

*14 Across; 9 Letters;
Clue: Not eager.
Answer: Reluctant*

CHAPTER 1

"Didja find the body?" Marcus, my eleven-year-old Korean foster son, thumped his backpack onto a kitchen chair without breaking eye contact. He walked over and planted himself between me and the coffee pot. He knew the danger. He just didn't care. He's a crime junkie.

He'd asked me the same question three mornings in a row. Monday through Wednesday. Every day I'd been on the case.

Tracy Rae Belden's my name. Five-nine. Short, straight brown hair and a moderately slim form that owes nothing to self-restraint. It's also no secret I hit thirty-five last week.

I wanted to tell my boy-child I wasn't looking for a body, especially not one of a possibly dead female. However, with the promise of coffee within sight, I ignored his ghoulish question. Instead of answering, I pivoted around him and walked to the small kitchen of our loft apartment. Grabbing a mug, I poured

myself a cup of ambrosia.

Stuck in a car for the past ten hours on an overnight stakeout, I had avoided drinking too much liquid, especially caffeine. Suffice it to say I considered it within my parental rights to drink my pumpkin flavored coffee before answering him. One sip of the scalding liquid sent a jolt racing through every nerve in my body and brought a smile to my lips.

"Speaking of bodies... " Mrs. Colchester, my seventy-plus landlady, looked up from cooking scrambled eggs long enough to wave my spatula at me. "I've something to tell you on the subject, ducks."

Mrs. C's British accent was a perfect complement to her newly acquired air of an English ex-patriot. Her mop of white curls and a short, plump figure were the icing on the cake.

I wasn't sure how long the accent would last considering it was all of four weeks old. Every time I asked about the change, she acted as though I were the crazy one.

Right after the accent made an appearance, she decided I needed a maid and announced she would fill the position. The woman has been letting herself into my apartment Monday through Friday for the past month. She never lifts a finger to clean, but neither do I, and it's my apartment.

Fortunately - or not - she also watches Marcus when I'm on

a job. I'd planned to ask a woman down the street. However, since Mrs. C was here anyway, I decided to go with the flow and have her stay overnight.

The older woman continued speaking without waiting for a response. "Me cousin works with a man who says he saw a woman's body in a gully by the new development, a mile or so from the estate. He agreed to talk with you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone about a body." I wanted to sit in my apartment and drink coffee until I stumbled to bed. "Have him call the tip line."

"I knew she was dead." Marcus slammed a bowl and a box of cereal on the table. "Her husband set a booby trap to kill her during the party so he'd have an alibi. Our science class is going to work out how today."

After making a mental note to do a background check on the science teacher, I turned to Mrs. C. Her announcement had jolted me awake faster than the caffeine. "Yesterday your theory was that she ran off."

"And I'm holding to it." Mrs. C stabbed the air with the spatula hard enough to send a chunk of egg flying across the kitchen like an angry bird with a death wish. "But it wouldn't hurt for you to talk to the man."

"T.R. will get the goods." Marcus dribbled milk on his

shirt as he pointed a spoon at me. "I'll go with you."

I put my head in my hands and wondered if I'd survive the conversation much less the investigation. The fate of Mrs. Randolph McKiernan, the former Ms. Cassie Reed of Black Oaks, Kansas, has absorbed the entire city of Langsdale, Nevada, since the wealthy woman disappeared Saturday night, three days ago.

She'd run upstairs during a gala she and her husband were hosting at their home and never came back. No one had seen or heard from her since. No ransom demands. No calls. Nada.

Her disappearance was like a mystery play had come to town. Was she dead? Had she gone hiking in the desert? Had she run off with a lover? Pick a theory. Everyone had one. Most included a trip to Las Vegas, a bright lure three hours south of Langsdale.

I imagine the woman in the South of France, living large with a huge chunk of her hubby's money. After a second, longer sip of coffee, I smacked my mug on the table. I only hope she cleaned him out.

Why do I care?

The missing woman is wifey-number-two.

I was wifey-number-one.

Fifteen years ago, with my usual impeccable sense of timing and luck, I divorced my deadbeat spouse eighteen months before a stock tip earned him a fortune. He now has a mega-mansion on the

outskirts of the city. I live in a downtown apartment and work three jobs.

After wifey-number-two went missing, a PI buddy I do research for asked if I'd help with surveillance. Since I'd just gotten my PI License, and stakeouts pay more than shuffling paper, I agreed. My second job, when I'm not watching ex-husbands whose second wives have disappeared, is mailing items sold via infomercials.

In whatever spare time I have left, I create crossword puzzles and sell them to newspapers and magazines. The pay barely keeps me in flavored coffee, but it's my first love and by far the most entertaining.

A rare moment of silence had me hoping that the body disposal debate had ended.

With a plate of scrambled eggs in hand, Mrs. C hustled to her usual chair at the kitchen table. Her ever-present pink slippers slapped a quick a rhythm on the tile.

Marcus eyed me from across the table. Undersized for eleven, he had golden skin and straight black hair that made his Korean ancestry a no-brainer. That was all anyone knew for sure. He had christened himself Marcus during years of surviving on the streets.

He'd caught my attention a little over three years ago when

he tried to steal my wallet. Though I'd kept my money, the cheeky grin he tossed me when he got away sent hooks into my heart. Since I couldn't get him off my mind, I decided to track him down.

Several weeks later, I'd felt as if I'd hunted a wily jungle animal to its lair. The trail ended in the children's section of the local library. We bonded over books. Science Fiction. Suspense. Mysteries. Especially mysteries. Trixie Belden mysteries. She's a distant cousin of mine. At least, that's what I told Marcus.

We compared notes, discussed clues, and found plot flaws.

Since a hysterectomy due to borderline cancer cells a few years earlier had ended my chance of conceiving, I never expected to be a mother, but life surprised me. While I was weaseling my way under his defenses with my lame story of being related to a fictional teenage sleuth from the fifties, he snuck into my heart. Now I can't imagine my life without him.

The hoops involved in getting him into the system with me as his foster mom were annoying, vexing, irritating, and more. But he was worth every bit of it. My next goal is to adopt him, but since there's no record of his birth, bureaucracy is moving with its usual glacial speed. In the meantime, I count myself lucky to have him, even if he does drive me crazy.

Hoping for peace, I sat down and closed my eyes. Three quick hard knocks jerked me awake.

Marcus bolted across the floor and flung the door open before I could blink. "Hey, Rabi."

"Mornin', bro." Rabi dropped his bag by the wall.

Jack Rabi has picked up my packages for five years. A black man with skin so dry it looks almost ashen, he has slightly more meat on his tall frame than a cadaver. His shoulder-length black hair is always perfectly waved and glistens as if it's been oiled. Within a week of moving in, Marcus knew Rabi's entire life history, especially his twenty-two years in Special Ops.

The following week, Rabi began stopping by before Marcus left for school.

"T.R.'s got a lead on the McKiernan case." Marcus's excitement all but bounced off the walls. "A guy spotted the body. She and I are gonna check it out."

"I've told you I'm only watching the husband, not investigating a crime." I pushed away from the table. "And I never agreed to go body hunting."

"I'll grab the brew." Rabi snagged a mug from the cupboard, then stretched out a long arm and lifted the pot off the warming pad.

I sat back with a sigh. After the debate about body

disposal, Rabi's quiet calm was a balm on my nerves. I flashed him a grateful smile and wrapped my hands around the fresh, hot cup.

"Marcus." I spoke in a sharp tone to grab my son's attention. "I do research. I'm not a PI. I'm only watching Randy McKiernan because Crawford is shorthanded."

The higher pay for surveillance was actually the bottom line, but I saw no need to bring up anything so crass as money.

Marcus shook his head at Rabi to make sure the man didn't buy my mundane explanation.

"Why doesn't your guy call the cops?" I asked Mrs. C, hoping to put an end to this madness. "Have him phone the tipline that has been set up."

"The gent doesn't trust bobbies. He believes the calls will be traced." Mrs. C gave me a knowing wink. "Bit of a dustup years ago."

"We have to question him, T.R." A hint of desperation shadowed Marcus's dark eyes. He bumped his bowl, sloshing milk over the side. "If he doesn't call the cops, her body may never be found. Besides, the police might not follow up in time. They have thousands of tips."

A report of a corpse would certainly get the attention of the authorities. As to my boy's estimate on the volume of

tipsters, his figure was only slightly exaggerated. It seemed wifey-number-two had made an appearance in every city from Seattle to Tijuana on her way to the South of France.

Marcus's midnight black eyes pleaded with me to accept Mrs. C's request. I had the impression my first case in the field meant more to him than merely a boy's idea of adventure, but a body in a gully? "The women disappeared from the second floor of her home. How could the murderer have gotten her body out of the house?"

"A hidden passage." Mrs. C sounded as if the answer was obvious. "Some of the mansions are built on silver mines. The gully originates at the base of the hill where the house sits."

I fought a laugh. "The place is a mansion, not a monastery from the Middle Ages."

My peripheral vision caught movement. I glanced at Rabi and found him nodding. "You, too?"

"Heard stories years ago," he admitted. "Old-timers talked about secret passages built during Prohibition."

I stifled a groan. Prohibition, mining, and ghosts guarding buried treasure are a few pieces of the past that have been resurrected and built up to color the town's history. The city government will do anything to pull in outside money.

Langsdale is a resort town built on tourist dollars. In

addition to casinos and ghosts guarding treasure, there are hotels for every level of the spending public. Eclectic eateries with master chefs sit next to art galleries of every description and price bracket. With spas and mineral resorts, the town has built a reputation of being both sophisticated and artsy with a laid-back air.

A three-hour drive or a short plane ride to our local airport makes us far enough away from Vegas to be seen as a getaway. Corporate retreats are another mainstay of the local economy.

The city has developed a number of attractions. A food and wine festival, sponsored by the local wineries, has become an international draw. A jazz competition and a world-renowned golf course, designed for arid conditions, have managed to appeal to a new segment of tourists.

The resident population tops out at eighteen thousand, but the mostly year-round stream of tourists pushes the usual total much higher.

Mrs. C gave a self-satisfied nod at Rabi's confirmation. "If the poor woman's body is in that gully, you'll have to move quickly to find it."

Marcus inched forward on his chair. "Why?"

"They're making way for a new development, aren't they?"

Mrs. C said. "The cloudburst two days ago interrupted the construction company's schedule for clearing the site, but they're bound to be at it again, and soon. The rubble and sand that will be pushed into that gully will bury her body beyond recovery."

"If her body's there." I took another sip of coffee, absently noting the spicy flavor. My body and I both wanted to dismiss this nonsense and head to bed. I looked for flaws. "The police would have found the passageway by now."

"It's hidden." Mrs. C reminded me patiently. "They've been busy checking the grounds and investigating leads. Not that they won't find it eventually."

But not before tons of rock filled the gully. Though her words were carefully neutral, I heard her unspoken warning. Unfortunately, I found myself agreeing.

Marcus's expression had grown studious, as it did when he was unraveling a word problem in math, his favorite subject. "If the killer buried the body in a shallow grave, the cloudburst might have been enough to uncover it."

I met his gaze. "This story can't be true."

"Absolutely not." He agreed a tad too quickly, then he shrugged. "But Crawford's paying you to work the case. Wouldn't it be your duty to check it out?"

I gave him a mock glare. "Pulling the duty card is a low blow."

A triumphant grin creased his face. "You do it to me all the time."

"Fine," I said in an aggrieved tone. "First, I need to sleep. I'll meet the man this afternoon. If he's not a kook, I'll head out as soon as possible. This late in September, those hills get dark pretty early. I won't return by the time Annie drops you off after school. Mrs. C, can he stay with you?"

Annie was a high-schooler on the next block. She took Marcus to and from school every day.

The older woman nodded. "Certainly."

Marcus's quick intake of breath held a note of alarm.

I looked into his wide eyes. "What?"

He scrunched up his face. "Annie called. She's not going to school today. She can't drop me off or pick me up."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Marcus bought time by chewing his soggy cereal far longer than necessary. His wide-eyed gaze would've done a Mississippi gambler proud. "We had to discuss the case. Rabi can drive me."

"No. We impose on him too much." Keeping my fifteen-year-old Buick running is an art form. As a result, Rabi's delivery truck has saved us more often than I can count.

"I don't mind." Rabi chuckled deep in his throat. "Marcus can ride shotgun."

Marcus hissed between his teeth as he mouthed an all but silent "Yes". Arriving at school escorted by the lean black man would only enhance Marcus's reign as king rat.

"Are you sure?" I knew Rabi enjoyed the company, but I still felt indebted. At his nod, I came up with a quick payment. "I'll make you cookies."

"T.R., don't do that." Marcus grimaced. "Last time we couldn't even save the cookie sheet."

Okay, so I'm no more Betty Crocker than I am a Merry Maid, which is why I stick to puzzles. Crossword. Jigsaw. Sudoku. You name it. I can solve it.

I glanced at the newspaper laying untouched on the counter. I only buy it for the crossword puzzle, a throwback to the countless hours I spent working them with my father. There was no point picking up the paper now or filling in even the first empty squares.

Well, maybe I could answer a few quick clues.

Marcus caught the direction of my gaze, his smirk had a know-it-all air. "I know what you're thinking."

My mock glare at his sing-song tone didn't faze him in the least. It rarely did.

"You're telling yourself," he said. "That you'll only answer a couple of clues, but we all know that once you start a puzzle you can't stop until you have all the answers."

Silently admitting he was right, I tore my gaze away from my morning ritual. I hope Crawford appreciated my dedication. Maybe he'd give me hazard pay. With that hopeful thought in mind, I concentrated on my coffee. If this was going to be my last contact with civilization, I might as well enjoy it.

By the time I caught up on several hours of sleep, then traced the road into the hills, it would be late afternoon at best, and that was if I didn't get lost.

Did I mention directions aren't my forte either?

What's a six-word recipe for disaster?

Me in the wilderness after sundown.