

Chapter 1

Maggie always woke up at five, which annoyed her. When she was a teenager she could sleep in, but those days were gone. Actually they were gone once her first son was born. Every cough, every sigh, from then on she heard everything. Now she automatically woke up, and once awake she was doomed to stay awake. It also didn't help that her cat, Bailey, nibbled on her hair and kissed her face to be fed every morning.

But this morning had been special. Her sister from Michigan was coming to visit her in Virginia, then they would go on their week long dream trip to a wooded island resort about an hour away. She wanted to make sure she had all her favorite foods in the house for her visit. She had jumped out of bed, fed Bailey, and showered quickly. She still liked to have candy by her sister's bedside and clean sheets on the bed, but she would do that when she got back from the store.

Maggie thought back to that morning and how it started out not much different than her other mornings...yet there was that feeling that she could not put her finger on, the feeling of a cloud over her that she dismissed as just not enough sleep, the cat meowing for food, or her dreams that came and went since her husband's death. If Maggie had not been so impatient to go to the store so early in the morning, the nightmare she was in might never have happened.

The grocery store was only about ten minutes away, so she threw on her usual jeans and sweater and headed out the door. There were lots of cars out for a Saturday morning, so Maggie decided to avoid the busy roads and take the shortcut she had found.

When she made that turn onto Eclipse Lane, she felt a random feeling of unease. There were no houses in this section, but mostly flat-roofed wooden businesses that sat side by side. The businesses looked dark and the parking lots empty this early in the morning. As she drove by the last business she noticed the front of a white car by the back of it, and saw a dim light on in the store's front window. *Odd*, Maggie thought, because she saw the car had no plates. Maggie had a habit of checking out everyone's plates quickly to see if they were from a different state. She had done this since she was a little kid, and her parents used to make time go faster on long car trips by having Maggie and her two sisters look at license plates.

Maggie had just passed the white car when a loud popping sound came from her car, and she lost control of it as pieces of her right tire flew into the air. She knew not to slam on the brakes, but her heart was racing as she let the car glide into one of the parking lots.

Oh no, feeling shaky, not today, not here. She sat still, her hands holding the steering wheel in a death grip, trying to think what to do next. Her first thought was that she would not get everything done for her sister's arrival in the afternoon. But then she wondered how she was going to change the tire.

"I know, I know," Maggie said to herself. "I'm an independent woman, I should be able to change a tire." But she had always counted on Henry to do those things. She thought of calling her automobile company, but in her rush to get out of the house she

had left her cell phone in her other sweater pocket. Now she was beginning to get nervous...flat tire, no cell phone, back road.

Not a very smart girl, Maggie, she scolded herself. Suddenly it dawned on her that the business was open a short walk back, by the white car, and they could help her. A sense of relief washed over her and she grabbed her purse and started walking. No cars were coming down the street, but she picked up her pace, thankful that it was not nighttime.

She did not know what made her suddenly step off the road and stop walking, as if someone had whispered in her ear, "Don't go any further."

Just then the door of the business opened and a man came out and jumped into the white car. He did not see her, but screeched the car out of the lot. *Oh no*, Maggie groaned, *now where am I going to make a call from?* She felt her heart start to speed up again, and the next second there was a loud explosion, and an enormous wave of hot air hit Maggie's face. The sound, heat, and flames were the last thing Maggie remembered before her body fell backwards like a rag doll and hit the ground hard, falling into darkness.

Maggie heard a faint voice calling her name. "Mrs. Andrews, Mrs. Andrews." Maggie could feel the pain in her head that screamed at her, blocking out the sound of the person's voice telling her, "You're okay, Mrs. Andrews, open your eyes slowly. I'm checking your vision, so you will see a bright light."

She felt the softness under her as if she was still lying in bed. She slowly opened her eyes and saw the glare of a flashlight in her eyes, and smelled the pungent smell of burning wood in her nostrils.

"My name is Sandy. I'm a volunteer paramedic with the city of Moline. You have been hurt. We are going to get you to the hospital." After seeing Maggie's hand fly up to the hard collar around her neck, the paramedic reassured her. "You have a brace around your neck. It's routine procedure. Do you know where you are? Do you know what day this is?" Sandy asked gently. "Are you in any pain?"

Maggie said groggily, "This is Saturday, I was walking, and my head is killing me."

Maggie knew what day it was. She remembered her sister was coming, and she remembered the explosion...she could not remember much else. Suddenly her sister's face came to mind, and she thought, *Oh, no*. She mumbled something about her wallet and her sister's number in it.

Sandy said they were taking her to Vine Hospital, which was about five minutes from Maggie's house.

"Please lie back and we will get you fixed up in no time. Don't worry about your sister and family. Your information was in your purse we found by you. They will be called, I promise."

It suddenly sank in...an explosion. *What on earth happened?* She began to shake uncontrollably. *Oh, my God, am I going to be paralyzed? How bad am I hurt?* she screamed to herself as she sank more and more into panic. She had always been calm to the world, but her real self, who could get anxious in a second flat, was here in full force. Seeing the blood and cuts on her hand did not help her feelings of helplessness.

As they secured her with safety belts and lifted her into the truck, she could not see down the road due to the neck brace, she could only look up. She heard someone say, "Oh, no. Here come the media. Let's get her out of here quickly. She is not up to answering any questions."

Now as she looked at the building from the safety of the ambulance, she felt her stomach turn as she saw the shell of what used to be the business, burned to a crisp.

Chapter 2

That was the last voice she heard before her eyes started to close. As she started to fade out, exhausted, she heard them say, "No more offices, just firefighters and flames. Boy, is she lucky that she was down the road, or it would have been a whole other story."

Maggie was wheeled into the hospital emergency room swaddled like a baby to keep her from moving, and quickly put into one of the back exam rooms. A young woman with a stethoscope around her neck and a white coat stood looking at a laptop computer on a cart. Maggie had been a social worker in a hospital as one of her jobs in life, so it did not surprise her to see someone trying to see what was going on.

"Hi," Maggie said wearily.

The doctor looked up from the screen and smiled at Maggie broadly. "Hello, I'm Doctor Mills, a neurosurgeon, and we will be running a number of tests today to make sure you're okay. I'm going to start with a neurological exam, and then we will do a CT scan. I promise I will keep you posted along the way. I will have the nurse come in to clean up those cuts and scrapes for you. We will try to get you up to a room as soon as possible. I can say, after what just happened, you're one lucky lady."

Dr. Mills was very kind and considerate to Maggie as she gave her a very thorough exam. Social worker or not, she was scared out of her wits about this, and Dr. Mills's kind manner helped to calm her down. She was worried she would have severe damage to her neck or spine. Dr. Mills assured her that the neurological exam proved negative, but Maggie wanted to see the CT scan results as well. After the CT scan was completed they took Maggie to her room and started an IV of fluids to hydrate and relax her, and she slipped off into the deepest sleep she had had in a long time.

"This is Reggie Page from Channel 21 News reporting from Moline. Our top story today is the explosion on Eclipse Street early this morning. Firefighters were able to put out the blaze after a few hours, but the explosion is under investigation. There was no one inside the business at the time, but a woman standing nearby was injured. We do not have any details at this time regarding why she was there or if she had a connection to the blaze. Watch our Five O'clock News for the latest update. This is Reggie Page, reporting from Channel 21 News."

Reggie thought, *Thank goodness I'm done for the day. I love this job, but this summer heat at times is just unbearable.* Of course, covering an explosion and fire did not help. Reggie was ready to go home and take a shower, then meet friends later at their favorite Thai restaurant. Tomorrow her employer would have her camping out in front of the hospital trying to get a scoop on Mrs. Andrews from her relatives or doctors regarding her condition. Reggie knew she should probably head over to the hospital now, having missed the woman before she was taken away. She also expected a call from her station manager, but since she had been on a five day work schedule with little sleep, her usual eagerness to cover a story was gone.

Reggie was twenty-eight and lived alone. She was from Boston, and had held her position at the station for one year. She was the rookie who, rain or shine, would be out getting a story. Her parents kept suggesting she get a roommate or live in a safer area, but Reggie would just look at them and say, "Do you know how many murders and robberies I cover? I'm very careful, so you don't have to worry about me. Maybe I'll get a guard dog," she'd joked. Her parents were not amused. They only wanted to make sure she was safe and secure in her apartment. Reggie always said, "Don't worry, Mom." and her mom would hug her and say, "I will stop worrying about you when I die, and until then, no matter how old you are, I will worry." After every visit, her parents would say, "We love you, be careful."

"Hey, Reggie," Joe, her cameraman, called to her. "Want to head over to the hospital?"

"Not today, Joe," she said. "How about if you pick me up early tomorrow and we will try for the story then, if that's okay with Bill?"

Joe said, "I'll text him now and see what he says. No sense in heading out if he wants us there now."

Reggie watched Joe send the text and then listened as Joe read Bill's return text, and frowned. "Guess your idea won't cut it with Bill. He wants us over there now to make sure this gets on the Five O'clock News *today*."

"Damn it," Reggie muttered to Joe. "Okay, okay, whatever Bill wants, but at least let me stop and grab a sandwich and soda to go. I'm starved."

Reggie jumped back into the station van and checked her not so perfect dark brown hair and her starting-to-melt-from-the-heat makeup on her light Mediterranean skin. She would have to do a quick fix up before being on air again.

Little did she know that someone in her very own city had been watching her coverage of the story, and was eager to learn just as much as Reggie did about this woman who they said may have been a witness...yes, very eager, and very furious.

Chapter 3

Maggie woke up with a hand holding hers. She looked up to see her sister, Alice, smiling at her softly.

"Well, Maggie, I see that my little sister has been up to more shenanigans again," she laughed. Maggie could tell she was trying to lighten the mood with her humor. "I spoke with your neurosurgeon and I was told you are going to be fine. You have a concussion from your fall, and they need to watch you for a while and wake you every hour for twenty-four hours. You are going to hurt like hell for a while, but you are lucky you weren't hurt worse than you were. Maggie, I'm worried about how frightening this has been for you. I'm so glad I'm here visiting with you. The police came in to talk to you, but you were out of it, so they will come back. For now, I won't ask you what happened."

"No, Alice," Maggie looked at her eyes. "I want to tell you about it. Some of it I can't remember, and I'm tired, but please just sit and listen."

"For a few minutes, but if I see you becoming worn out or upset, I want you to stop. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal. Well, you know how I like to go to the store early. Today, since you were coming for a visit, I started out much earlier, and decided to take a shortcut to get to the store. On the way I had a blowout. I forgot my cell phone at home so I started walking toward a business I saw that I thought may have a telephone I could use. As I was walking towards it, the building blew up, and I flew backwards." Maggie knew by the look on her sister's face what she was thinking. "Alice, this is not because I went to the store for you. There must have been a gas explosion. Thank goodness the person in the white car got out."

"What white car, Maggie?"

Just as Maggie was about to answer, two policemen walked into her room.

"Mrs. Andrews, do you mind if we speak with you?" the older policeman with grey hair and a beard said to her. "We won't take up much of your time. I'm Detective Adams, and this is Detective Mike Pierce."

"Yes, as long as my sister can stay in the room with me, that would be fine." Maggie did not trust herself to speak clearly or remember much after the fire.

"Absolutely," Detective Pierce said.

"I was just telling Alice that I went to the store early, took a shortcut, and had a blowout. I then walked towards a business I saw to use their phone since I forgot my cell phone at home. Just as I got close to the business, I heard this loud explosion and saw flames coming from the building. The next thing I remember I woke up and the paramedics were there." Maggie was surprised how many of the details she remembered, since she was suffering from a concussion.

"Did you know anyone at this business?"

"No, I was just on my way to the store," Maggie said, a little confused as to why they might think she knew anyone at that business.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure; I was headed to the store, and thought I could use their phone. I don't even remember the names of any businesses there."

"Why would you think you could use the phone there at that time of the morning, since those businesses are closed?"

"I saw a light on inside one of the offices, and the front end of a white car when I first drove by, and then I saw it leave just as I was coming back and getting close to the building. As the building exploded, I remember thinking, 'Oh, no, there goes my phone call.'"

"Could you tell who was driving the white car that you saw?"

"No," Maggie said, now feeling a little light headed. "I saw a man come out, but I was not that close that I could see his face."

"Can you give us any type of description of this man?"

"I can't. I do know he was white, not tall or short...dark wavy hair."

"Was there anyone else in the car?"

"I don't know. I was only looking at the front of the car," Maggie said wrinkling her brow trying to remember, and feeling pain from doing that.

"Did you see the license plate number?"

Now Maggie was starting to get annoyed. She wanted to say, "What the hell, I'm in the hospital with a concussion, I almost died, and you want to know if I saw the license plate number?"

"No, I don't remember even seeing the license plate."

"But you did see the driver."

Alice interrupted. "I think she has answered all the questions she can for now. She has a concussion, and you gentlemen know you can't remember much with a concussion. It's a serious brain injury. Could you please come back later?"

Detective Pierce looked a little annoyed, and looked like he was about to say something else when he changed his mind and said, "Sorry, you've been through a lot. We have additional questions for you, but we will come back. If you remember anything, you call me. If not, we'll be back tomorrow." He laid his card on the tray table by the side of her bed. "Nice meeting you both."

Detective Pierce was at the end of the hall before he turned to Detective Adams and looked back towards Maggie's room. "I know, I know, you're going to ask me if I think something is funny about her story. She seems like a nice lady. Hard to imagine that she could be involved in a bombing, if it was a bomb, but we've seen stranger cases than this before. I want to talk to her tomorrow, here or at her home, depending on when they discharge her. Let's head back to the precinct and see if any more information has been gathered."

Usually Detective Pierce and his partner would handle most of the initial investigation, but with a bombing there were a lot of other departments involved. Depending on the circumstances of the situation, whether hurting one person or taking out a business, Homeland Security or the FBI may also be involved. It was too early to tell the scope of it all. The bomb squad was at the scene along with the firefighters.

Moline's sheriff had already called in the Evidence Recovery Team, and Pierce would make the call to the FBI also. It was being investigated to see what types of businesses were located in the strip of buildings that were affected. Could be as simple as someone who owned the business, and after leaving, a gas leak was the cause, whether by accident or for insurance fraud. It was believed that five businesses in a row were blown up, so all owners needed to be contacted. At the moment it was not known if all had alarm systems or surveillance cameras.

Mike Pierce liked this part of his job. He had become a detective to follow in his uncle's footsteps, but he liked the mysteries that he had to solve. He did not like to have people die or be seriously hurt, and was glad this fire had killed no one. Mike's wife, Annie, used to say he loved his job more than her, and he would grab her, wrap her in his arms, and say, "You're right, Annie Monroe." He would then give her a long passionate kiss, smelling her Shalimar perfume on her neck, looking into her crystal blue eyes, and telling her that he loved her a lot. Annie would laugh and snuggle in close. He knew that she hid, as best as she could, her fear that she would get a call that he was dead. Little did either of them know that it would be Annie who would pass away first from an aneurysm, and Mike the one who would get the call that she had died suddenly. All he remembered was crying like a wounded animal and yelling into the phone, "Is this some kind of joke?" His heart had never been the same, and the feeling that he should have known something was wrong haunted him still.

Mike's partner asked him a question, and he snapped back from that horrible memory of five years ago to the present. "What was your question? Sorry, I spaced out for a moment. Must be a senior moment," he laughed, glad for the interruption of his thoughts of Annie.

"How about we take another run over to the fire before we head back? The station can send us any information via our phones if we need it right away."

"That sounds good to me. You and I could maybe use our sixth senses and vision to find out anything new."

Mike headed towards the coffee cart as he said to Detective Stephens, "I think Mrs. Andrews knows more than she is telling us. Maybe tomorrow she will remember more.

"It would be horrible if we find out she set the bomb."

As they came out of the front of the hospital they did not notice the person standing over to the side of the bench looking at a map, yet glancing up to look at them.

A little way from Mike and his partner, the man with the map heard what they said and smiled. "Yes, wouldn't it be horrible if we find out she set the bomb...so very horrible."