

*9 Down; 4 Letters;
Clue: To discover by chance.
Answer: Find*

CHAPTER 1

"We need an electric drill." Marcus Belden, my eleven-year-old foster son, stared at the yellow, plastic box on the kitchen table with a laser-like intensity. His eyes narrowed in determination as he flipped a pancake onto the serving dish.

His golden-hued skin and straight, silky black hair marked his Korean ancestry, but the mischievous gleam in his dark eyes was all him. He's my ray of sunshine. Even if he does eat me out of house and home, and even if he is the reason I was in the Emergency Room of Langsdale, Nevada, until midnight last night.

Which is where I got the mysterious box.

Relishing the smell of bacon hanging in the air, I sipped my hazelnut-flavored coffee. A rush of affection overwhelmed me at the sight of the boy-child who had stolen my heart and turned my life upside down several years ago. In the next heartbeat, a dose of reality overlaid the softer emotion and brought me back to the moment. "We don't have a drill."

The box looked like a small self-contained toolbox about

the size of a paperback. Hard molded plastic, five-by-seven inches, two-inches deep. The latch was a simple tab. It should have opened with the flip of a thumb.

It didn't. Someone had glued it shut.

I frowned at Marcus's head, which had inserted itself into my line of vision. Putting my finger on his straight, black hair, I gently pushed him away. "You need to stop messing with that box."

"We have to get it open."

"No, we don't." A lack of caffeine after a late night had dampened both my curiosity and my trepidation. "Whatever is in here will keep. It obviously wasn't meant to be opened easily."

The unsettling thought sent a shiver up my spine. Questions and possibilities pulled at me, but I squashed them. I did not need trouble.

"What if Rickson needs help?" Marcus asked. "The guy who chased him through the ER had a gun."

"Rickson knows where to find me," I said. "Which is more than I can say about him. Besides, the cops arrested the other guy."

Welcome to my life. Tracy Rae Belden. Thirty-five-years-old. Five-nine. Spiky brown hair that goes in and out of style. Slim.

Well, moderately slim. Okay, not as slim as I used to be,

but who steps on the scale more than once every three years?

"Cook or eat." I pointed to the stove then a chair. "I'm done discussing this box."

Marcus shot me a frown. "This isn't over."

"I didn't think it was." I gave him a mock glare. As expected, my stern words did no apparent damage to his psyche. After being abandoned at a young age, he'd lived on the streets for several years. He was tough. At least on the outside.

I met him years ago when he tried to steal my wallet. Instead, he stole my heart. We bonded over mystery stories in the local library. Including, yes, the Trixie Belden Young Adult mysteries from decades ago, my supposed "cousin".

Okay, I'm shameless. I needed an "in" with the boy to get him off the streets. The result is he's been living with me ever since as a ward of the state. I'm trying to make the arrangement permanent, but a tsunami of bureaucratic regulations has the matter tied up in a thousand knots.

Unlike my foster son, I don't look for trouble. I don't have to, it finds me. It certainly did yesterday. At nine o'clock in the morning, a pipe burst in my bathroom. At ten last night, Marcus cut his hand on a broken car window. In between, B & T Inc., the fledgling handyman business my best friend and I recently started, lost two jobs.

Big jobs, with paychecks that would have paid the rent for

months. Now my only guaranteed income was my part-time gig as a private detective. That's the one that pays the bills.

Well, most of the bills. Most of the time.

That's also the one that gets me in trouble with my boy-child. My goal as a PI is to cash the paycheck. Period. His goal is to live up to our family heritage and solve the case, whether we get paid or not.

That's just crazy talk.

The job I enjoy the most, pays the least. It's a work-for-hire gig creating crossword puzzles. The money barely keeps me in flavored coffee, but puzzles are my addiction. Once I start one, I have to solve it to the very last square or it haunts me. Besides, creating clues and answers that I have total control over keeps me on the right side of sane.

I picked up my cup of coffee. The aroma alone woke up the blood vessels in my brain, ambrosia with a touch of hazelnut. "If Rickson doesn't get in touch this morning, I'll contact Crawford and see what's going on."

"Bossman left for his Canada fishing trip yesterday." Marcus, who wanted nothing more than to be a PI, made it sound like we both worked for Crawford Investigations.

"Oh, I forgot." Typical male. Never around when you need him. I pulled my rattled thoughts together. "That area doesn't have cell service."

Marcus punched me lightly in the shoulder. "Until he returns, you're in charge."

Unlike my crossword puzzles, I couldn't solve this puzzle by making up an answer. The yellow box sat there taunting me. What could it contain?

My first guess? How about a seven-letter word for agitate or harass?

Answer: trouble.

"We have to investigate." My son waved the box in front of my face.

I refused to take the bait. Keeping food on the table fed the body. Creating crossword puzzles fed the soul. Being in charge brought only trouble.

"Getting up to speed on Rickson's case is your duty." An overly somber note deepened Marcus's tone, in contrast to his slim, undersized frame. "This is a piece of a puzzle."

The boy knew my weakness.

"Rickson is your co-worker. Your friend. Your buddy." An overly dramatic sense of outrage underscored his words as my bored expression remained unchanged. "How can you leave him out in the cold?"

Drama never takes a day off in this house.

"Langsdale is three hours north of Las Vegas. It's never cold here." I can state the obvious, too. It's also best to take

every chance I can to ground the boy in reality, rather than feed his flights of fantasy.

"I was speaking metaphorically." Marcus scrunched up his nose, evidently looking for another argument. "You won't be able to live with yourself if you do nothing."

"Yes, I will," I assured him. "I'm good at doing nothing. Besides, Rickson hasn't asked for my help and I doubt he needs it."

"He hunted you down in the ER." Marcus pointed the pancake flipper at me. "He passed you the box while staring down the barrel of a police gun."

Good grief. "I was there. Remember? The cops never drew their guns."

Marcus threw his hands up in the air. "Rickson was chased by a vicious assailant. Did you miss that?"

"Rickson is six-foot-nine in his stocking feet. He's over three-hundred pounds of solid muscle. David Ferguson, the skinny, redheaded guy who chased him and who claimed Rickson stole that box from him, was maybe five-seven."

My son drew his undersized frame up to full height. "Vicious can come in small packages."

I had no comeback. Fighting a smile, I raised my coffee in salute and took a long sip. Ferguson's claim had started me wondering what Rickson had gotten himself into with his latest

case. Unfortunately, Crawford, my boss of seven years, my friend for fifteen, wasn't around to ask.

Though Rickson and I both worked for Crawford Investigations, he's a retired homicide detective, twenty-five years on the force. I'm a newbie with less than a year under my belt as a solo investigator in the field.

Langsdale has a relatively small population of twenty-five thousand, but the city has transformed itself from a once thriving town of wealthy silver mines into a high-end resort. The pricey boutiques, eclectic gourmet eateries, and exclusive art galleries offering exclusive auctions, attract both national and international tourists. All awash with disposable income. A specialist was even brought in to design a world-class golf course. The constant flow of tourists, residents, and cash keep Crawford Investigations plenty busy.

Unfortunately, my income barely makes it from one month to the next. My second-floor apartment sits in a so-so neighborhood in a faded, three-story brick building. My main floor is a large, open room. A kitchenette in the front corner overlooks the street. My bedroom is in the back corner. Marcus's bedroom is up a small flight of stairs on the second level.

"Oh, come on, T.R." The boy dropped his actor's mask, replacing it with a thirty-year-old attitude in an eleven-year-old body. "I won't survive not knowing what's inside or who sent

it."

"Frustration is good for the soul." I didn't even flinch at hearing my grandmother's words coming out of my mouth. "It builds character."

"I have enough character." He assured me with aplomb. "What I need, after my tortured, deprived childhood, is instant gratification."

"If you're done cooking, turn off the burners." I pushed myself to my feet. "I'll put this somewhere safe and we'll deal with it later."

When a stubborn gleam shown in his eyes, I braced myself for battle. Instead, he heaved a sigh. "Don't do anything with it behind my back."

"Don't worry," I assured him as I headed into the other room. "I have no intention of messing with this thing."

I stepped out of his line of sight. Feeling like a child playing hide-and-seek, I checked over my shoulder before hiding the package.

As I returned to the kitchen, Marcus flipped the last pancake from the grill to the platter. "What if we x-ray the box?"

Same song, second verse. Luckily, a drumbeat on the door saved me. "Come in."

Kevin Tanner, twenty-eight-years-old, longtime friend,

current business partner, and recently minted boyfriend shoved open the door. He strode across the large, open living room like a man on a mission.

My heart did a little skip at the sight of him. I couldn't stop the smile that touched my lips. I've known him for ten years. He was eighteen when we met, so our instant chemistry settled into the best-friends category. As the years flew by, he started to push for more, but I resisted.

My luck with love makes my shaky bank account look good. I hated the thought of risking our friendship. However, having fought against my attraction and affection for several years, all the walls I'd built crumbled a few weeks ago.

Maybe because one of my last investigations brought me up close and personal with my ex. At some point during that case, I realized how much I'd grown up since I'd made the mistake of marrying an arrogant, self-absorbed man-child.

I knew I would never have cause to doubt Kevin's character, loyalty, or love.

My call to action came when Marcus told me about the blind date Kevin's work buddies had set him up on. Hurt and fury erupted in me like a volcano. I was ready to find him and the unknown woman and do... I don't know what.

That's when my son shrugged and said, "Why do you care? It's not like you and Kevin are dating."

I should have smelled a Marcus-sized setup that instant, but the lava was boiling in my veins. When I calmed down, I realized that, thanks to my reluctance to commit, I might lose Kevin entirely. The very thought opened a void in my heart.

Still, I hesitated. Though I trust him with my heart and my son, part of me wondered if, after the newness of romance wore off, he'd wake up one day and change his mind.

But I screwed up my courage to the sticking point and decided to move forward with my life. Two days later I ambushed Kevin and asked him out on an official date. I later learned that the alleged blind date had been a work party.

Since our "getting to know you" stage has been the longest one in history, we've leaped into the relationship with both feet. Though finding time alone isn't easy, thanks to my inquisitive son, I can finally enjoy the fun of being in love.

The memories and conversations flashed through my mind as my boyfriend walked across the room. The fact that his T-shirt didn't have a wrinkle on it and his khaki pants were perfectly pleated didn't surprise me. I just don't know how he manages it. My clothes don't leave the store looking that good.

Kevin stands six-foot-two and has a body hardened by years of working construction. Add to that the fact that he's been graced with wavy black hair and blue eyes to die for and it's hard to make him look bad.

"Little early to be spacing out, Belden." He pulled out a chair and shot me a distracted look that seemed at odds with his teasing words. Leaning over, he brushed a kiss across my lips.

I blamed my woolgathering on last night's ER adventure and a dangerously low caffeine level. Okay, blame it on love. Ignoring the uncertainty coiling in my gut, I went on the offense. "You look worried. Does Juan want the Great White Beast back?"

Kevin froze in the act of grabbing a mug off the shelf and shot me a look of recrimination. "Don't even joke about that."

He's currently making payments to his mechanic on a 1967 pearly white Cadillac, otherwise known as the Great White Beast.

I smiled. "Someday the rightful owners will find out where their Caddy is and you'll be out the money you've spent."

When he didn't leap to the defense of his beloved vehicle, I knew something had him worried.

"What's up?" I asked, all too willing to forget my own troubles.

Marcus leaned over the table. "What's the prob, man? Spit it out."

Kevin's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He raked a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure where to begin."

The scent of fresh warm pancakes hit me. "A full stomach always helps me think."

Kevin's expression lightened and he sniffed. "Smells good."

"Thank you," I said with pride of ownership.

Hesitation, or perhaps fear, flashed in his eyes. "You made the pancakes?"

"I could have." None of my past attempts had ever looked this good, but I *could* have.

Marcus set the platter of hotcakes on the table next to a plate of bacon. His expression never wavered. Cooking isn't his only talent. He's a great little con artist.

Kevin studied the stove. "No smoke. No scorched grill. I'm betting on the kid."

So, I'm not Betty Crocker. "It's not my fault the batter got into the burners. The stove top moved when I wasn't looking."

Kevin speared a couple of hotcakes. "Happens to a lot of people."

"I helped." I pointed at the plastic bottle of syrup. "I nuked it with my own little hands. See? The label reads Hot."

"I'm impressed," Kevin assured me.

For the next minutes, we occupied ourselves with smearing butter and pouring syrup until I broke the silence. "Tell me what's got you worried."

"Godert has been named as Murph's replacement." Kevin took a bite.

"Your old boss?" I don't know why I asked. I mean, how many Murphs could a guy know? I blame my confusion on Rickson's crazy package. "You were happy when Murph retired. I was there when we waved him and his wife off for their RV tour of America."

"What's bad is that his replacement has it in for me." Kevin bit off the words. "I've had run-ins with Godert in the past. Now, he's changed my schedule and I'm on the list for reduced hours."

I grimaced in sympathy. "That's not going to pay the rent."

"Let's get back to the box," Marcus said.

I sighed. That's my boy - never say die. I set my mug down and met his gaze. "Kevin and I are talking."

"You and I were talking about the box before he came." Marcus's innocent stare was amazingly believable.

"Forget the box," I said, wishing I could.

Kevin didn't even ask. He mopped up his syrup with a bite of pancakes and bacon and lifted his gaze to Marcus. "What happened to your hand?"

Marcus wiggled his fingers to show the bandage to better advantage. "Cut it on Mr. Rheault's broken windshield last night at ten o'clock. We were in the ER until after midnight."

Kevin shifted his gaze to me as I picked up my mug. "What was he doing in the street at that time of night?"

"Do you know, you're the first person who's asked me that?"

Gratified someone else showed an interest in my son's welfare, I never dreamt of taking offense. During the years Marcus has been in my life, Kevin has spent as much time raising the boy as I have.

"After Mrs. Colchester woke us up for the street fight, I saved the kitten from the fire." Having given his version, Marcus, took a bite of pancake.

Kevin favored me with a raised brow.

"It sounds so much worse in the light of day." I took a breath then decided we didn't have time for the gory details. "A few facts are missing, but the players are there."

"Uh-huh." Kevin sipped his coffee. He knew Mrs. C, my seventy-plus landlady, well enough not to be surprised at her role in the latest Belden crisis. "And in gratitude for his rescue, the kitten gave you this mysterious box we're going to drill open?"

Marcus laughed. "Rickson slipped the box to T.R. after a gunfight in the Emergency Room."

Kevin froze, then looked at me for a reality check. A rattling windowpane filled the silence.

Marcus's explanation sounded like a TV blurb for an adventure show. I raised my mug to my lips. "I hate to admit it, but that's pretty much what happened."

Kevin cocked his head. "Hear that?"

The window rattled louder this time. It sounded like it was coming from upstairs.

"It's in the bathroom." Marcus bolted out of his chair.

I caught him on the fly without spilling a drop of coffee.

It's taken some time, but I'm definitely getting the hang of this parenting biz. I put aside my cup. "Stay here."

Turning toward the stairs, I grabbed the wooden bat leaning against the railing. I may not be an Iron Chef, but a tomboy past has left me with a swing that can clear the bases. It's come in handy during some of my stints for Crawford. I told myself the noise was nothing but the wind or perhaps an errant squirrel dropping by for breakfast.

Halfway up the steps, I felt, more than saw, Kevin behind me.

"Hey, sport," Kevin spoke over his shoulder to my son. "How about you lock the door so nobody sneaks up behind us?"

Marcus nodded and ran toward the door. Kevin has a knack with the boy.

I favored my buddy with a raised brow. "You know something I don't?"

"I've learned to cover all exits when I'm with you." He came even with me and reached for the bat as we walked into Marcus's bedroom. "I'll go first."

I pulled the bat out of his reach. I was in the mood to

bash somebody. "You might be too nice."

Kevin wisely didn't comment.

I stepped over an electronic robot then did a two-step to avoid a remote-control truck.

"Maybe we should let them come in and take their chances with the obstacle course," Kevin whispered.

I swallowed a nervous laugh.

A tapping sounded from behind the bathroom door. I stepped to one side, gripping the bat firmly.

Kevin twisted the knob and flung the door open.

I jumped into the room, bat poised for a home run. The room and the lone window were empty. Some of the tension drained away. "Nobody's here."

As my shoulders relaxed, a dark-haired form popped up outside the window. The man's shoulders were wide enough for an elephant, and the face would have looked at home in a police line-up.

My heart leaped into my throat. I swung for the outfield with the guy's head as the ball. That's when my brain recognized the face.

I almost pulled a muscle trying not to break my bathroom window. Catching my balance, I watched as Kevin flipped the lock and opened the pane.

Anxious to vent my pent-up nerves, I fixed Rickson with a

glare. "You're a detective. You can't find the front door?"

Minutes later, Rickson finished squirming through the window and stretched to his full height. In these close quarters, he made Kevin look like a child.

"When did you start double locking the window?" Rickson asked in an aggrieved tone.

"Since people started using it as a separate entrance."

"Hey, Kev." Rickson's smile brought to life a puckered scar that ran across his right cheek. "How you doing?"

Kevin leaned against the bathroom door, twirling the bat. "Not bad. You?"

Rickson shrugged. "Can't complain."

"If you two are done with the social niceties, how about we get some breathing space?" I said.

Kevin spun around, hoisted the bat on his shoulder, and led the way through Marcus's bedroom.

The boy-child peered at us from the top stair. His face lit with a smile. "Hey, Chichi."

"Rickshaw boy, you got the goods?" Rickson asked.

Rickson's Chinese mother endowed him with his golden-hued skin, his nickname, and the right to make Asian jokes. His English father accounted for his size, his police career, and a love of soccer, all of which had contributed to his bashed-in face and assorted scars. "Do I smell the Korean pancake

special?"

Moments later the three of us watched Rickson plow through the remainder of the pancakes and bacon.

"You do the best flapjacks I ever ate, kid."

What was it with men and food? I'd waited long enough for an explanation, time for the thumbscrews. "Today, you crawl in my window. Last night, you hunted me down and passed me a box full of incriminating evidence. What gives?"

Rickson's face lost all expression. Eyes wide, face pale, he grabbed my shoulders with a tight grip. "What evidence? Not the box? Tell me you didn't open it."

I stared at him, stunned by the raw fear that roughened his tone.