

# GLUE GUNS FOR CHRISTMAS

## CHAPTER 1

*9 Across; 7 Letters*

*Clue: An educator, especially in a school*

*Answer: Teacher*

When the third wad of paper sailed by my head, missing me by mere inches, I realized the entire process had ceased to be fun. Not that it ever was. It was the Monday before Christmas break. I was in my son's classroom where the walls reverberated with the echoes of eleven and twelve-year-old middle-school children.

I'd been drafted to help a teacher. Don't ask me why I agreed; I don't know. I arrived to discover the teacher had called in sick, and the usual substitute was on jury duty.

Now I had a glue gun in one hand, a tube of red glitter in the other, and twenty-three raucous children completely uninterested in building a Santa or a snowperson out of the body parts on the table, Styrofoam balls, colored paper, and long strands of cotton.

I hadn't been interested in art when I was eleven either. No wonder I couldn't sell this project.

I couldn't pin down the moment when I lost authority. But I knew when I would get a handle on this room.

Right now.

I raised the glue gun in a white-knuckled grip. Who'd nominated me for classroom mother the week before Christmas? And what fever had prompted me to agree?

A subtle tapping on my shoulder felt like a moth. When another paper missile flew past my head, I spun on my heel and pointed the glue gun at the children.

I was ready to use it on every single one of them.

Would that be wrong?

"Button your lips! Now!" I yelled the command in a loud, guttural tone that hurt my throat. Staring down the barrel of the sticky filled weapon, I aimed it at the wide-eyed gazes of the suddenly immobile children. "Anyone not in your seat in five seconds, I will glue to the chair."

No one twitched.

"Open your mouths again and I'll use red glitter to paste them shut." I advanced slowly. "Move!"

As I waved the weapon, the room exploded in a flurry of rushing feet and running bodies. The only one not moving was Marcus, my twelve-year-old Korean foster son. He was in his seat laughing so hard he was about to fall on the floor.

Ten seconds later, I stared at the children sitting in

their chairs. Absolute, blessed silence reigned. From their scared expressions, they evidently expected death.

I have to admit I felt a certain satisfaction. As I took a deep breath and relished the quiet, the awareness of someone by my side broke through my contentment.

A girl, maybe fourteen, stared at me with brown eyes the size of saucers. One black braid hung over her shoulder.

I raised a brow, ready to let loose. Then, I glanced at the room. There were no empty chairs. I frowned. I didn't need *more* children dropping in. "Is this your classroom?"

"No, ma'am."

Her stiff posture and trembling voice made me feel like a drill sergeant. I kind of liked it. "What are you doing here?"

She held out a folded note in her trembling hand. "I'm supposed to watch the room until Mrs. Wang comes in. The principal wants to see you in her office."

Oh, great. I'm back in school for half-a-day and I'm in trouble again.

Wait. No one can send me to detention. I'm Tracy Rae Belden, five-nine. Brown hair. Gray eyes. Today I was a thirty-five-year-old den mother, or whatever I volunteered to be this week for a middle school in Langsdale, Nevada.

Mrs. Wang was coming in from jury duty? Why?

Heck with it. I'm out of here.

I thrust the tube of red glitter at the girl and took the folded note. Then, I spun the glue gun around and slapped it into her palm. "Don't be afraid to use it."

I headed toward the door, grabbing my purse enroute. I was not returning. Standing in the open door, I tossed Marcus a salute. "See you at home."

With the door shut behind me, I marched down the hall. I'd been one of those out-of-control children. I couldn't count the times I'd taken a walk like this to the office of doom.

I wonder who reported me? The white-haired teacher from the room next mine stood in the open door of her classroom. She was probably the snitch. No doubt she thought I was too hard on the delicate little dears.

As I passed the teacher a grin broke out on her face. Her hands came together in a slow, steady clap. "Thirty years. I've always wanted to let loose. Just once."

I stopped and gave her a salute. She probably never lost control of her students, but she was definitely on the frontlines. "You deserve far more respect from everyone involved."

A moment later, I practically skipped down the stairs. I was almost free of this entire affair. The front desk admin did a double take as she waved me through the principal's office door. Once inside, I shut the door and masked my impatience at

the sight of the dusky skinned woman on the phone.

With her black hair pulled back in a bun and her navy dress with matching jacket, she looked every inch an executive. She had at least ten years on me, maybe more. Perhaps it was the mileage rather than years. It was hard to tell.

When she met my gaze, her eyes were filled with fear that gave way to a desperate hope. Putting a hand over her heart, she held up a finger in a silent appeal. Furrows appeared on her brow. One short, stylishly painted pink nail pointed to the right side of her flawless chin and rubbed her skin.

I wondered what caused her worry as I felt my chin. My fingers came aware sticky and covered with red and green glitter. Holding onto my crumbling patience, I glanced in the mirror by the door.

Yep, a streak of glitter. A few quick scratches pulled off what was left. The drops of glue in my hair proved more stubborn. I yanked out a few strands of my short brown hair along with the glue. It was a cheap price to pay to be free of classroom duty.

"Of course, thank you." A click sounded behind me.

I turned to see Mrs. Sonya Sheffield hang up the phone.

She clasped her hands together. "Thank you so much for your assistance this morning."

"Mrs. Sheffield." Perhaps it was the school atmosphere, but

I felt awkward calling this woman by her first name, Sonya.

She continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Mrs. Wang's trial ended in an acquittal due to new evidence. She's on her way to school now. She'll be here the rest of the week."

There was one more morning. School would be dismissed at noon tomorrow. "Why not wait until the morning? No one would know. That's what I'd have done."

Mrs. Sheffield gave me a stiff sort of smile.

This was how my visits to the principal's office usually went. Maybe the last part should have been left unsaid. Maybe the whole thing didn't need to be said.

The other woman stared at me as if she wasn't sure where to go from here.

When in doubt, I go on offense. "You sent for me. Is there a problem?"

*Or can I leave and stop for a chocolate shake on my way home?*

"Yes," Her voice grew firmer. She straightened her shoulders slightly as she met my gaze. "I... the school has an issue that is suited to your professional life."

"You need a room painted?" Perhaps it was the glue and the glitter and the attempt to create a craft with ungrateful children that prompted me to go with my and my husband's handyman business. I was certain she didn't need me to create

another Christmas themed crossword puzzle. That had been fun.

"Or are we talking drywalling in the basement?"

She frowned as she shook her head. "I was referring to your investigative affairs."

"My PI job?" Which was mostly checking on marital affairs or petty theft from businesses. Okay, I'd solved a handful of murders. However, her response caught me by surprise. "What do you have that would require a private investigator? Missing pencils? Spit wads? I suggest you contact the police."

I didn't need the work. More importantly, I didn't want the work. The handyman business was quiet right now. Few people wanted to tear up their homes or smell paint fumes during the holidays. Which was fine by me the calendar was full starting in January.

Marrying my best buddy of ten years in April had definitely fattened our collective pocketbook not to mention life in general. Waking up next to the love of my life added a layer of joy that I never thought would be mine. As for the business, being self-employed made things a bit leaner in the beginning, but on the whole we were doing okay. I was in the mood for my own Christmas vacation.

Mrs. Sheffield's lips pressed together in a firm line. She shook her head. Her expression had the stern look I remembered all too well from my school years.

"Ms. Belden." The principal stepped around her desk. She held a long-fingered hand toward me. "It will be better if I show you rather than trying to explain. It's hard to... picture."

Did I want to see whatever she was talking about? I thought twice about saying anything out loud. The woman evidently had yet to hear about my threatening to glue children to their seats. However much they deserved it.

Perhaps I should play along. My son went to school here. I could stack up points for the moment when the truth came to light. After all, what could be wrong in a fairly small public school in Langsdale, Nevada? "Show me."

A few moments later, I followed the other woman onto the tiled floor of the lower level. The well-lit hall was much brighter than I remembered from my school.

Mrs. Sheffield fixed me with her a direct gaze. "It's in the corner room."

I nodded like the responsible adult I was supposed to be.

The sound of her heels sounded like nails in a coffin as we marched to our destruction.

The deep bass voice in my head threw the last phrase in as if this were a film noir from the nineteen-forties.

Whatever she had to show me, the police could handle. What if she wanted me to sort papers or alphabetize folders?

My stomach clenched in horror. Then I mentally slapped



myself. That wouldn't account for her pulling me out of class, even if Mrs. Wang had made the ill-advised decision to return to school in the middle of the day.

With every passing second, my imagination painted one lurid scenario after another for the reason behind this meeting, a dead body, stolen money in bank bags, a ravenous wild animal.

I had to get out of this place. This school atmosphere was doing weird things to my brain.

We were halfway down the corridor. A door on the left jerked open.

I jumped in shock and put a hand over my rapidly beating heart.

A white man with gray hair and a wrinkled brow stuck his head out of the door and stared at us with wide eyes. He was a couple of inches shorter than me and several inches wider. His gaze targeted Mrs. Sheffield, then his burning intensity settled on me. "I thought you'd never get here. What took you so long?"

*Why do people always blame me?* "I came as soon as I could."

"Fine." His tone was shaky. The sarcasm was completely lost on him. "Get in here. I can't take being alone with this any longer."

Mrs. Sheffield's hand formed white-knuckled fists. She shot me a worried look as she strode into the room.

I followed, wondering if wild animals would be the least of

my problems.