

**CHAPTER 1**

*27 Down; 5 Letters;*

*Clue: Induce by gift or money*

*Answer: Bribe*

"Stop her!" Fear echoed in the woman's scream. "Stop her, now!"

With credit card in hand, my whole body seized. My son, Marcus and I were in the Miner's Mercantile. As the most complete general store for well over a mile, the place usually had a steady stream of locals.

Two other shoppers froze as I had. Alarmed, I looked for an escaping thief. No one came running through the aisles. Even the coffee klatch tables sat empty.

The next thing I knew a large, callused hand clamped itself over the card reader.

"Hey!" I yelled in the face of the dark-haired man standing at the cash register. Otis Berenger, a co-owner with his wife Risha, was a husky man who could look straight into my eyes. I'd known him for years.

Risha Berenger ran toward us. Her long, black braid swung behind the medium sized frame. Double doors leading to the back

hall where the office was situated, swung wildly behind her. "I told you. Stop her!"

Otis looked at me with an apologetic expression. "Sorry, Tracy. I forgot."

Quick witted soul that I am, that's when I realized Risha's cry of alarm was aimed at me. Guilt kicked in automatically, then I realized I hadn't done anything.

Marcus, my twelve-year-old son, poked my arm. His straight, black hair hung over his forehead. The dusky skin of his Korean heritage had a soft glow. "Did you steal something?"

My annoyance shot to the red zone. I shook the plastic sack full of candy at the boy. "You picked out the candy to sneak into the movie."

Marcus had indulged in a ten-minute debate to ensure we chose the correct items. Otis snatched the bag out of my hand.

Risha, out of breath, ran up to us. She scowled at her husband, swatting his arm. "I told you!"

"I forgot!" Otis threw his arms out. My sack, held in his fist, would have hit me in the face if I hadn't jerked back.

The Miner's Mercantile reminded me of the general store in my hometown in Kentucky. The store boasted a handful of wooden

barrels brimming with candy, a soda fountain with a gleaming wooden counter lined with stools, and walls decorated with memorabilia related to Langsdale, Nevada's heyday during the 19<sup>th</sup> century silver strike. At the moment, the nostalgic admiration to a bygone era was lost on me.

Tracy Rae Belden here. Five-nine with gray eyes and short brown hair. A thirty-five-year-old transplant to Langsdale, the resort town three hours north of Las Vegas. The town's population of twenty-five thousand is constantly supplemented with tourists drawn by gourmet restaurants, a world class golf course, and an endless number of boutiques, art galleries, and auction houses.

None of which I could afford with any of my three jobs. At the moment, I'd be happy if I could get out of here with four boxes of movie candy.

Marcus had been my foster son for four years. He'd survived on the streets before I caught him stealing my wallet and ran him to ground. His adoption had finally gone through several weeks ago, shortly after my marriage.

Considering my son's attitude, I'd have tossed the boy into a body of water had one been handy. Thankfully, living in the desert made that impossible.

What I needed was Kevin Tanner, my bestie for ten years and my husband of three months to detach himself from the old couple who'd waylaid him on the street.

When the couple asked about a caller who swore they'd won a prize, Kevin waved me forward. My hubby, several years younger than me at twenty-eight, is rumored to be a financial expert. In fact, he's the disowned son of an internationally renowned clan of grifters, the Feilens. He parted ways with them ten years ago when his conscience overrode his loyalty. Now, he considered it his duty to help others avoid scam artists.

I didn't think we had a problem with our credit, however, Kevin usually carried cash.

The bells over the door jingled. Kevin walked in.

The tension left me. A smile spread across my face. My white knight had arrived. All six-foot-one of him. With tousled, black hair and eyes the color of sapphires, the man could be a mistaken for a Greek god. His solid build was the result of clean living and a decade of working construction.

Why he stuck it out with someone who could disappear in a crowd of four I'll never know. I met his gaze in a silent plea.

"Tracy Belden." Risha whispered my name in an enigmatic tone. "You're a detective."

The unexpected comment replaced my irritation with wariness. Everyone in the neighborhood knew being a PI for Crawford Investigations was one of my three jobs. However, an underlying note of fear in her eyes pricked my curiosity.

"Maybe you don't have to pay." Risha's smile reminded me of a snake. She leaned closer. "You like puzzles."

Otis snatched a crossword puzzle book off of a shelf and handed it to her. She waved it in front of my face.

The book was new. I'd been admiring it the day before, especially its boast of puzzles based on countries and cultures around the world. I felt like a fish watching a hook as the bag and the puzzle book danced in front of my eyes.

Risha smiled. "You get the candy and the book free."

Otis cringed. He didn't part with his goods lightly.

The part of me that had spent my adult life scrambling to get by urged caution. Too bad puzzles were my catnip.

Kevin leaned against the counter that ran along the front of the store. With his arms crossed over his well-muscled chest, he glanced at Marcus, who now stood at his father's side. "These two know their audience."

Our son's fist bumped Kevin's. "Word."

I heaved a sigh. Even knowing I was going to regret asking, I couldn't stop myself. "What's your problem?"

Rather than victory, Risha's eyes were filled with worry, which was far more unsettling. "Come with me."

In a quick flurry of movements, Otis thrust the book into the bag and canceled the sale. He and Risha exchanged a look of silent communication. She yelled at Sammy, their teenage employee, who was tending the fruit and vegetable display outside the front of the store. Then, they walked toward the back office.

I favored my two guys with an apologetic look. "We'll miss the movie."

"Movie. Shmovie," Marcus said as he ran after the pair. "This is an adventure."

I watched the boy go with a sense of trepidation. "I'd rather go to a movie."

Kevin put his arm around my shoulders and urged me forward. "Wasn't stopping here your idea?"

"Don't remind me." Kevin and I found the Risha, Otis, and Marcus in the back hall. They stood by an office big enough to be a closet in a former life.

Risha stood next to a small wooden desk. Hope mixed with worry in her hazel eyes. Her long black braid lay over her shoulder. "You'll fix this for us."

Her hard tone couldn't hide the fear beneath the stern command.

I squashed my rising curiosity with a hard blow. I was *not* going to be dragged into some sordid mess. Putting out my hands, I fought to forestall an info dump. "If this is a legal issue, I advise you to call the police."

Otis's expression crumpled. His thick lower lip stuck out as if he were about to cry. "There's something in the basement."

He delivered the words in a whisper worthy of a b-grade creature feature. I made a show of looking around at the floor. "What is this, the beginning of a horror movie?"

"The Case of the Monster in the Moat." Marcus added his movie voice over to the mini-drama.

Otis's jaw tightened, but his eyes were pleading. "It stinks. The smell is in the corner room. We don't use it."

"Give her cash." His wife's strident command was accompanied by a hard jab to her husband's arm.

Horror etched itself on his face. The man retreated as if she'd pulled a knife. "I'm not giving her money."

His outrage roused my sympathies. I found myself rooting for him. Try to get cold, hard cash out of my hand. See what happens. I caught myself nodding and stopped. I should have walked away. I still could.

With the pit opening at my feet, I tried to withdraw. "Kevin can pay for the candy. We have a movie to go to. I promised our son."

The boy child in question snorted. "Don't drag me into your lame excuses. I want to go monster hunting."

Otis and Risha exchanged a hopeful look. They sensed weakness. The scales were tipping in their favor.

I crossed my arms over my chest. If I was getting roped into this mess, I was upping the ante. "Throw in the latest issue of the graphic novel with the warrior rat and our son will look in your basement."

"I'll go!" Marcus pushed away from the counter. "If you come with me."

Otis scowled. "I don't want the boy."

Kevin's laughter sounded behind me. "Marcus isn't going anywhere."

Risha slapped her hands together. "It's a deal."

Before I could blink, she pushed Kevin aside with a force that belied her smaller stature and disappeared through the swinging doors. She returned in a heartbeat, carrying not one but two issues of the talking rat's adventures. She grabbed the bag from Otis and shoved the comic books inside. The plastic bag swayed back and forth as she thrust it toward me then instantly pulled it away.

Her gaze lit on Marcus. She held the bag full of prizes out to him. "You hold it and wait for your mama here."

Marcus grabbed it, then danced backward. He waved the bag at me.

Risha's clasped hands wound around each other. "There was no smell two days ago."

Her trembling whisper drilled the hook in tighter. She stepped back, evidently trying to distance herself from the whole affair.

Her desperation sent a jolt through my bones. Though my rational side grappled with the siren call, the allure of

solving a puzzle intrigued me. "Risha, you need to call the police."

Her jaw tightened and her gaze turned hard. "No police."

"They'll search the place again." Otis's harsh tone mixed with his wife's. "They'll find a reason to close us down."

Breath hissed through my teeth. A visit from a drug-dealing friend two years ago had led to several visits from the narcotics squad. The episode had left a deep distrust of the authorities with the couple.

A feeling of hopelessness swept through me. They'd never willingly call the police.

Otis patted me on the shoulder, subtly pushing me toward the exit sign at the other end of the hallway. "It's probably spoiled food or a dead rat."

*Then why don't you go check?*

Because we all knew it was neither of those things.

"Bring back a full report." Marcus pointed at me. Then, he shook his head. "We better go with her, Kevin."

"Go watch the store, honey." Risha grabbed my arm and pulled me along at a brisk pace. "There's a small storage room in the basement we don't use. The plaster's crumbling."

Despite my better judgment, I took a deep breath. Was there a stench or was it my imagination?

"Go to the back corner of the store. The storeroom door is tucked into the wall. There's a staircase." Risha pushed a key into my hand. She glanced over her shoulder. Otis was gone. "It's Mr. Monkey. Tiffie's cat. He sneaks in the corner window. I don't want Tiffie to blame me. I'll pay you a hundred dollars to move the body down the alley."

By the time I deciphered her rapid-fire whisper, she'd spun on her heel and vanished into the store.

Looking over my shoulder, I met Kevin's knowing gaze. The man thinks I have a penchant for adopting strays whether human or animal. Considering the pair of twenty-pound cats we'd rescued during a case two months ago he might be right.

Marcus darted around him and snatched the key out of my hand. "Let's go hunt monsters."

"Marcus." Kevin's level tone held a note of warning that couldn't be ignored.

"I won't go in." The boy's high-pitched voice bounced off the walls in the narrow hall. A mischievous grin danced in his eyes. "But she'll need back-up when the monster snatches her and drags her to oblivion."

Kevin smacked his forehead. "Of course, a witness to her moment of doom. What was I thinking?"

"Thanks, guys." Who needed a movie when Marcus could create his own world-ending scenario? "Be sure to stand back so no blood splatters on you when the monster grabs me."

Marcus ran ahead on the balls of his feet. "Come on. We have to hurry."

"Whatever smells that bad isn't going anywhere." I cringed at the image that produced. I didn't want it to be a dead cat.

Perhaps it was a prank. I could handle that. Except no in the neighborhood had a grudge against Otis or Risha. Maybe it was a rat. How big did a creature have to be to give off a noticeable stench? A sense of dread skittered up my spine.

A moment later, my hand traced the white smooth wall as I rounded the back corner. The door to the main basement was in the middle of the building. Pallets stacked with boxes of supplies sat within easy reach. Beyond that the alley dead-ended at a six-foot tall privacy fence.

Walking on a few feet, I spun around to face a locked door. Tucked away like this few people would know it was here.

"Our journey begins on the wicked streets of the harsh inner city." Marcus's narration sounded like a noir movie.

I rolled my eyes at his hyperbole.

"The trip to the neighborhood grocer had started innocently enough." The boy continued.

That much was true. How had stocking up on movie candy gone so wrong? I raised my gaze to the scorching blue sky above. Sweat trickled down my spine. Why did I let myself get mixed up in these situations? I held out my hand for the key.

Now that the moment had come, the implications struck me full force. A horrible smell that wasn't there two days ago? I shied away from the worst-case scenario.

What if I walked away? I might be able to convince Kevin, but Marcus would rat me out. Him and his adventures. "You two stay here. I'll handle this."

With all the harsh language and stern looks at my command.

Without giving myself a chance to back down, I opened the door and hurried down the stairs to a landing. A second door, flush with the back wall, greeted me. I jiggled the knob. Locked.

My hand stopped short of inserting the key. This was madness. Before I could back out, my curious brain, which is not my wiser half, unlocked the door and pushed it open.

A gag inducing stench swept over me. My overwhelmed brain forced out one thought: this was not a dead cat.

Was a noxious smell enough to call 9-1-1?

I gasped as the overhead light hit my eyes. I looked over and saw my hand on the switch. "Anyone here?"

That was stupid. Did I expect an answer? My muscles knotted with tension. Weathered wood covered the walls. Thick dust sat on shelves along the wall. A few decrepit cardboard boxes were stacked along the wall.

A dry wind swept through the open door, hitting me with unexpected power. Climbing up and over my back, the hot, desert air ruffled my hair. Clouds of dust swirled like small tornadoes. The rancid stench, previously contained, roused like a living beast.

I put a hand over my mouth. My eyes watered.

The smart thing would be to leave and call 9-1-1.

That's when my brain told my feet to go forward.

I never said I was smart.

My gut and I both knew my brain would say anything to find out the truth. That's the way it's wired. It had to know the answer.

When I reached the last set of shelves, I stopped. Last chance to call 9-1-1. But what if the smell was a dead cat?

Two small windows high on the wall let in squares of sun. Light shining through a crack showed one latch undone. An animal might have pushed their way in then become trapped.

My hand was still over my mouth. My breath hissed in and out between my fingers. I didn't want to look but I couldn't stop myself. Stepping forward, I faced the corner.

A crumbled body lay on the concrete floor. A set of shelves lined the wall behind the body. Pity filled me at the sight of the crumbled shape on the hard floor.

The dark skirt on the figure was stretched tight. Her bare legs were akimbo. One foot was bare. The low-heeled pump sat nearby, perfectly upright. Her jacket sleeve was pulled back showing her bruised forearm.

I grimaced at the swollen purple flesh of the arm lying across the face of the victim. Whether she'd tried to protect herself or if she'd fallen that way, there was no telling.

Dark, dried stains colored the cement floor beneath her head. The hair, pulled back in a chignon, looked dark but with the shadows and the blood it may have been lighter in life.

"Oh, my God." I breathed the heartfelt words into the heavy silence. Then, my mind stepped back from the tragedy. My narrowed gaze scanned the walls and the boxes lining the shelves. No splatter.

One arm covered most of the victim's face. The blood under her skull indicated she'd been struck here. Were the marks on her arm the result of a beating or the passage of time?

The high windows looked too small for someone to squeeze through. So, who locked the door after the woman died?

I crept forward on cat-like feet. Crazy, I know. It was me and a dead woman. And she was definitely dead. I had to breathe through my nose. After the first lungful, that wasn't hard to remember. The shadows in the narrow area made the flashlight handy.

"TR!" Marcus's high-pitched, impatient bellow almost unbalanced me.

My arms flailed as I fought to stay upright rather than pitch face-first into the body. With a grimace, I gained my feet. "Time to call the police."

I addressed the words to the dead woman. I felt like I should apologize. Though for what I couldn't say. Disturbing her, perhaps? I retreated around the corner.

The doorway leading to the stairs showed a rectangle of bright light. I fought to ignore the invisible thread of obligation that already bound me to the dead woman. Striding forward, I swept the room. Nothing looked out of place.

Don't ask me how I knew since I'd never been in the room before. It was more of an impression. A few seconds later, I blinked as I stepped into the brightly burning heat of the sun.

"It's a body, isn't it?" Marcus straightened. His lip curled. "We smelled it."

I met his gaze and nodded. Then, I met Kevin's somber expression. "I need to call the police."