerts. Rycliffe Castle often hosts appealing activities, such as Ghosthunters, 101.

The mansion had been built by the Rycliffe patriarch who'd made his fortune mining silver in the late eighteen-hundreds. Located on the edge of town, the turreted, castle-like structure had been home to several generations of Rycliffes. The family history of intrigue, arguments, and violence was the basis of the hauntings credited to the building. Ghosthunters 101 had timed their event to coincide with Friday the Thirteenth.

"There's money to be made from the dead." I cringed at my words. "I mean from the ghost trade. They'd pull out all the stops to get a good story going."

"It's him." From her blank expression and distant gaze, she didn't appear connected to the here and now. "I thought I was safe. I let down me guard, didn't I?"

"You're sure he's dead?" Marcus didn't hide the ghoulish interest in his voice.

"Blood on his temple." A shudder shook the older woman's

thin frame. "A blow to the head. Just like the last time I killed him."

"Shhh!" I checked the empty hall for witnesses lurking in dark corners.

"Don't say that," Marcus whispered at the same time. "Never confess."

My son balanced on his toes, obviously eager to see for himself. He eyed me with a hopeful yet guarded expression. "I could go check."

I hesitated, but I had to know what we were facing. Though I was unsure what the older woman had seen, she was too overwrought to be left alone.

"Don't touch anything," I warned the boy in a hard, low tone. "Look and come right back."

I watched his undersized form dart down the corridor. Soon, his black hair blended with the darkness. He disappeared into the sitting room.

Before I could breathe or blink, he was dashing toward me.

My alarm meter shot to high. This couldn't be good.

Tension radiated from the tight set of his shoulders. He put a hand on my arm. "There *is* a dead guy. He's got blood on his head. It's dripping down his neck."

I filed away the image of gore. Containment. That was my priority. I couldn't let the older woman talk to anyone.

Whatever she had done now or in the past, she was too frightened to make sense. Her confusion might land her in prison.

Luckily, only we three rebels had strayed from the main group, but it was a matter of time before we were missed.

I grasped Mrs. C by the shoulders and bent from my five-foot-nine-inch height to meet her gaze. "Did this man hurt you?"

She nodded. Her shaking hands touched the loose skin on her throat. "He threw me against the table. The Tiffany lamp shattered on the floor. His hands were crushing my throat. I couldn't breathe."

Though the hall was cool, Marcus pulled his shirt away where it clung to his skin. "That's self-defense."

"Wait a minute." A full-blown attack and I hadn't heard a sound? That made no sense. "He just now attacked you? Who is this guy?"

"He's followed me across the ocean, across time." Mrs. C looked frantically around. "I have to confess."

Marcus put a restraining hand on her arm. "No."

The street ethics Marcus had grown up with before hooking up with me gave no thought to guilt or innocence. Protect your own was the first rule.

"We need the whole story before you do anything." I put a hand around her shoulders. "First, let's get out of here."

Marcus and I helped Mrs. C to her feet.

"T.R." A note of urgency rang in my son's tone. "Is that tape recorder still running?"

My breath caught in my throat. One person in each group carried a handheld tape recorder to catch any happenings. Lucky me, I had the one for my group. I'd hung it on my purse and forgotten it. My first impulse was to destroy the offending instrument, but I didn't dare. Instead, I thrust it at Marcus. "Erase it. We'll wait here."

He took the recorder, pushing some electromagnetic thingamabob detector he'd been given at me. "Keep quiet."

He walked several feet away. His expression intent. After a moment, he wiped the recorder with his shirt, then set it on a nearby table.

I pointed him toward a room on the far side of the stairs. If there was a dead body, I wanted the three of us to be elsewhere when it was found.

I put my arm around Mrs. C's shoulders. "Not another word about the past, bodies, or vengeance. Marcus can't be involved. He might be taken away from me. We might never see him again."

Gut-wrenching fear shot through me at hearing my own personal nightmare aloud. Though the current caseworker was a good sort, I lived in terror of losing the boy I loved. Besides, I had to cut through the older woman's confusion.

Mrs. C's shoulders stiffened. The blank look in her eyes

dissipated. "Quite right, dear. I can't drag you or the boy into my troubles. Not a word."

I put my hand on her shoulder while Marcus waved us forward. Once in the child's room, deserted but for us, I aimed our trio toward a door that connected to the music room. With luck, no one in the main group would notice we'd gone missing.

"Not a word," I repeated. "We stay together from now on."

Marcus nodded.

Mrs. C stared straight ahead.

I squeezed her shoulders. "Remember, think of Marcus."

She took a deep breath. "Right."

Slipping into the main group was amazingly easy. Between the darkness and the attempts to communicate with spirits, no one so much as glanced our way or seemed to realize we'd been missing.

I was congratulating myself when I realized the real murderer would have been able to leave and return just as easily. I glanced at the shadowy ring of figures and wondered which of them was the killer.

A new worry sprang up, full blown. What if the murderer had seen Mrs. C head for the library? Even worse, what if they overheard her confession?