

Chapter One

After the first explosion, most everyone in town spent the next few days announcing to anyone within earshot exactly where they were at the time it happened. Me, I was jonesing for my usual triple shot of espresso, but the line outside High Country Bean on that fine summer morning wrapped clear around the corner of Main and 3rd, and there was no way I was going to stand there on the sidewalk like an idiot and patiently wait my turn with all the others. And it was precisely as I was cruising past the tourists on my way inside to pour myself a drip at the DIY counter at the back of the coffee shop that Boomville went Boom.

The boom ripped through the sky and shredded the airwaves, as if tearing a giant hole into Earth's atmosphere from another dimension. A sound so loud, so big, so imposing, that it eclipsed everything in its environment, bringing all thoughts and words to a sudden halt. An expert on explosions I am not, but I do have a few finely tuned instincts from all my years with the Chicago PD, and when I heard that boom, I threw myself to the ground, grabbing en route a toddler who was in line behind his mother and shielding his little body with my own as I hit the pavement and cried out: "Everybody get down!"

The silence that followed was deafening, largely because most of us had ringing ears and reduced hearing capabilities. Then, within a matter of seconds, the shrill wail of sirens pierced through that partial deafness, and as we sat up or stood up, closed our gaping mouths, opened eyes whose size had doubled and removed hands from over shattered ears, we watched every emergency service and law enforcement vehicle in the mountain town of Boomville Colorado descend on Main Street from two different directions and barrel down West 3rd Street, from where billows of smoke were now traveling upwards and snuffing out the perfect blue of the sky.

The state of stunned silence gave way to verbalized shock.

"Oh my gosh!"

"Mooooooooommy!"

"What the *hell* was that?"

"Dude!"

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god!"

"Ooooh I sure hope nobody died!"

I returned the bewildered toddler to his parent, who shot me a look of gratitude as she ushered her cub into the safety of mama bear's arms. She was too stunned to speak and so was I. Now we were all standing and craning our necks towards West 3rd, staring at the darkening sky, each of us no doubt entertaining morose thoughts about what had happened and who had been hurt or killed. Those of us who were locals did a quick search through our mental filing cabinet for a folder labeled "People I Know Who Live on West 3rd."

A couple of police vehicles blasted back our way, and a man's voice came blaring out of the loudspeaker. "Everybody listen up: we are evacuating a five-block area west of Main, between West 3rd and West 8th. You must get off Main Street immediately. If you live in the cordoned off area, you must not go home. Repeat: you *cannot* go home. We are evacuating all residential homes and businesses. Proceed along Main Street past 3rd and 8th before you cross over. Repeat: clear Main Street. Do not cross Main Street. Walk slowly and in an orderly fashion."

And then it was chaos. Coffee-shop patrons went running down the sidewalk towards the exit areas, bar patrons stumbled out onto the street looking disappointed, people filed out of residen-

tial buildings and businesses along Main Street looking lost, and cars were encouraged to get the hell out of there or else. On the affected side streets, people could already be seen leaving their homes and heading towards authorized zones, pets and children in tow.

Winston. My thoughts turned to my companion, who was waiting for me at home, and I dashed across Main towards West 8th. The voice came over the loudspeaker again.

“Where do you think you’re going, Martini?”

I ignored the voice and picked up speed, and had just cleared the corner of Main and 7th when a Boomville PD vehicle zipped past me, spun around like a souped-up Ford Mustang in installment No. 23 of a Hollywood action franchise and stopped an inch from my nose. Down came the window and out leaned the face that sometimes stars in my dreams on nights when my loneliness clings to me like a sweat-soaked sheet in a Bruce Springsteen song. Other times, the face and the smirk it often bears are simply irksome. But today the face portrayed exasperation bordering on outright anger, an expression also frequently reserved for me.

“I can’t let you go home, Martini.”

“I have to get Winston. I promise I’ll only be a sec,” I said without looking at the law enforcement man, dodging the car and resuming my sprint, my thoughts fully focused on my mission.

“Brandy Martini! Stop right where you are! That’s an order!”

I kept running, knowing that I was attracting all sorts of ill will my way and not caring. I was almost at 8th now, about to turn the corner and head west towards the Saguache Range. In two short blocks I would literally be home free. But the tires screeched behind me again, and now there was a siren with my name on it, and the squad car did another spin-and-stop, and this time I stopped too.

“Martini!”

Lieutenant John Pritzky, aka the cowboy, as I liked to call him, exited his vehicle and was about to tear into me, when the look on my face stopped him.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant,” I stammered, hearing the anxiety in my voice, “I need to get Winston. He’s all alone and he... and I...” I stopped before my voice also started to tremble.

The expression that came over the cowboy’s face is one of the reasons he visits me in my dreams. Moments of emotional honesty are rare between us, and often too painful to dwell on for me, hence better left in the land of the non-real. Pritzky put his shades on, sparing me the need to look directly into his eyes. His voice was softer now, the exasperation gone.

“I know. But I can’t let you go home. We have a situation on our hands, and I need all my people manning their posts, not chasing after disobedient residents.”

“But I’ll just be—”

“Martini,” he said, coming closer and leaning in. “Winston is fine. This is just a precaution, okay? We’re dealing with what is most likely a gas leak. Colorado Gas crews are on the way, and they’ve already shut down the service line to prevent migration.”

I looked up at him, dubious. “Anything happens to Winston, cowboy, and I’ll—”

He interrupted what was going to be a graphic promise of physical injury. “Nothing’s going to happen to Winston, Blondie. I promise. Now please don’t make me arrest you again. Go find something to do for the next couple of hours and let me do my job, okay?”

I nodded reluctantly and walked away, feeling his Ray Ban Aviator eyes on me as I crossed Main again and headed for East 7th street. I figured I’d go chill for a while at the house of bong, where hopefully there was still a nice stash of coffee beans in the freezer.

I reached the big wooden house with the faded hippie paint, the crooked front porch, the dirt bikes and the skateboards, and I gazed up at the Rasta flag with the marijuana leaf hanging from

one of the upstairs windows as I knocked on the door. There was no answer, so I knocked harder, making the big bay window in the living room rattle and setting off the chimes inside that hung directly over it: a homemade arts and crafts project fashioned during a delirium of weed-induced creativity and consisting of a cluster of multicolored glass smoke pipes that started to gently knock against each other.

Finally, after a few more knocks, a trim blonde in her thirties, wearing tiny white shorts, a skimpy white T-shirt with a funky black Eiffel Tower and the logo *La Sorbonne* on it opened the door, a cable from her silver-colored headphones dangling down her right shoulder.

“Oh, ‘morning, sis! What are you doing here?”

“Are you guys okay?”

“What do you mean?”

I walked inside, expecting to step into a miniature version of the chaos on Main Street, but instead was greeted by nothing but peaceful quiet and no visible signs of household activity.

“Didn’t you hear the explosion?”

“What explosion? The boys are still asleep. They were up late last night playing poker and trying out a new kush, a purple kush from Bali, as I recall. I got up early to write, and I was listening to Beethoven with my headphones on, he’s so inspiring, sis, I was reading how lots of writers listen to music when they—”

“Annie,” I said, interrupting what was sure to be a fascinating paragraph about the writing process of famous scribes throughout history, “the reason I asked was because there was a big explosion, on West 3rd, and the whole town, except for this house, apparently, heard it, and I just wanted to make sure you weren’t freaking out or anything. It looks to be a gas leak, and a house went up in flames from what I could—”

The minute I said that, I cursed myself and wished I could take it back. My sister Annie has a well-documented fear of being burned alive, and the fact that this fear had almost materialized during the ordeal we had both been through just a few short weeks earlier had done little to alleviate it. Though we never discussed it much, I was betting she had woken up with nightmares more than once, as had her tougher, ex-cop sister. Two months had passed since my night in the Forest of Despair, and I still couldn’t mentally evacuate the horrors I had witnessed there, which returned to haunt me on a regular basis.

Sure enough, my sister’s blue eyes shot open at the mention of a fire.

“Oh my god, is—”

“Annie, it’s okay, it’s all good, I promise. Now listen, my real reason for being here is actually that I’m jonesing for some caffeine, so do you mind if I make myself an espresso?”

We were both briefly silent. That was another word that was dangerous to pronounce in this house. Fraught with sorrow and memories all too fresh. Come to think of it, a lot of vocabulary uttered inside 130 East 7th Street was a potential emotional minefield. The house of bong had lost one of its most beloved occupants, and the hurt was still there, raw and unhealed. Palpable at times, hovering in the room alongside the residual presence of incense, patchouli and reefer mist.

Annie closed her eyes and opened them again, mentally making herself snap out of it.

“Of course, sis. You know where everything is. Just help yourself.”

“Thanks. You want me to make you a cup?” I said, on my way to the kitchen.

“That would be divine.”

The last time I had opened that freezer, it had helped trigger the big Aha click in my mind as I suddenly connected all the dots on the kidnapping case I’d been working on. Twenty-four hours later, someone we all cared about was dead, the bad guy had vanished, and I had barely survived

one of the most horrific nights of my life. I closed the door on both the freezer and my own gloomy thoughts, grabbed the Italian stovetop espresso pot from the windowsill and got busy.

“How’s the book going, Annie?” I asked minutes later as I headed back into the dining room area, where my kid sis was filling pages of her notebook with blue ink. She put her French fountain pen down and looked up, her eyes alive with the glow of literary passion.

“I think I can say with some measure of confidence that it’s going great, sis! Right now I’m busy creating character notes and observations. This is what we in the industry call *characterization*. You want to have fully formed, fleshed-out characters if you expect your readers to connect with them, and so I’m creating a backstory for each person, which means—”

“But what about the story itself, how’s that going?”

The universe had recently revealed to Annie that her calling in life was to be an award-winning crime novelist. The series of heart-pounding, life-threatening events that had transpired recently had inspired her, but as far as I knew, she had only written one paragraph in her masterpiece thus far—which she refused to show me despite my repeated pleas.

“As I’ve said before, sis, I’m not quite there yet. What with the job hunt and the family—oh, but I do have a great idea for an income-generating activity that I haven’t told you about yet!”

I glanced at my watch. Now that I was properly caffeinated, the ex-cop in me was itching to head back to Main and check out the scene. I had an ongoing case that required my attention, but nothing too urgent it couldn’t wait a half-hour.

“I’d love to hear all about it, Annie, but right now I gotta bounce. Tell you what: why don’t you and the roomies swing by the Victorian later? I’ll defrost some ground beef and we can do burgers and beer around a campfire.”

“Sounds divine, sis! And I can’t wait to tell you about—”

My hand was on the door handle. “Save it for tonight, Annie. You can tell me all about it when you—”

And then there was another boom.

Chapter 2

This one was louder and sounded closer. This one had “not a coincidence” written all over it. The big bay window looking out on East 7th shook and rattled, and the chimes started swinging and banging against each other until one bright blue pipe exploded into small shards of glass that went flying across the room directly at Annie’s head.

My sister let out a piercing shriek and ducked under the table. Much in the manner of a trained ninja, I had instinctively thrown myself on the floor again, and now I quickly jumped to my feet and ran out the door. Outside, there was another brief ominous silence over the town of Boomville, Colorado, and then the sirens ripped through the air again.

“Annie,” I called out from the doorway, “I’m heading out! Stay home if you can today, okay? I’ll see you tonight!”

Just then, one of the bong bros made an appearance at the top of the stairs. “Can’t a brother get a little shut-eye around here?”

I looked up. “Hey, Jeremiah. Listen, man, make sure my sister’s okay, and all of you, get ready to evacuate if it comes to that, okay? I’m putting you in charge. Make sure your rig’s good to go. Two houses just blew up downtown, most likely gas leaks, and the cops might need to evacuate this area.”

Sleepy eyes opened wider, and a throaty cough cleared out morning weed congestion.

“Whoa, hold on. What did you just say?”

“I gotta roll, dude. I’ll call you guys if I hear anything! Later!”

I ran down E. 7th past neighbors standing in their doorways with anxious faces, then I flew up Main again past clusters of people seeking comfort in numbers as they gasped and whispered and stared up at the sky, and into a scene of pure chaos set against the backdrop of another house on fire, this one in plain view a half-block down West 4th, spewing its flames and smoke up into the air in curling wisps that seemed to have sprung directly from the book of Revelation. I scanned for law enforcement presence on Main, but Pritzky and his crowd-control vehicles were gone, likely relocated to the scene of the second explosion along with the second fire truck and ambulance. From what I could see, the house had been reduced to a fraction of its former self, its frame an ominous configuration of skeletal black beams, its façade and left wall blown clear off along with two thirds of the roof. Flaming or smoking debris was strewn about the tiny front lawn, the sidewalk and the street, with more debris blowing and glowing in the air, detaching from the house and landing all around it.

I sprinted towards the action, ready to offer my assistance as a former Chicago detective and current private investigator whose professional life had been a little on the quiet side lately. Not that I was anxious to go up against a vicious drug cartel again or spend another night tied to a tree in the forest fighting off predators with sharp teeth and questionable intentions, but my cases had been on the lower end of the excitement-o-meter lately.

No sign of the cowboy when I got to the house on fire, but I spotted Lopez and Andrews, whose names I called out as I walked over. “Officers, I’m here to help! Anything I can do?”

They both turned to me, briefly taking their eyes off the house from which two firefighters had emerged while others aimed their sprays at the tower of flames.

“Brandy!” Andrews yelled. “You need to get out of here! It’s not safe!”

“But—”

“He’s right,” Lopez said. “You need to go. Now. No civilians on the scene.” Just as I was about to protest, inwardly cursing my new status as a lowly civilian, he added, in a softer tone: “Please, Brandy. It’s too dangerous here. You have to stay outside the perimeter.”

I could tell from the look on his face that there was no point in arguing. I knew officer Luke Lopez had the tiniest bit of a crush on me, and that if even *he* was being this rigid, then it was hopeless. I shot one last look at the house and headed up Main again, scanning the area in the process, taking in details both visual and auditory as I did. While it looked like the side streets west of Main had been evacuated as ordered, clearing Boomville’s main artery had been a less successful enterprise. The crowd had grown denser and louder and more agitated, and bar patrons had boldly taken their booze out onto the street. As I neared the Miner’s Saloon, one of the oldest and most famous Wild West watering holes in Colorado, I spotted a few peeps I knew among a gathering of mostly foreign faces. It is not my general habit to partake in alcoholic beverages this early in the day, so I wasn’t as familiar with the morning shift at the Saloon.

“I had just gone to reapply when I felt the whole *bathroom* shake,” said one woman.

“I was just about to get another beer!” a man said.

“That put the boom back in Boomville!” bellowed an older gentleman by the name of Clint, aka the Marshal of Main Street and one of Boomville’s finest barflies.

Clint’s sophisticated pun was rewarded with a honking laugh from the man standing next to him, Ringo, who worked for my landlord Bob Underwood. “I was having myself a cocktail before heading out to the field,” he said to the crowd, “and I—oh, hey Brandy, what’s up girl?”

Ringo’s butt-length braids spun towards me, one of them nearly whipping Clint in the face. “D’you hear them big booms?”

“Kind of hard to miss. Any idea who those two houses belonged to?”

“Hey, Brandy. We were just discussing that, hon.”

In between two other morning drinkers, I now spotted Red, the bartender at the Saloon, known throughout the county for her deadpan wit, her Blood Mary’s, her generous shots, her even more generous bosom, her tattoos and her Harley.

“One of them houses belonged to Bob,” Ringo said, draining the last bit of his cocktail and then staring at his empty plastic cup with the pain of separation anxiety already clouding his baby blues.

“*What?*” I said. I knew my landlord owned a lot of properties around town, but this came as news.

“Yip, yip. Mattera fact, when I said I was heading to the *field*, what I meant by that is, that’s precisely where I was heading, 101 West 4th. It’s one of Bob’s vacation rentals, and I was gonna git it all nice and ready for the next batcha tourists.”

“Vacation rentals and tourists can kiss my crusty ass and rot in hell with their balls on fire!” Clint bleated.

“Settle down, Clint,” Red warned, even though technically, the sidewalk wasn’t her jurisdiction.

“Why, Clint, personally, I thought that was very colorful!” exclaimed the re-applier, a woman in a white cowboy hat.

I had never once observed any degree of female attention being directed at Clint, save for a sharply voiced reprimand or a cuss word, and the rarity of the moment was clearly not lost on the Marshal.

“Balls on fire and dipped in lava!” he added flirtatiously as the brunette giggled and the grey skin on his face briefly took on a semblance of color while a vein above his glassy left eye throbbed with pleasure.

I turned back to my man Ringo. “So the place was empty at the time?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“That’s a relief, at least.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Though I ain’t so sure them tourists who rented it are gonna think so.”

“Peel ’em, shred ’em, fry ’em up in a pan!”

Clint’s well-known, bourbon-flavored anti-tourist stance was too much to take this early in the day and I had things to do, so I hasta-la-vista’d myself from that scene and headed back up Main and then down West 8th, to my home and my Winston.