

Prologue

I think I just heard something. I close my eyes and concentrate and I put my respiratory system on pause so I can listen. Yes, there is definitely a sound. The sound of something brushing past a branch or a bush. Then, that rustling sound stops, and now I can hear breathing. There is a presence. Out there in the darkness, there lurks something that probably wants to get closer to my tree. I know it can't be human. All the humans left after the carnage. It's just me and my tree now. And the body twenty feet away from me. A body that is not helping the situation. Even I, a mere human with inferior senses, can smell the blood, which, in addition to the vomit at my feet, was bound to attract some degree of unwanted attention from whatever creatures call these woods their home. I would say that my odds of making it till sunrise without one of them taking a bite out of me are not looking too promising.

For the umpteenth time, I try to loosen my restraints, but all I manage to do is inflict further agony on my hands as they grind against the rope and leave bits of shredded flesh on the bark of my tree.

The breath in the darkness is getting louder. And closer. Soon, I'll be able to feel it on me.

As I stand here, unable to move, powerless, alone on my journey to hell, alone in the forest but for that invisible presence, I can't help but muse about the universe's perverse sense of humor and the irony of my current predicament. As someone who left the congestion of the big city to bask in the wholesome beauty of nature's loving arms, I now find myself stranded in the wilderness in the middle of the night, about to

have a close encounter with the local wildlife population. And as someone who left the big city hoping to enjoy some peaceful small town living, I certainly never imagined that a community of 2,656 souls surrounded by glistening snowy peaks would turn out to be the breeding ground for so much wickedness and brutality.

Chapter 1

The smell of weed was strong that night in the air over Boomville, Colorado, as I stepped out onto Main Street with a duffel bag full of laundry, the taste of Cuervo and lime in my mouth, a bounce in my step, and destiny close behind.

The laundromat, fortuitously located just a few blocks from the motel I had called home for the past couple of weeks while I looked for a place to hang my gun holster, was virtually empty. Just one fortyish Marlboro man fiddling around with his basket at one of the machines, with the helpless look of a recently divorced family man now forced to fend for himself; and two individuals I assumed were employees, lurking about at the back of the place: a fidgety, skinny twenty-something girl with brown teeth and stringy blond hair who looked as though she may have indulged in a schedule 2 stimulant in the recent past, and her thirty-something male coworker with the puffy face of someone who had skipped a few meetings.

“Hi,” I said as I approached, “can I get some change for the machine?”

“Yep, you sure can,” the girl said, taking my two dollars and fishing out a bunch of quarters from a Ziploc bag under the counter. “Here you go, hon.”

Everybody called everybody “hon” in this town, and I have to admit, I kind of liked it.

I dumped the entire contents of my duffel bag into one of the machines. That's when I realized I had forgotten to bring laundry detergent. “I need to buy some Tide, too,” I said, walking back to the two employees. “Can I have change for the dispenser?”

The girl looked at the guy, who looked at the girl. “Um, the machine doesn't work.”

“It's out of order?”

“Yes, right. That's it. Out of order.”

I glanced over at Divorced Guy, whose brow was wrinkling as he studied his options, clearly trying to establish a distinction between normal, delicate, and permanent press. I thought about asking him for a favor, but I was in no mood whatsoever to make inane chitchat or teach some laundry-challenged male how to select the right temperature and water volume. My plan was to make a fast getaway and break all previous world records involving minimum time spent at a Laundromat. I turned back to the he and she.

“Listen, I really need to get my laundry done tonight. Do you have any detergent I can use? I'm more than happy to pay.”

The girl shot another glance at her companion. “No, sorry, hon, no detergent.”

“But it says right here that you provide laundry services. So clearly you must have—”

Just then, I spotted a row of small boxes of Tide, the kind used in detergent-dispensing machines, on the floor behind the counter. “Aha, see, you do, you do have Tide, right there. *Now* we're talking. I'll take one box, please. How much is it?”

“Listen, hon, I'm sorry but I can't sell you—”

“*Que pasa aqui?*”

I turned to see a guy walk in who had “rap sheet” written all over his face.

“Hey, Eddie,” the male employee said, “we were just explaining to the lady here that the Tide is not for sale.”

“That's right,” Eddie said, turning shifty eyes on me. “Those are for the machine.”

“The machine that's broken, you mean.”

“I was telling her how the machine's *broken* and all,” the girl explained.

Eddie shot a quick back and forth glance at the two over-achievers and then grabbed an industrial-size, puke-colored

knockoff bottle from under the counter. “Here. Have some Limpio. On the house.”

“Sorry, but I’ve never heard of *Limpio*,” I air-quoted. “I want Tide.”

“No Tide. Limpio.”

“I *said*—”

“Lady, *just* take the Limpio!”

“No, I want *Tide*—”

“No Tide. Limpio.”

I could feel my dark side threatening to come out as my patience inched closer to its limit—which, admittedly, is typically not that high to begin with.

“Right. This is ridiculous. Here’s five bucks. That’s more than enough. I’m getting some freaking Tide.”

I expected them to put up a fuss, but I didn’t care. I stepped around the small counter, grabbed a box of Tide with one hand, and waved my five-dollar bill at the girl with the other—just as, from across the room, a voice rang out: “Everybody freeze! This is a raid!”

Now *that*, I was not expecting.

Chapter 2

The cowboy was now pointing a Colt .45 at our quarreling four-some, all thoughts of rinse cycle settings clearly pushed to the side.

“I’m sorry, *what* did you say?” I asked.

“Hands where I can see them! This is a raid!”

“Listen,” I insisted, “I—”

“*Drop the Tide!*”

All my years on the force, I swear, I never once belted out such an order. “*Drop the Tide?* Seriously? I gotta say, the whole small town thing—”

“Everybody, move in!” Marlboro man barked into an invisible earpiece.

Suddenly, what must have been half of the entire Boomville PD busted through the front door of the laundromat. Throughout the commotion, skinny chick and fat face had remained frozen with shock and indecision, but not shifty-eyed Eddie. As if in slow motion, I saw, no, I *sensed*, Eddie reach for something under his jacket, which caused every law enforcement and martial art instinct I had ever learned to flood my brain cells and activate my muscle memory. Before I or he or the battalion of cops could register what was happening, I had

1. Yelled *gun!*
2. Wrestled the piece from him
3. Kneed him so hard in the pecans that he was now wheezing like an asthmatic ferret at my feet
4. And was now brandishing his gun high in the air—which turned out to be not such a wise move.

“*Drop the WEAPON!!!*”

All told, six firearms of various calibers were suddenly trained directly on my noggin.

“Easy now,” I said. “I’m dropping it. This is all a big misunderstanding.”

Slowly, in a non-threatening, eager-to-cooperate-with-the-law kind of way, I laid the 9mm belonging to the still-writhing Eddie on the counter.

The cowboy flashed a badge as he took a couple of steps in my direction. “Lieutenant Pritzky,” he said.

He turned to the room. “Get these three out of here. Lopez, you keep your weapon on this one. Shoot if she tries anything.” To me: “You, keep those hands over your head.”

The Laundromat Trio were handcuffed—Eddie letting out a loud yelp as his hands were removed from the family jewels he was cupping protectively—read their rights, and escorted out to a waiting paddy wagon, whose blinking lights reflected in the window briefly made me miss my cop days in Chi-town. That was always one of my favorite parts, the flashing blue finale after a thorough investigation, a beautiful team effort and a flawlessly executed sting operation. The only part that was better was the beers and the “remember when” stories that followed. But those days were behind me, and here I was now, standing on the opposite side of the long arm of Mr. Law, with my hands up in the air like a common street punk busted pushing dime bags.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” I said to the cowboy when he turned toward me again.

“I’m sorry—what?”

“I just saved your life just now.”

He shook his head. “What I saw was an attempt to commit aggravated assault.”

“Excuse me?”

“Against an officer of the law.”

“Huh?”

“While caught in the act of trafficking narcotics.”

“What? Is this a joke?”

The look in his eyes suggested that he probably wasn't the knock-knock type.

"Listen, Lieutenant, I just wanted some detergent, that's all."

"But not just *any* detergent. You were pretty insistent, as I recall."

"What can I say? I like my whites to be really white."

Pritzky grabbed the box of Tide and tore it open. He dipped one index finger in it, lifted it to his nose, then shoved the box in my face. "This look like Tide to you?"

"Well now that you mention it, I don't see those blue crystals I'm so fond of."

"Blue crystals? So you cook meth, too? You just keep getting more attractive by the second."

The shot of tequila I'd had at the Saloon earlier was making me chattier than usual. I knew I really needed to just shut the hell up, but I couldn't help myself. "Now wait just a minute there, Lieutenant Prissy, er, I mean *Pritzky*, I believe it was obvious that I was speaking strictly in laundry detergent terms."

"Yeah, too bad for you, Blondie, that our intel has an out-of-town dealer heading to our neck of the woods."

"Intel? You have intel here? I'm more than a little impressed."

"That's it. I'm taking you in. Hands behind your back."

"No, seriously. You don't understand. I'm actually a cop. *Was* a cop. From Chicago, to be more specific."

"Save it for the judge."

"Gladly. Will he be meeting us at the station?"

"Oh, most certainly. Just as soon as she's back from Vail on Monday."

"Let's see, by my calculations that would be thirty-six hours from now."

"Drug dealers are good at math, it's a well-known fact."

"My understanding of the law is that you can't hold someone without charges for more than twenty-four hours."

"I'm happy to charge you, if you prefer."

"I'd like to think about that."

"You do that. Let's go."

Chapter 3

Slam. Ah, the sweet, unmistakable sound of a cell door slamming shut. Used to be music to my ears, but then again, I was usually the one doing the slamming.

“Hey, I want my phone call!” I yelled, grabbing the bars with both hands.

“I’ll get right on it,” the cowboy said as he walked away without so much as an over-the-shoulder glance in my direction.

I turned around. I was expecting to be reunited with my little criminal from the laundromat, but she must have been taken somewhere else, because my only cellmate was an older woman slumped over on one of the benches and looking to be sleeping off a bender. I took a seat on the other side of the cell. I had a big decision to make: who should I call? And to say what, anyway? I didn’t need bonded out, I hadn’t been charged, and they couldn’t hold me longer than one night. So really, I just needed someone to vouch for me and confirm the legitimacy of my claim.

“Lieutenant!” I cried out.

Total silence.

“Lieutenant Pritzky!”

Nothing but more silence, except for the slumped-over woman in my cell, whose snoring had now upgraded from the soft, steady hum of a humidifier to the sound of a circular saw with something stuck in its blade.

“Hellooo! Anyone?”

Finally, the officer on duty walked stiffly over to my cell, his steps echoing down the hall in a clack-clack, totalitarian regime

military march kind of way. He had that young, rule-following, just barely out of the academy look about him.

“Yes?”

“I want to speak to Lieutenant Pritzky.”

“Lieutenant Pritzky's not here at the moment, ma'am.”

“What? Where did he go? I need to explain something to him.”

“He went home for a bite to eat.”

“Is he coming back?”

“In a little while.”

“Listen, I need someone to make a call to the Chicago PD for me.”

“I'm afraid—”

“You'll see, this is all just a big misunderstanding. I was on the force up until just a few months ago.”

“I don't know if—”

“Please, would you write down a number for me? It's the 14th District in Chicago, my old beat. I was a detective with narcotics.”

He studied me for a beat. I could almost hear the wheels in his mind processing the information and evaluating the odds of it being accurate.

“Fine, I'll take the number, but I'll let the lieutenant make the call. This is his investigation.”

“Thank you, officer.”

I gave him the number, smiled submissively, and retreated back into my cell. Right. Well okay then. Things were looking up. I was a minor celebrity back in the 14th, thanks to a drug bust that had not only gotten me shot and decorated but had also taken down a heroin ring we'd been after for a year. Whoever was working the desk at district headquarters tonight would have the issue resolved in about eleven seconds flat. I smiled at the thought of news of my predicament circulating through the department. I had spent a few hours in the slammer here and there for contempt but hearing about the coke-in-a-Tide-box mix-up would be sure to fuel a few conversations and laughs over burgers and pints at O'Malleys.

Then the laughing in my head subsided and I was suddenly alone and locked up in a jail cell at a police station at the top of the Colorado Rockies, in a town where I had no friends, family, or allies, and the reality of that wasn't so amusing.

I shot a cautious glance at the drunk hippie and stretched out as best I could on my own jailhouse bench, closed my eyes, and tried not to dream.