

Chapter One

A whiff of weed floated through the open windows of the karate studio.

I'd cranked the windows open and propped open both front and back doors to let the cooling air of twilight circulate through our stifling workout space. It was a hollowed-out hundred-year-old converted bungalow, which of course didn't have air conditioning. I didn't want my students to pass out from the buildup of searing heat of late summer, a heat so intense that it could bake the air and poof it into dust. Now the breeze swirled its powdery grit, along with that distinctively indefinable, yet unmistakably tangy smell.

Pot.

Sort of like a combination of used shoes and burning incense.

Pot was legal in Boulder and all of Colorado. Some thought it was nirvana, others thought it was evil incarnate. I just thought it was a poor substitute for meditation.

Of course, I didn't have experience with any stimulants other than meditation and heavy martial arts.

I tried to ignore the reminder of someone's party nearby. Bone-tired and past my bedtime, I was already having enough trouble focusing on my students. Seven hotshot tweens and teens, all belt levels, were jumping and whirling and kicking and punching before me in their sweat-soaked T-shirts. It was after the last class of the day, and they were using this time to choreograph an upcoming performance for an end-of-summer festival. The casualness of the night combined with the heat of summer gave all of us privileges to wear only our loose, cotton karate trousers and T-shirts rather than full *gi*.

With the drifting smell, my students couldn't focus any better than I could. Punching arms dropped. Bare feet landed in sloppy stances. Their faces contorted into dramatic sniffing spasms, as if they were imitating hound dogs. One of the girls covered her mouth and giggled. They twisted this way and that, searching for the pot smoker.

Then one of them, squeaky-wheel Elliott, pointed at the window behind me and yelped.

We all turned to gape at the mullioned panes that overlooked the side yard jungle, shadowed with thickening nightfall and overgrown junipers. Through the blistering glass, I saw a spot of red-orange flicker against the dark. From its angle through the trees, I could tell it was coming from an upper window of Alice's Victorian house next door.

"Fire!" Several voices shouted at the same time.

"Oh no no no!" Mumbling sounds slipped out of me as I froze in place. Or maybe it was my heart clenching in my chest. I glanced over to the folding chairs near the front door where parents often sat to observe classes, but tonight none had come. I was the only adult in the room.

"My sister's over there!" Elliott choked on his words, and the despair in his voice snapped me out of my momentary freeze.

I whirled around and ninja-dashed across the workout floor, heading toward the office phone at the back of the studio. It was closer than my cell phone, which was upstairs in my apartment. I hadn't made it very far before footsteps thudded up the porch steps out front and clattered across the wooden floor of the entry hall. I spun around, in sort of a sloppy tornado kick without the kick, and recognized the young woman as Elliott's sister, Robinette. She often picked up Elliott after class. Now a feral look glazed her flushed face as she ran onto the workout floor, gasping.

"Help! Call for help!"

"Robi!" Elliott cried. "What's wrong?"

"There's a fire," she said, pausing to suck air. "I think someone's trapped inside. You've got to help." Wisps of white-blonde hair fringed the kohl rings around her eyes, adding to her wild and frenzied look.

"On my way," I said, leaping down the twisting hall toward my office. I could move pretty fast for a middle-aged mom.

What we used for an office had been the kitchen when this bungalow was someone's home back in the day. The only phone in this place was located back there. I'd tried to persuade my boss, Arlo Callahan, to install an extension on the workout floor — the former living and dining rooms — but no dice. He was an even bigger Luddite than me.

I reached for the clunky yellow phone, inherited along with autumn gold kitchen appliances, and dialed 9-1-1 to the ripping sounds of zippers and Velcro. The first of my

students had untwisted themselves from their gawking positions at the window and managed to scramble toward the racks where they stowed their bags and their cell phones. For any workout on the floor, I made my students shed their phones, silence them, or better yet, turn them off. They complied because they all knew that at the first peep of a phone, I would confiscate it.

With all the calls I've made these last few months, I should set up an account with 9-1-1, I thought lamely as the dispatcher ran me through the usual procedure. My name was Nell Letterly, I told her. I knew the operator was only doing her job, but really. Could we get on with the emergency?

Finally, after I told her the nature of my emergency, she assured me that the fire had already been reported. She could've said that at the outset and saved me a few more gray hairs. I glanced around the curve of the hall, but from my position, anchored by the cord—yes, an actual phone cord—chaining me to my desk, I couldn't see my students. I heard the buzz of their chatter, instead. Surely, none of them had managed to get through to dispatch before me.

I did not know the extent of the fire next door at Alice's Arts and Crafts Shoppe. Alice, my new best friend, liked to spell it "shoppe," not shop, because it was a special, magical place. Her words, not mine.

Oh dear, I hoped Alice wasn't the person trapped inside.

Actually, I hoped *no* one was trapped inside. How bad was the fire if it had trapped someone? All I had seen was one flame, shooting out of an upper-floor window. Although, that was probably not a good sign. If the fire had reached the upper floors, then didn't that mean the fire was pretty much consuming the entire house? It must be spreading like wildfire. No wonder that cliché meant speed.

And all that separated my studio from Alice's *shoppe* was a side yard filled with kindling.

It wouldn't take much in this dry climate, at this driest time of year—wildfire season—for a fire to spread. One gust of wind—and we had lots of wind hurling down the side of the mountains here along the front range—could carry a burning cinder across the twenty-yard distance to my roof. Before anyone knew it, this building would be engulfed, too.

Time to corral my students. I was responsible for them as well as the martial arts studio.

I dropped the phone and ran back down the hall to the workout floor, where my seven students huddled around the bag rack with cell phones pressed to their ears.

“The fire department is on the way,” I told them, trying to inject calm authority into my voice in spite of my hammering pulse rate. “We’ll stay together until your parents arrive.”

In case we need to evacuate.

I hadn’t said it, but they must’ve read my mind. They charged, squealing, toward the foyer and squeezed through the bottleneck of the front door.

“Hold on!” I yelled, sprinting after them.

Outside, the smoke singed my lungs, and I felt as if I couldn’t breathe. My students stood rooted in place along the tilting cracks of the sidewalk. Overhead, cottonwoods—the hanging trees from the old west—rattled their leaves in the breeze that tossed Alice’s flames about, licking for purchase to spread.

There were only six students.

One of them, an orange belt named Chanel, who was the most dedicated and diligent of this bunch, making up for her deficiency in athletic talent, broke away from the group and scurried over to me. “I couldn’t stop him!” she said amidst choking sobs.

“Who?” I scanned the huddle. Elliott was missing. So was his sister.

“He said...” Chanel gasped. “He had to... had to... stop Robinette. She went back inside, looking for that person she said is trapped over there, and Elliott followed her!”

My heart froze, in spite of the outdoor furnace blasting my face. I scanned the thickening crowd of curious rubber neckers. Light leaked out from the neighbors’ open doorways and the flames from Alice’s house, illuminating this sloping block of off-campus university terrain known as the Hill. Hundred-year-old bungalows had been converted into student rentals with a mix of commercial that catered to the pleasures and needs of twenty-somethings.

I didn’t see either Elliott or his older sister.

Chanel stared at the burning building. Her freckled face had gone pasty pale, and her freckles stood out. “I couldn’t stop him. I tried, but I couldn’t!” Her lower lip quivered, and she covered her face with her hands.

I hugged her close. “Try not to worry, honey. We’ll get them out of there safe. It’s not your fault.”

I shouldn’t call my students by such endearing terms, but I couldn’t help being a mom. That’s what I was. My fifteen-year-old daughter should be home any minute from her band practice. Where was Terra? It looked as if the rest of tonight’s demo prep was canceled. We didn’t even have a chance to bow out properly.

Maybe we were canceled forever, if that fire spread.

Nell, Nell, Master Hwang’s chiding voice rang in my head. *Clear your mind of negative thinking.*

I know, I know, but it was true. If we burned down... Then what? Not even my master sensei could find the hidden strength to overcome such a fate.

“Stay here,” I told my students. I gave Chanel an encouraging squeeze and rushed up the incline of the hill toward the burning house. The sound of a siren’s wail drifted like sweet music to my ears.

Good grief. Elliott’s sister was an adult. Why on earth would she have led her little brother inside a burning building?

I reached the porch steps of Alice’s house as the fire truck turned a corner and wailed closer. The front door stood open, revealing an eerie, orangish, backlit interior. “Elliott!” I called into the roiling smoke, hot as a furnace. Crackling and snapping sounds made my stomach feel sick. “Alice!”

As I debated the wisdom of plunging inside, two figures burst out from the inferno, out onto the porch. Thank goodness! Elliott and Robinette stumbled across the porch, and I raced up there to help drag them down the steps and onto the grass.

But where was Alice?

My squeaky-wheel student, Elliott, a brave runt of a kid, wiped away the kohl smudges streaking down his sister’s cheeks. They coughed, and the young woman cried as I bent over them, making soothing sounds. Coughing was a good thing, right? It meant they were breathing.

“Do you realize what you did, you twerp?” Robinette shoved Elliott’s hands away from her face. She gulped back tears and choked, struggling to stand. “I would’ve gotten to him if you hadn’t dragged me out first.” She made a move back towards the house.

“You’re not going back in there.” I clamped my fingers tight around her skinny wrist, scarcely bigger than the rubber flail of my practice chuks—nunchaku. If she thought she was heading into a burning building, she would have to get past me first. And past Elliott, who leapt to his sister’s other side and blocked her from running back into the burning house.

The fire truck screeched into position, and suited-up firefighters jumped down from the truck. One of them swished and jingled in our direction, as much as his suit would allow him to move. “Is everyone okay here?” he yelled at me as his colleagues hooked up their hoses.

“I think so,” I called, waving him back to his duties, “but I don’t know where Alice is.” My voice quivered.

“*She’s* not the problem,” Robinette wailed. “She went to the movies tonight. It’s that other guy. The artist.”

I felt the blood drain from my face as I suddenly remembered Alice’s renter. “He rents studio space from Alice! Where is *he*?” I had never met him, but occasionally I had seen the artist—Felix Something—come and go. Alice had told me he rented studio space from her because her Victorian house had an honest-to-gosh garret. I had even seen him outside a couple times, painting weird alley stuff that his artist’s eye claimed were *objets d’art* in the trash-can lined alley that ran behind our buildings.

“Maybe he’s not in there after all,” Robinette said. “I thought he was, and I called out, but no one answered. I heard a noise, and I thought it was him, but maybe I was wrong.”

“There’s a cat.” Elliott’s voice rose to a whine. “Remember, Robi? You told me how the cat is always getting into paint, ’cause it’s a Siamese, and it’s—”

“Gotcha.” The firefighter lurched over to one of his partners, consulted briefly with him, although you couldn’t tell if any of them was a him or a her on account of their bulky suits, and then two of them charged past us, up the walk, clanking toward the front door.

Another of the firefighters helping hook up the hoses shouted at us. “Ambulance on the way.”

“Ambulance?” Robinette said with a cough. She looked dazed, as if she’d just woken up from a bad dream. “No! Not for me! I don’t need an ambulance.”

“We just need the paramedics to check you out, ma’am.”

Robinette sobbed and twisted around in her brother’s and my restraints to stare at the craft shoppe. Flames crackled out of an upper window. The attic garret. An arching spray of water hissed, swiping across the brick front of the house.

Just then, a woman’s scream ripped through the gathering crowd on the sidewalk. Curious onlookers jumped to either side as a tall, thin woman torpedoed her way through them and shouted, “My house! That’s my house!”

Alice.

I released Robinette to Elliott’s care and ran to Alice’s side, encircling her in my arms. I whispered soothing sounds and stroked her trembling arms. Her soft weight collapsed against me, infusing me with the heat of her flushed body. Holding her up, I steered her to a patch of straw-dried grass just beyond the range of the crowd.

“Everyone get back!” one of the firefighters yelled. The hoses bucked in their arms as water hissed, smacking against bricks and dousing the flames.

A dark, stout man in the crowd appointed himself policeman and herded most of the gawkers across the street, giving the firefighters space to do their job. I tugged at Alice to come with me to the karate studio next door, but she wouldn’t budge.

“My house!” Alice twisted out of my grip and wailed. Her fingers spasmed in and out of fists and clawed at loose strands of her reddish golden hair, sparkling in the fire’s glow. One lopsided tail fell free of its pins. “What have you done to my house?”

“Can you get them out of the way?” one of the firefighters asked, dipping his helmeted head at me.

“Felix! Did he do this?” Alice thrashed, pushing one way and then the other, scanning the crowd for Felix.

“Ma’am, help us out here?” the firefighter said to me again, brusquely this time.

I obliged. “Come on.” I tightened my fingers on Alice’s arms and guided her forcefully down the hill in the direction of the karate studio. I nodded at Elliott to do the

same for Robinette. “We’re all going to wait next door, while the professionals do their job.”

Not that I was sure the karate studio would be any safer, not if that fire spread. We staggered next door as Alice continued to gasp and Robinette sobbed. Elliott and I gently pushed the two women down onto the steps leading up to my front porch. Chanel and the rest of the students clustered around us, edging closer.

“What happened?” several of them said in unison.

Alice mumbled, as if in a trance. “No... It can’t be happening... Not again...”

I nodded at the nearest student. “Go get them some water.” The student ran inside.

Neighbors—university students mostly, since this older residential section of the town bordered the university’s gown—trickled across the street, gathering in clumps. Some of them strolled along the sidewalk and joined my students’ huddle.

“You know when that started?”

“No, I just got here...”

“Is everyone okay?”

“No, they think there might be someone inside...”

“Oh, man... Anything we can do to help?”

Parents came and went, collecting their children and shuffling them away. But not Elliott’s. He explained, because Robinette couldn’t, that his sister worked part-time for Alice. Long story short, she had brought him to karate because she wanted to clock some work time next door while he was at practice. His parents never intended to pick him up. Robinette was responsible for taking her brother home. She was the adult. But the way she broke down and sobbed, and the way he took care of her, their roles seemed to have reversed.

Above the din of curiosity seekers rose one voice, growing more and more querulous. “I bet I can guess what started all this.” It was a woman. Sarcasm oozed from her tone of voice.

Her animosity made me rise to all five feet of my height and turn to face her. I recognized her as one of the permanent neighbors, not a student renter. In her late thirties, I thought, she must come from a block or two away, somewhere farther up the hill. I’d seen her pushing a baby stroller past the studio, presumably on her way to the bus stop.

She was a stay-at-home mom with young children and a husband who supported them. The kids weren't with her now. Hopefully, they were home with their dad. This woman was as out-of-place in this neighborhood as I was. I'd never talked to her though, so I never realized before just how full of anger she was.

"I know what goes on in there," the angry mom said, screeching at the world and steaming with garlicky breath in my face.

Alice sprang up from the porch steps. Robinette looked up from her tear and kohl sodden hands that had been covering her face. Alice edged close to my side, practically attaching to my hip. The angle of her chin jutted out. I'd seen that same defiant look on my teenager.

The neighbor mom stuck her finger in Alice's face. "You people have been making hash oil in there all along, that's what. And now your lab exploded."

Gasps swept through the air, or maybe it was the roar of the fire.

"Shut up!" Alice screamed back. She grabbed the mom's finger and shook it. They looked like they were arm wrestling, only with fingers. "Just shut your friggin' mouth!"

Nearby onlookers buzzed among themselves.

"Alice!" I stepped between the two women and grabbed their locked fingers, prying them apart. The neighborhood mom yanked free of me. Her arm snapped away from me like a slingshot.

I put my arm around Alice and rubbed her back. Spine knobs bristled like armor. My soothing efforts didn't calm her down. It was as if the fire had heated her up to this new level of agitation. I'd never heard her swear before. I'd never even heard her raise her voice before.

Alice shook me off and charged after the neighborhood mom, matching her anger with a fury of her own. "Who do you think you are, talking to me that way? You don't know squat! How dare you accuse me of something like that? Hash oil? Are you serious?"

The mom took a step backwards, as if retreating from the range of Alice's lashing. "Why not? You use your store as a front for marijuana sales. You don't even have a license. I'm here to tell you, it's ruining the neighborhood. See what happened?"

“Maybe we can sit down and talk and sort this all out,” I said in my unruffled voice, trying to emulate my sensei’s calm.

“No, Nell,” Alice said. “She’s way past talking.”

“Let’s be sensible —”

The neighbor mom turned to me with her pointing finger. “And as for *you*.” Pure loathing coated her words. “It’s always something, isn’t it? All spring and summer it’s been the police, and now it’s the fire department. Are you like a magnet for trouble or what?”

Whoa. I cringed from the reek of her negativity. As if it was my fault the house next door was burning.

“You can’t talk to my friend like that, either,” Alice said. “Your complaint is with me, not her, so let’s have it.”

The mom reached past me and grabbed a fistful of Alice’s loose hair tail. She tugged, bringing down the rest of Alice’s do, and Alice swore again, swatting at the mom’s arm. They were fighting all wrong. Arms flailed wildly, leaving their midsections temptingly unprotected. I thought about inserting a couple of well-placed kicks there, just enough to take their breaths away, but I didn’t want to accidentally hurt them.

“Stop it,” I said, timing my moves like a kid entering a twirling jumprope. I stepped closer, reaching for their swinging arms. A bad move.

And I was too slow. A fist popped me in the nose.

“Oh!” I touched the stinging spot. The nose was still there.

Elliott yelped. “Ms. Letterly! Are you okay?”

“Omigod! You’re hurt!” Alice gasped and turned her attention away from the mom.

Flailing, swinging arms dropped. The neighborhood mom shrank away from us, fading into the crowd. Someone’s camera flash went off in my face, blinding me.

“Nell!” Alice shouted again, but I wasn’t deaf. “Say something!”

“We should enroll you in lessons,” I said, gingerly poking at my face. A warm wetness tickled inside my nose, as if it was trying to make up its mind to bleed or not.

Alice sobbed and moaned. “I’m so, so sorry.” I’d meant for her to laugh, to release some tension, not to cry harder.

“No worries,” I said. “It’s not even bleeding. But I should be prepared, just in case. Elliott, can you run inside and get me a towel?”

He scampered away, up the porch steps, and Alice snatched her purse from where she’d dropped it beside Robinette. “Wait, I have a tissue in my purse.” She dug around inside and produced a wad of tissues, which I pressed against my nose.

Murmurs arose from the crowd of onlookers, and more camera flashes sparked the night. There was movement at the front door of Alice’s burning house. The two firefighters who’d gone inside looking for Felix burst outside. Between them, they carried someone’s inert body and laid it down gently on the grass.

“Felix!” Alice shouted, lurching away from me. I sprang after her and grabbed her arm, keeping her from bolting up the hill.

Robinette’s small voice squeaked. “Is he...is he dead?”

