

A CLUE TO MURDER BY LOUISE FOSTER

CHAPTER 1

17 Across; 7 Letters;

Clue: Burst or shatter violently.

Answer: Explode.

I tapped my pen on the Sunday crossword puzzle. The puzzle's black-and-white grid took up a quarter of the newspaper page. I'd been working on filling in the blanks since I'd grabbed it off a table at the coffee shop this morning.

I'd spent hours on the answers. With only five blank squares in the middle, I was on the verge of success. Except I couldn't nail down the last few answers. I'd put the paper down twice, but my brain wouldn't let the challenge go unanswered.

Once I finished, I could move on to the rest of my list for the day: taking a nap so I could work my late shift. but first, I had to eat lunch. The thought rang a bell in my brain. There was something I should be doing. I was sure of it. The unfinished puzzle shoved the worry aside. Readjusting my body, I flipped my legs over the arm of the small, ragged armchair in my friend's small apartment.

A dirty window showed the side of the apartment building next door. If I stood on my toes and stretched my neck I could see the top of the laundromat across the alley. Though we lived in Las Vegas, the neon lights and dazzling glitter of the strip were miles away from this corner of the city.

I'm Tracy Rae Belden. Five-nine, short brown hair, gray eyes, mostly slim through no fault of my own. Hotel maid struggling to pay her bills by the very early morning light. Master crossword puzzle creator and solver by night. At the moment, clue fifty-nine stared at me with a taunting air. It was laughing at me. I knew it.

Five letter word. Second letter was a T. Ends with an R. The down clue after the T had four possible solutions, depending on the horizontal answer. The only letters in that answer were D and N, third and fifth square respectively. The rest of the NYT's crossword was filled in. I'd tried several options but

none of the answers fit both directions.

I couldn't walk away, and I refused to quit. The empty squares would haunt me until I completed every square. Unfinished puzzles preyed on my mind. Good thing I-

A loud banging shattered my concentration. The noise sounded like a minor explosion. I stared in shock as the small stove jumped in place before settling down. The open design and close walls of the apartment amplified the noise. Shock drove me to my feet and propelled me toward the stove.

"Now, I remember what I was supposed to do." My hand still clutched the crossword puzzle as I stared at the oven. A thin trail of smoke rose out of the loose door. "That can't be good."

A key rattled in the door, which swung open to admit Kevin Tanner, my bestie. At six-one with wavy black hair and eyes the color of cobalt, he's the best looking person I know. Think Greek god come to life.

A look of concern marred his handsome features. He quickly shut the door. "Did you hear that noise? Something exploded."

"Maybe." I couldn't hide the defensive tone in my voice.

He glanced at the smoke which had started to form a cloud over the stove and showed no signs of dissipating.

"Oh, Belden." His broad shoulders slumped. "Don't tell me you tried cooking again."

"Okay, I won't tell you." I answered obligingly. "But that was the frozen lasagna."

Betty Crocker I'm not. Don't ask me why, but the ingredients in recipes refuse to come together for me like they do in cookbooks and on TV shows. I'm not even sure where or why I go wrong.

My buddy strode over and turned off the stove. With a quick move, he threw open the small kitchen window without taking a step. He returned to my side. Grabbing the newspaper from my hand, he began fanning at the smoke.

"Hey! I haven't finished that!" I snatched my crossword puzzle back. "I don't care if the building is on fire, until I

fill in the last letter, this puzzle is sacrosanct."

For the first time since entering the apartment, Kevin frowned at me.

"By the way, do you know a five-letter word. Second letter is a T. Ends with an R. Blank; Pradesh, India." I asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Distracted much?" His jaw dropped. He groaned again as he stared at the oven. His look of utter dismay could have been for the smoke still seeping into the room or for the damaged oven itself.

"Don't worry. I can fix it." I promised.

He pulled his gaze from the growing fallout and shot me a disgusted look. He was now using a cookie sheet as a fan. "The stove or the lasagna? And how?"

"I can't save either of them. I don't know why I said that." Desperation mostly. The stove had come with the apartment. Even worse, this was Kevin's place. I bit my lip in growing concern. "Do you think anyone heard the noise?"

He faced me with a flat stare. His shock must be wearing off. "The military personnel working twenty stories beneath Cheyenne Mountain heard that explosion."

A hard thumping shook the apartment door in its frame. "What's going on in there? You cooking drugs? You get out."

My heart and stomach fell all the way to my feet. Kevin and I both live paycheck-to-paycheck. Neither of us had the money to pay for the stove. Surrendering the security deposit only to have to come up with another one for a new apartment would be close to impossible.

A groan escaped my lips. "I'll never cook in your apartment again. I promise."

Kevin, still waving a cookie sheet at the thinning smoke, managed a small grin. "Well, that's something. Too bad I won't have an apartment after today."

I grimaced as the burning smell registered. "Yuck. You keep fanning. I'll talk to Mr. Smeltzer."

"Belden." Kevin's tone of command stopped me as I started toward the door. "I'll deal with him."

"No, I'm responsible for this." This wouldn't be the first time I had to explain a catastrophe in the kitchen. After signing up for a cooking class in high school at my mother's insistence, the teacher escorted me to the door before the second week was out. After asking me never to return, she shut the door in my face.

Kevin's earnest gaze bore into mine. "I can smooth this over."

For most of his life, his evident sincerity and deep voice were enough to block out the world for anyone listening. Add in those eyes and anyone on the planet believed whatever he said.

Not this time. Don't get the wrong idea, but have I mentioned I'm twenty-eight? Kevin is twenty-years-old. Two years ago, I found him standing over the murdered body of my co-worker. The gun was at his feet.

At the time, Kevin had claimed, believably, to be twenty-six. He was eighteen. He would have been a senior in high school if he'd lived a normal life, but he hadn't. He'd grown up in an infamous family of con artists. Suspected of much. Rarely arrested. Never convicted.

The Feilen family was the best of the best. And Kevin was their star. Blessed with brains, looks, and intelligence, his confident, caring charisma had bilked millions of dollars from the pockets of wealthy, and not so wealthy people all over the globe. Kevin had only one flaw, but it was a glaring one. He had a conscience.

Faced with a final test to take millions from my company on a phony deal, Kevin balked for the last time. His parting gift was to be framed for murder. The Feilens don't take rejection well. Not even Kevin's grandmother, the matriarch of the clan, who'd taken advantage of a murder and planned the set-up.

Since I and a security guard discovered him with the body in a locked room, I would have been a witness against him. However, my puzzle solving brain couldn't make the pieces fit.

Instead, after sorting out the facts like the clues in a

crossword puzzle, I'd accused the president of the family-owned company that I worked for. Amazingly, the man didn't take that well. Neither did his cousin who took over the company. Kevin had changed his name and walked away. My life changed also.

Good-bye cushy corporate job, a recent promotion, and a pay raise. Hello cleaning up after drunken conventioners in Las Vegas hotels. It's not pretty. Which brought me back to reality; a kitchen with traces of smoke and a destroyed stove.

I pushed Kevin toward his fanning duties. "This isn't a scam. No amount of smooth-talking is going to make Mr. Smeltzer ignore his destroyed stove. You can crash with me until we figure something out."

"Oh, no." His doom-laden disappointment sounded more heartfelt than before.

"My housekeeping isn't that bad." I protested, gesturing toward the pieces of aluminum and burnt lasagna plastered on the oven. "It's better than my cooking."

Still waving a cookie sheet at the disappearing smoke, Kevin rolled his eyes. "How can someone who works as a maid be so bad at cleaning her own place?"

I flapped a hand at him. "Just because I'm not a germaphobe doesn't mean anything. My house is neat."

His response was either a groan or a growl. I couldn't be certain over the renewed thumping on the door.

"You. Open. Up." A hard blow accompanied each word. "I'm calling the police."

I threw the door open and faced a lanky, bony man glaring at me over the threshold. "Your nephew's only been out of prison a week. The police are the last people you want on your doorstep."

Mr. Smeltzer, a couple inches shorter than my five-foot-nine height, leaned in close enough that I could smell the mint of his toothpaste. Despite his name, his features were Asian. His straight black hair, touching the collar of his t-shirt, was combed to one side. "You're nothing but trouble."

I snorted at his attack. "Like I haven't heard that

before."

The man glared at me as he shoved me aside and strode into the apartment.

The hard thump of footsteps sounded close behind him.

Mrs. Smeltzer. I raised my gaze heavenward, searching for a way out. Biting back a groan, I hurried to shut the door on the jumble of calls from residents standing in the hall.

"What's going on? Is the building on fire?"

"Tracy burned up the kitchen again." Overriding all the voices, Mrs. Smeltzer's gruff voice dispensed the conclusion with an angry note.

I pulled the half-closed door open and stuck my head into the hall. A handful of annoyed souls frowned at me. Chief among them was Mrs. Smeltzer huffing toward me.

"I've never burnt down the kitchen." I yelled. "A couple of cookie sheets got scorched. They're still usable. Clear the hallway!"

I pointed at the assembled occupants in the hall as the older woman stormed straight at me. The temptation to slam the door in her face rose up, but, again, this was Kevin's apartment. Instead, I withdrew and turned my back on her.

The door slammed shut. The next moment Mrs. Smeltzer's shoved past me and focused on Kevin. The woman is the child of first-generation Italians. She stands five-five. What she lacks in height, she makes up for with curves.

As my great Uncle Nick always said, "Never trust a skinny cook." Believe me, Mrs. Smeltzer can cook. No recipes. She just throws spices and vegetables and bones in a pot and simmers it for hours. Unlike me, she can't go wrong. She invited me to dinner with Kevin a few times, despite not liking me. Then, she found out we weren't a couple. That ended that, but Kevin still shares the meals she makes for him.

The older woman clasped her hands to her breast. "What has she done to you? She ruined your kitchen. The stove is destroyed!"

"Aargh!" Mr. Smeltzer shut the oven door with a bang. Straightening, he faced me with an eagle eye. "You're responsible for this!"

"Hello, Mrs. Smeltzer." Kevin graced the woman with a charming smile that brought forth a loving gaze in return. "As I was telling your husband, I'll make this right."

During the months after we first met, I thought his friendly attitude toward everyone was a holdover from his days as a con artist. Then, I realized he actually likes people. He doesn't get angry or antagonistic. He listens and sympathizes. He can make anyone smile. I was actually hoping to be part of a riot at some point just so I could watch him disperse an angry mob.

"You aren't going to pay!" The woman's expression turned fierce. She swept her hand through the air and pointed at me. "She is responsible. She will pay if we have to take her to small claims court."

Not even Kevin's friendship can keep me on this woman's good side, if she has one.

"Yes!" Her husband shook a fist in the air. "We'll take you to court. They'll make you pay for the damage."

"No, they won't." I fisted my hands on my hips. "I'm not legally responsible for this apartment. Kevin Tanner's name is the only one on the lease. He's liable for any damage."

Wide eyes and open mouths greeted my harsh words.

I faced Kevin with a straight gaze. "Legally, that's the truth. You're responsible."

The other woman grabbed at her hair as she turned to Kevin. "You need to find another girl. I know so many nice girls for you. Why do you stay with her?"

Kevin's calm expression never changed. "Tracy's a good person, and she's not my girlfriend. We're just friends."

Mr. Smeltzer's face darkened in anger. "How can you betray your friend? You owe us."

"I don't owe you anything." I retorted, jabbing a finger at

the landlord. "I owe Kevin, and I'll pay him for any damages."

Yeah, don't ask me how.

After a moment of exchanging glares, the landlord straightened.

I took a deep breath and wondered how I'd get out of the hole I was digging. Damage control was obviously not my strong suit. Perhaps I should have let Kevin handle this part.

As I was thinking, Mr. Smeltzer let out a high-pitched shriek. He flung out his arm at me.

His scream shocked me out of my stupor and skittered across my nerves. I yelped and jumped back, leaving my thudding heart hanging in mid-air between us. His voice rose over an octave as he stared at me with bared teeth and a wild-eyed expression. Truly alarmed for the first time since the explosion, I looked at Kevin.

Brow furrowed, my buddy stepped forward, putting out a hand toward the landlord. He eyed me with a stunned look.

Mr. Smeltzer glanced at his wife before stepping towards me. He waved the hand he had aimed at my chest. "Police."

The hissed word raised my ire and defused some of my alarm.

"You can't have me arrested either." I yelled, keeping a wary distance. "Blowing up a stove isn't a crime. It wasn't intentional."

Mrs. Smeltzer eyed her husband with a questioning gaze. She put a hand on his arm.

When he turned, their gazes met in silent communication. Within seconds, her expression cleared. A knowing light gleamed in her eyes and her mouth formed an O.

They turned as one to face me with what I can only call matching evil grins. "Police."

They hissed the word as one.

With a growing sense of trepidation, I stepped back.