

CHAPTER 1

12 Across; 5 Letters

Clue: Thick mist; Hard to see

Answer: Foggy

An unseasonably cool June morning had deposited a thick bank of fog over the green hills of my parents' Kentucky horse ranch. The smoky tendrils in the low-lying gullies looked like fingers of an ethereal hand reaching out toward the living. The tethered horse munching on the yellow petals of a wild flower remained oblivious to its danger.

I watched in fascination as the slow rising sun burned away random patches on the east side of the exercise track. Leaning against the fence with my foot on the bottom rung, it seemed I'd truly come home. Though I'd never felt like I belonged in the horse loving state of Kentucky, the smells and sounds of thoroughbreds were among my first memories.

Tracy Rae Belden here. Thirty-five-years-old, five-nine. Short, spiky brown hair. Gray eyes. Able to disappear in a crowd without trying. Full time owner of a handyman company with my hubby. Part-time PI to pay the bills. Seventeen years ago, I'd transplanted myself to Nevada. Langsdale, the resort town three hours north of Las Vegas, is my home now.

I raised my coffee mug, pausing to inhale the smell of raspberry, chocolate coffee. The intoxicating aroma made me sigh. A cry of success behind me brought a smile to my lips. I spun around.

Marcus, my twelve-year-old Korean son, sat on a stationary statue of a cow. Arms raised in triumph he danced in place shaking the lasso that encircled his undersized frame.

Twenty feet away from the lassoed child, Kevin Tanner held the other end of the rope. He's been my best friend for over ten years, my business partner for six months, and my husband of two months.

Kevin and I had officially adopted Marcus as of last month. We'd struggled against bureaucracy for four years to see that day.

Several years younger than me, Kevin stands six-foot-one. His black wavy hair glistened in the sun and his sapphire blue eyes were laughing. He held out the rope to the astonished ranch hands who'd bet against him. They'd been testing him since our arrival last Wednesday. They hadn't won yet.

The man was a card shark from Vegas. Actually, card shark is an understatement. My husband is a member of the Feilen family, a clan of international grifters. He was the best of his generation when he left their ranks ten years ago. His charm and sincerity helped them steal untold millions of dollars. After a

lifetime of being trained to play any role to con anyone with money, his departure cost them several million in a carefully planned scam.

It was only in the last several months that his family had reached out a hand of reconciliation. I was thrilled when his sister and cousin attended our wedding in April.

Our merry little band had been here for five days and Kevin was on better terms with the ranch hands and our neighbors than I'd ever been. Whether that was the result of a lifetime of training, his friendly nature, or my prickly attitude was an open question. Maybe a mix of all three.

Take your best guest.

Jack Rabi, another member of our Langsdale family, stood in the partial shade of a wagon that held saddles, bridles, and assorted equipment. A lean black man in his late fifties, his dry skin looks ashen and he has slightly more meat on his tall frame than a cadaver. His shoulder-length black hair falls in perfect waves and glistens in the light.

His twenty-two years in Special Ops fascinated Marcus from the first. The boy adopted Rabi as a surrogate uncle within a week of moving in with me. After four years, he's a solid member of our adopted family. So much so that I'd insisted he and Mrs. C come on the trip to my hometown.

Mrs. Alice Colchester is my seventy-plus landlady, a

self-proclaimed maid, and a constant source of criminal knowhow. She had remained at the main house, citing both the early hour and a complete lack of interest in horses.

I couldn't blame her for not loving the four-footed beasts. I didn't either, which is why I live in Nevada instead of on a horse ranch.

My reason for returning to Hessian Springs, Kentucky, population twelve thousand, was so Mom and my sister could throw me and Kevin a wedding reception and an adoption celebration.

The party on Saturday was great fun. I don't think anyone in a fifty-mile radius missed it. We had our family, the church congregation, and a few hundred of the closest neighbors. We'd partied until dawn, making yesterday, a well needed day of rest and recuperation before our departure tomorrow.

The thundering sound of the horses running on the track pulled me from my thoughts. A row of tall hollyhocks along the fence bounced in rhythm to the galloping hoofs. The wall of fog still blanketing the west end of the track muffled the noise. By the sound, I judged the riders were entering the final turn.

Though the hazy air masked their forms, the rhythmic striking of the hooves become clearer with each passing second. The fog had a life of its own. It ebbed and flowed like waves on the ocean. First thickening to block the view, then thinning into wispy fingers. Finally, it parted before a rush of noise

and movement.

The muted forms of the racing animals appeared like ghosts thundering out of a dream. Though the thick eddies refused to surrender anything but the outline of the horses, the thunder of hooves against the hard track announced their approach.

With a sudden burst the leaders broke free of the churning mist. Heaving and snorting, they raced for the finish line.

A gray filly led by two lengths. A bay stallion was hot on her heels. The bay's longer stride closed the distance, but the gray had a faster clip. The riders, focused on the finish line, urged their mounts to greater speed.

I made a silent bet the filly would hold off the stallion. Five lengths behind the bay, two more forms slipped free of the fog. My peripheral vision caught sight of the roan solidly in third place despite riding wide with an empty saddle. The brown gelding, hugging the fence, was gaining ground.

I sipped my coffee and noted the positions with a quick glance. I was interested in the leaders. My oldest brother, Clay, was on the bay. He always went all out for the win, but Reeves, on the gray, was one of the best riders on the ranch.

They were neck and neck on the final few lengths. Clay was gaining, but I was certain Reeves would hold him off.

Then, a frisson of shock rolled through me. My world stilled. The picture of the last two horses was wrong.

An empty saddle?

I tore my gaze away from the leaders as they crossed the finish line. My brain noted the filly holding on to win by a nose as I turned to the horses running behind them. My eyes confirmed what my brain already knew.

The roan, running in the middle of the track, was missing its rider.

"Pop!" I yelled at the top of my lungs to be heard over the hoofbeats and the cheers for the winner. My feet ran alongside the fence, the opening to the track was only six feet away.

"Frisco's down!"

I pointed at the riderless horse now galloping behind the brown horse. As the words left my lips a ripple of realization spread through the rest of the group. Movement swirled through the watchers like a churning wave.

The other riders, who'd been zeroed in on their runs, stiffened at the sight of the empty saddle. Reeve shifted the gray to catch the loose horse. The two other riders, Clay and Pedro, turned their mounts and started up the stretch, spurring their beasts.

"Hold off!" Pop's clarion call could have been heard on the back forty. Decades of projecting his commands over the sound of racing hooves had given him a voice and an attitude that brooked no argument. "In this fog, you could ride over him."

"Calling 9-1-1." Kevin's somber tone slid into the heartbeat of silence.

Pop raised a hand in acknowledgement as he gestured to three mounted ranch hands, two women and a guy, who'd been waiting to lead the horses. "Y'all line up. Three feet distance. Go steady. Keep your eyes open. Do we have-- "

"Hurricane lamps." Mom rushed out from the direction of the shed, juggling several lamps.

I ran forward, but Marcus outraced me. "I'll help, Gram. Give me two."

In moments, the riders set off into the thinning fog. The eerie movement of the mist added to the tension. The stillness in the air seemed frozen in time as the string of lights and the forms were swallowed up.

I fought to slow my racing heart to its normal rhythm.

When Marcus crowded close to my side, I put my arm around his shoulders. "TR, what could have happened to him? He wouldn't just fall off. Would he?"

Kevin walked up from behind and put his arms around both of us. He pulled his gaze from the track to exchange a silent, knowing glance with me.

I shook my head in answer to my son's question. "Frisco's been riding since he was in diapers. He didn't fall."

So, what *had* happened?

A sense of doom replaced the worry that had taken hold at the sight of the empty saddle on the stretch run. I found myself stepping forward, following where the search party had ridden into the fog.

"Here's the medical kit." A disembodied voice pulled my attention.

I turned in time to see Mom, mounted on a buckskin, accept the kit from a ranch hand. I gently pushed Marcus to Kevin's side, meeting their gazes, hoping they'd understand. "I'm going with you."

My mother had earned her medical experience over decades of nursing injuries in the field. With the distance of the ranch from town and any chance of immediate medical help, she'd taken several first aid courses. Heaven knew she'd had numerous episodes of practical experience.

I looked over my shoulder at Kevin and Marcus. They nodded encouragement in unison. Increasing my pace, I strode toward a chestnut gelding tied off close by. While I'm no Dale Evans, nor as good as my three siblings, I can stay on a horse.

My mother rode toward the open gate to the track. "Honey, there's no need for you to bother. We don't know what we'll find and you have no experience with first aid."

Pop walked toward me, leading the chestnut. He met my gaze with a knowing look. A silent message passed between us. He knew

better than anyone that Frisco hadn't fallen off the horse. "Let her go, Sylvia. She'll be a help."

I took the reins, touching his hand in search of comfort. I had a bad feeling about this. "I hope we're wrong."

A weariness bowed Pop's shoulders. His features settled into hard lines as he shook his head. "The only thing that could get Frisco off a horse is death."

The whispered words added to the chill of the day, but they didn't carry beyond the two of us.

I swung onto the saddle and set off after Mom who'd already passed through the gate.

A walkie-talkie on my dad's belt squawked. "Turning onto the backstretch. Nothing so far."

The distant voices of the searchers sounded from beyond the curtain of mist.

They'd find him soon. The words marched through my brain with a certainty I couldn't refute. They were nearing the farthest corner of the track. A low-lying area that would be shrouded in fog. The greatest distance from witnesses. The least chance of being seen or heard. No possibility of anyone stopping the attack.

I urged the horse into a canter to catch up with my mother. A cone of light from her flashlight illuminated the thinning mist. The rising sun slowly burned off the fog.

I slowed as I drew up alongside of Mom. My eyes scanned the track from side to side. Pointless. Frisco would have been found if he were here and the hoofprints coming and going obliterated everything else.

"I hope it's not too late." Mom's breathy whisper carried on the still air. Her voice trembled like a taut spring coiled too tightly.

I nodded. Unsure whether she was looking at me, I spoke. "Me, too."

Guilt suffused me at the implied deception. My brain was seized with the certainty of trouble. This - whatever this was - had been no accident. Frisco was in his early forties, in the prime of health. He hadn't fallen off. Alive or dead, he'd been attacked. Why and by whom?

My gut wanted to be wrong even as my brain laid out the facts with cold certainty.

"Here!" The loud call broke through the silence. Several jumbled voices followed. A squawk of a walkie-talkie added to the mix.

Mom and I urged the horses to a run. We slowed as we rounded the far corner of the oval track. The mist was thicker under the trees, but several circles of light flickered up ahead.

We pulled up a few feet away from the stand of horses. The

men and women had dismounted. Four of them held the horses, craning forward.

Clay and George knelt by Frisco's still form. He lay on his back on the packed dirt.

Irene hurried toward Mom to take the first aid kit.

Mom, relieved of the box, dismounted with the ease of a born horsewoman. Once her feet hit the ground, she took the kit and rushed forward.

I dismounted as well, taking both sets of reins I slowly walked to the other bystanders.

Clay's tall, solid frame seemed to sigh in relief as he gave way to Mom. "He's alive, but he's not breathing right."

My mother knelt in the dirt, setting the medical kit by Frisco's head. She put a hand on his neck to check his pulse. "It's weak and thready. No obvious wounds."

I shifted left to see her expression, noting her tense shoulders and worried frown. Only as she spoke did I realize my hands were empty and I'd walked half the distance to Frisco's prone form.

I looked at my hands as if I'd find the reins still there. Looking over my shoulder, I met the smirk of longtime ranch hand Ray Armstrong. He had the reins in his hands. He waved me forward, an understanding expression on his weather-beaten face.

First rule of dealing with a horse, don't drop the reins.

One more reason I live in a resort town in Nevada.

A squawk rent the air. "Ambulance is coming down the backroad. One of you go meet 'em."

"I'll go." Ray handed our horses off and moved toward his own mount. "We're at the seventh furlong."

The farthest corner from the finish line, my brain repeated.

Mom leaned over Frisco. Her quick hands searched his chest and arms. "Not a mark on him. His pulse is fast and erratic. Could be a heart attack or a seizure."

Clay settled back on his haunches. "He doesn't answer. Can't rouse him."

Mom put a hand on Frisco's forehead. "He's hot, sweaty. That doesn't make sense. It can't be sixty degrees out here. He's not wearing a jacket, just his flannel shirt."

The discordant wail of a siren skittled on my nerves.

I jumped despite myself. Eyeing the eerie mist, I gritted my teeth against the eerie setting.

Frisco lay on the outside portion of the track. Had he been making a wide turn? Or had he already lost control of the horse? Beyond him was the outside fence. Though I couldn't see the details, I knew the landscape better than I knew the streets of Langsdale.

This corner of the track ran up against an old knot of

trees and brush Mom and Pop never bothered to clear. The paddock behind it opened to full sunlight and a carpet of green grass. It was where mares and foals were kept. The low-lying area provided shade in the heat of summer.

The gulley had been a destination for adventurous children and grandchildren to ride through and explore. My mind brought forth images of galloping horses and the laughing voices of my friends and siblings riding under the green branches of yesteryear. Countless adventures had played out beneath the leaves of that seemingly endless forest.

Now the leaves hung heavy and thick. The branches drooped low. Plenty of coverage for an attack. Logic marched in and swept the memories aside with a ruthless hand. Even without the mist, none of the riders would have noticed anyone hiding in the underbrush and overgrown bushes in that corner of the track.

Someone knew the layout. They also knew the morning's schedule.

A shiver of horror ran through me. This wasn't the big city. This was the small town of my childhood. How had these green hills collided with the darkness of my PI profession?

The wail of the ambulance broke into my brain, shattering my thoughts. I stepped back, uncertain where they'd stop.

Someone was waving a hurricane lamp. Ray and Will galloped along the inside of the track. The ambulance kept pace with

them, slowing as it approached. The ranch hands who stayed had already pulled the horses to the inside rail.

Three figures jumped out of the ambulance. One ran to Frisco. The other two dove into the back of the vehicle and pulled out duffle bags and a gurney before running to the fallen man.

"Give us room."

I couldn't tell which of them spoke, but Mom and the others stood and obediently retreated.

I backed up as well.

"Tracy, what are you doing?"

I heard the strident tone in my mother's voice but I was too intent on looking over the EMT's shoulder to answer her. Part of me realized I'd retreated in the wrong direction, but the rest of me was too intent on studying Frisco to pay attention to my brain or Mom's warning.

The injured man's breath was labored, even to my unprofessional eyes. His skin was ashen and waxy. Medical phrases, harsh and hurried, erupted from the professionals. EKG leads were on his chest.

Eyes fixed. Have to move him. He needs a hospital. Could be anything. No wounds.

Their rushed voices filtered through my mind.

No obvious wounds. Clay and Mom had noted the same fact. I

flashed a glance at the shaded area. The tops of the trees glistened in the sun. My first assumption had been wrong.

It hadn't been an attack. Something he ate or drank? A medical condition?

A renewed urgency filled the air as the EMT's took position on both sides of Frisco's prone form. Clay and George were suddenly in the mix. Together they lifted him onto the gurney, then into the ambulance.

Clay, George, and I stood in a small semi-circle and watched the sirens and lights roar into the distance.

A breeze stroked my cheeks then rustled the green leaves on the trees. I glanced at the blue sky. A streamer of clouds stretched across the horizon. The sun had burnt away the fog.

"A beautiful morning." The irony in the muttered comment wasn't lost on anyone.

Clay scowled.

Loose bits of paper from the ambulance crew skittered along the dirt track chased by the breeze. I squatted down and absently picked up the fluttering bits of paper.

My gaze scanned the immediate area, though I knew it was useless. Too many booted feet and horses' hooves had trod this dirt for anything useful to be found. No wound. No blood. I frowned at a piece of plastic tubing with a clasp on it. That could be dangerous if left on the track for the next run.

I turned it over as I stood. What had they used that for? I shoved the pieces of trash into my pocket, looking to make sure I'd gotten everything.

The walkie-talkie squawked to life. "Come on back, y'all. Sheriff's here."

Once Pop's voice fell silent the deserted exercise track held an eerie emptiness that skittered over my skin. I felt as if an abyss had opened at my feet. I wasn't sure what to think. I couldn't believe Frisco's fall was an accident, but what did that leave? Attempted murder? I refused to think about that option.

Frisco was alive, I told myself.

For now.

I grimaced at my treacherous brain's refusal to play nice.