

**The Hamlin Park Irregulars:**

***boom-BOOM!***

By

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[www.HamlinParkIrregulars.com](http://www.HamlinParkIrregulars.com)

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**1**

My heart pounded so fast I found it hard to breathe. I called FBI Special Agent Scott J. Wiles. “He’s here!”

“Who is this?” Wile’s voice was annoyingly calm. “And who’s where?”

“It’s Tina Edwards, and the bomber I warned you about yesterday just walked into the surgery entrance of the Arlington Women’s Clinic.”

“Oh, really?”

“He’s disguised as a deliveryman.”

“Ms. Edwards, are you sure you’re not overreacting?” He paused. “Again.”

*Jerk.*

I grabbed my backpack and jumped out of my car. “He’s pushing a laundry cart and the bomb is in it!”

“Are you certain he took the device into the building?”

I sucked in a deep breath before I answered. “Not exactly. No.”

Wiles didn’t say anything.

“He is *not* the regular laundry deliveryman, and he’s *here* on the wrong day!”

“I will send an agent to investigate,” he said.

“With D.C. traffic, your agent will be lucky to be here by noon.”

*Forget this damn story.*

I shouldered my backpack. “Wiles, I’m going in there to stop him.”

“Ms. Edwards, do not go into that building!”

I hung up on him and slammed my car door.

My next call was 911. I told them about the bomber and gave them the clinic’s address.

Jamming the phone into my backpack, I turned my jog into an all-out sprint. There were several abortion protesters on the other side of the street from the clinic’s front door. They saw me coming and began chanting anti-abortion protests as I roared past them.

“Bomb!” I shouted, pointing at the clinic. “Run!”

I didn’t stop to see what they were going to do. I ran through the clinic’s front door and skidded to a stop in the middle of the waiting room. There were about half a dozen young women sitting with their heads down, looking at their cell phone screens. A couple wore ear buds. Two female staff personnel sat at a glass-enclosed desk. They worked on their computers.

“There’s a bomb in this building! Get out of here!”

One young woman looked up at me. The rest continued to stare at their cell phone screens, oblivious to what I’d said.

“Stop looking at your damn cell phones!” I yelled again, this time stomping my foot.

“I’m a reporter, and you’re all going to be blown up!”

No one moved.

*They might die because of their stupid cell phones.*

One staff member picked up a phone. If she called their security, help might be on the way. But I didn’t have time to wait. I had to find the bomber and stop him before he blew up the building and all of us inside.

The door to the surgery area was to my left.

*He might be in there.*

As I stepped into the hallway, the odors of cleaning solvents and medications washed over me. The frigid air being spewed out by the building's overly enthusiastic cooling system instantly gave me goose bumps.

Twenty feet in front of me, the men's bathroom door flew open. The laundry deliveryman walked out. He turned to his right and moved toward the exit door into the parking lot.

*Where is his laundry basket?*

Did he plant the bomb in the bathroom?

Adrenaline surged through my blood stream. I reached into my backpack and grabbed a Glock 19. It was a departing gift from the Marines I'd been embedded with while doing stories in Afghanistan.

Throwing down my backpack, I jacked a bullet into the chamber. The click-clack noise echoed off the white walls and the green tile floor of the hallway.

The laundryman's head snapped up.

*Now you know I have a gun.*

He stopped and turned toward me. I held the Glock in front of me with both hands, my right index finger on the trigger guard. He reached into his white jacket pocket with his right hand and pulled out a flip-phone.

*You can use it to detonate the bomb.*

I motioned with the gun. "Put the phone down and step away."

He ignored my command and shuffled backward toward the exit.

*You don't think I'll pull the trigger.*

Turning on my gun's internal laser sight, I pointed the narrow red beam at the center of his chest. I wanted to prove to him that I would shoot.

*But will I?*

He continued to back up. I walked toward him. With each stride, the laser beam moved back and forth across his chest. My ASICS squeaked on the tile floor.

The surgery entrance door opened behind him. A slender young woman entered the hallway. The dazzling morning sunlight from the open door backlit her stringy blond hair. She stopped when she reached the man.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I’m looking for pre-op registration.”

The bomber grabbed her around the neck and twisted her toward me, using her body as a shield.

*I don’t have a clear shot!*

She twisted and turned, struggling to break free. “Let go of me, you creep!”

Her screams became muffled as he tightened the pressure on her throat.

I stopped walking. Assuming a shooter’s stance, I slid my index finger onto the trigger. The girl’s eyes widened when she saw me aiming the gun in her direction. She broke loose from the bomber’s grasp and dived to the floor.

He pushed a number on his flip-phone.

“Baby killers!” he screamed.

I heard a phone ring in the men’s bathroom.

*Shoot him!*

The bathroom phone rang a second time.

I fired two shots at his center mass.

A blinding flash of light...

A thunderous *BOOM!*

Acrid smoke and dust... Chemical odors... My body thrust upwards... Pressure in my ears... My chest slamming into a wall... Searing pain in my ribs... My head bouncing off the floor... A shower of lights behind my eyelids... An explosion inside my head...

And darkness...

### 3

I woke up.

I was flat on my back.

*I can’t open my eyes!*

My eyelids felt like they were covered with some kind of glop.

I tried to take in a breath. Excruciating pain exploded through the right side of my chest.

*I can’t breathe!*

There was a noise to my right.

An unseen force blew air into my lungs. Shock waves of pain shot into the entire right side of my chest.

*That freaking hurts!*

A few seconds later, air passively escaped from my lungs, and the discomfort diminished. I rolled my tongue against a hard object in my mouth.

*Feels like a tube.*

The mechanical swoosh started again, followed by a feeling of barbed-wire being pulled around in my ribcage as my lungs expanded. And then relief from the agony when the pressure went down.

*A machine is breathing for me.*

There was a hard mattress under me, but the pillow was missing. I tried to rub the gunk out of my eyes, but I couldn't move my forearms.

*Why are my arms tied down?*

I sniffed.

*Medicine?*

After multiple attempts, I was able to force my eyelids open, and what I saw puzzled me. I was in a room filled with machines. I recognized one because I'd seen it before when my grandmother was in a hospital ICU.

*It's a heart monitor.*

When I attempted to move, the machine began beeping rapidly. When I relaxed, the beeps slowed down.

*Is this a hospital room?*

*I'm not sick.*

*Why am I here?*

#### 4

When I woke up again, I was still flat on my back. I attempted to take a breath. There was a mechanical hiss. I felt my lungs painfully expand. Blinking my eyes, I saw two men standing next to me.

*Who the heck are you guys?*

“Do you know what the five-tube rule is, young man?” the men asked. He had gray-hair and wore a starched white lab coat over crisp green scrubs.

“No, I don’t, Dr. Klabenes,” the young man next to him responded. He wore a short, wrinkled white lab coat and scruffy green scrubs.

“Any trauma patient that has more than five tubes rarely survives. How many tubes do you see in this patient?”

“A Foley catheter, an NG tube, a central IV line, and an endotracheal tube. Yesterday at 2200, Dr. Murphy took out her chest tube and abdominal drains.”

“And from this what is your conclusion?”

“Even though she’s still unresponsive, she’ll survive.”

“Exactly. Have you ever taken out an endotracheal tube?”

“No, sir, but I’ve seen it done once.”

“See one, do one, teach one, as the old saying goes. Okay, let’s begin.”

“Ah, Dr. Klabenes?”

“Hmm?”

“I think the patient is awake.”

*You bet I am, buster, but I can’t talk to you with this freaking tube in my throat.*

“Tina,” the older doctor said. “Welcome back. Do you want the endotracheal tube out of your throat?”

*Is it going to hurt?*

“I can see by your rapid eye blinks that you do, so let’s get on with it. This is…” He turned to the young man beside him. “What’s your name again?”

“Morrison, sir.”

“He’s a senior med student, and…”

“Junior, sir.”

“What? Right, a junior med student. He’s going to help me do this.”

*Didn’t you say he’s never done this before?*

“Tina, stop wiggling,” the doctor said. “This will be over very quickly. Okay, Mossman, undo the tape.”

“Morrison, sir.”

“What?”

“My name’s Morrison.”

“Young man, I don’t give a good goddamn what your name is. We’re not going out to lunch together. You’re here to learn. Let’s get to it. Pull that tape off.”

*I don’t want a rookie doing anything to me!*

Morrison ripped the tape off my cheeks, causing the skin to burn like he’d applied dry ice to them. I tried to twist my head away from his hands, but that made the tube rub up and down in my throat, and I began to cough violently.

Slugging him was my only hope to stop this torture, but my forearms were still tied down.

He tilted my head forward and yanked the rest of the tape off of the back of my neck.

“Now, let the cuff down,” the doctor said.

The pressure in the lower part of my throat immediately diminished, but I still couldn’t talk.

“The secret is to have the patient take in a couple of deep breaths,” the doctor said. “As she inhales, pull the tube out.”

*If I could talk again, I was game for anything, as long as it didn’t hurt.*

“I want you to take in a couple of deep breaths, okay?” Morrison said to me.

I tried to nod, but the minimal movement of my head gave me a throbbing headache.

“Here we go,” Morrison said. “Breathe in...Good...Now another one...Perfect...One more time...”

*Yikes!*

It felt like he pulled the inside of my throat out through my mouth along with the tube. I began to cough uncontrollably, causing more searing pain in my right side. This was followed by a shower of multicolor lights behind my eyes and a horrific headache.

It wasn’t until I stopped coughing that I realized my abdominal muscles felt like I’d done ten-thousand sit-ups.

“Well done, Mossman.” The older doctor took out his stethoscope and listened to my chest. “Normal breath sounds on the left. The right is still a little soupy. Get a stat chest x-ray to be certain her lung is still inflated. And remove the restraints from her arms.”

They walked toward the door.

“Uh, doctor?” I sounded like James Earl Jones.

He put my chart under his arm and stopped in the doorway. “Yes?”

“What the heck happened to me?”

“In the most basic of terms, you were blown up.”

## 5

“Good morning, Tina,” Dr. Klabenes said. “How are you feeling today?”

“Like I jumped out of a plane in Afghanistan again, but this time without a parachute.”

I had chased a story there, while I was embedded with a Marine forward recon patrol. I had parachuted out of a plane and didn’t break a nail.

“We will transfer you to a regular room today,” he said.

“How about going home instead?”

“Not quite yet. There are a couple of tests we need to do before that happens.”

“Doctor, do you have time to tell me the extent of my injuries? I don’t remember anything that happened.”

He pulled up a chair and sat down beside me.

“I want to check to make certain I don’t leave anything out.”

He scanned the chart. I kept my mouth shut and waited.

When he was finished, he took off his half-moon reading glasses and made eye contact with me. “The force of the bomb’s explosion threw you against a wall breaking multiple ribs on your right side. The result was a pneumothorax, which collapsed your lung.”

“I guess that was the reason for the annoying tube that was in my chest.”

“It was necessary to re-expand the lung, but that proved to be the least of your injuries. You suffered a fractured pelvis. Your liver was also severely lacerated, which made things dicey for a while.”

*Uh-oh.*

“Dicey?”

“You almost bled out, but like we say, ‘all bleeding eventually stops.’”

He was obviously trying to be funny, but the humor escaped me. “What about my head?”

“That was the exciting part.”

“You mean these other injuries weren’t?”



“Oh, no. We see chest and abdominal trauma like this all the time.”

“But my head?”

“You were lucid when you came to the ER, but then you unexpectedly blew a pupil. We had to take you to the OR before we had completely evaluated your other injuries.”

*Speak English, buster.*

I hated doctors when they tried to explain things. “Blew a pupil?”

“It was caused by an epidural hematoma from a ruptured artery. The neurosurgeons did a burr hole and clipped the artery, solving that little problem, except of course for your brain swelling, which put you into a coma a little longer than we had anticipated.”

“What about the bandages on my abdomen?”

“My handiwork. As I said, we didn’t have time to do any diagnostic tests, so our only option was to do a lap and a look. And it was fortuitous we did. There was a seven centimeter stellate liver laceration, which was the source of your extensive blood loss.”

“How extensive?”

He put his glasses back on and thumbed through the chart. “The final tally was twenty-nine units, but part of that was due to your liver being blown through your ruptured diaphragm and into your chest. This further compressed your lung, which was already compromised.”

*Whoa.*

My brain was foggy, and I had trouble processing this medical jargon. It was like he was talking about someone else.

“What do I have to expect from here on out?” I asked.

“We’ll take your staples out on Friday,” he said.

“Staples?”

“I rarely use skin sutures, especially on long incisions.”

My head began to swim.

He pulled the sheets down and lifted up my hospital gown. Bandages covered my abdomen.

“The only way to repair all the damage was to make a midline incision for complete exposure,” he said. “I’ll show you.”

*Maybe I don’t want to look.*

I shut my eyes. He removed the dressings. When he was done, I peeked down at my tummy. There was a linear incision running from my breastbone to my pelvis.

*Scarred for life.*

“There goes my string bikini,” I said.

“But it will be a great conversation piece.”

“Doctor, I’m never, ever, going to tell anyone about this.” I patted my head. “Do I have staples up here, too?”

“Yes, a neurosurgery resident will remove them on Saturday.”

“Thank God, they didn’t have to cut any of my hair.”

“Young lady, where did you get a mistaken idea like that? They had to shave some of your hair. It was the only way to prep your skull for an emergency craniotomy.”

*NO!*

My stomach dropped three floors. I was all about my hair. “But probably not too much, right?”

He patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry. It usually grows back.”

*Usually?*

## 6

I sipped on a cup of water with ice chips that my mother had handed me.

“God, it feels so good to drink something,” I said.

My parents, Lottie and Andy Edwards, had flown in from my family home in Omaha, Nebraska, the day after I was injured. My brother Jimmy, who pitches for the San Diego Padres, had arrived from California the next day. He always sleeps late, so he was still at the hotel.

“I can’t imagine how sore your throat must be,” Mom said.

Lottie is sixty-three years old, but she appears ten years younger. Her posture is shoulder-back erect, and her weight has never varied more than a pound, or two, since I was born. Most mothers would be hovering over me, but she isn’t like that. The ice chips and a pat on the hand were the best I was going to get.

“I agree,” Dad said. “I only had a tube in for an hour after my last knee surgery, and my throat was sore for two weeks.”

He is two years older than Mom and more of a perfectionist than she is. His posture is like hers, and with his crew cut, he has always reminded me of a Marine drill instructor. His mantra was always that his two kids had to learn to play hurt. But he hadn't said it yet, proving how badly injured I was.

I took another sip. "Thank you so much for coming. It means a lot to me."

"Honey, we will always be there for you," Mom said. "You know that."

"But, I feel like I've inconvenienced everyone."

"Maybe for others, but never for us," Dad said.

Dad and Mom glanced at each other and stopped talking.

"Okay guys, what's up?" I asked.

"You never told us about Carter," Mom said.

"Carter Thomas? From the *Post*? Has he been here?"

"Almost more than we have," she said.

"That's so strange," I said. "Except for going to some bars with the other reporters, we never hang out together. He doesn't even talk to me all that much at work."

"From the glowing things he has to say about you, my opinion is that he is very interested in you," Mom said.

"Who else from work has been here?" I asked.

"No one that we've seen, unless they come when we aren't here," Dad said.

I glanced around the room at the multiple flower arrangements. "But they sent flowers, right?"

Mom stood up and walked around the room, studying the cards on the flowers. "Most of these are from Carter, but there are several from our friends, and, oh, yes, this one is from your office."

She held up a tiny arrangement of wilted daisies that looked like they came from a discount grocery store. Except for Carter, my fellow workers seemed to have been underwhelmed by my injuries.

## 7

I was transferred to a regular hospital room. It had a bathroom, and the bathroom had a mirror. I didn't care about the scar on my abdomen, or the pain in my pelvis and chest. It was my hair. I had to see what the surgeons had done to my hair.

Sitting up on the edge of the bed, I gauged the distance I would have to travel to the bathroom. I took a deep breath, preparing to stand up, but a visitor delayed my journey.

“Hold it, Newt,” my brother Jimmy said, as he strolled into my room. “I don’t think you’re supposed to walk without help.”

Jimmy is fifteen months older than I am. We both have Mom’s oval face and dimples, and Dad’s easily tanned skin, so we look enough alike to be twins, except at six feet two, he is four inches taller and eighty pounds of muscle heavier than I am.

“I need a mirror, and I need it now,” I said.

“The hair thingy?” he asked.

“You got it.”

My head was completely encased in a gauze dressing. I had no clue what had happened to my hair under it.

“Maybe you should leave that baby on,” he said. “The turban look is kinda’ cool.”

“Jimmy, get this stupid dressing off of my head.”

He began unwinding the gauze. I watched his eyes get bigger and bigger with each trip around my skull. When he pulled the last strip free, his eyebrows shot up.

His voice cracked when he spoke. “Let’s reconsider this whole deal. You know, get you a hat.”

It hurt to move my right arm, but I raised my hand and touched the right side of my head above my ear. The bare skin was numb. All I could feel was a semicircle of staples. I moved my hand around until I finally felt a mass of tangled matted hair on the left side of my head.

“At least I have some hair left. Does this look as bad as it feels?”

He stepped back and reassessed the situation. “Worse.”

“Forget the mirror. I need the hat.”

## 8

The succulent aroma hit me as Carter Thomas entered my room.

*Yes!*

“Food!” I said. “I smell real food. I am so excited.”

I had progressed from having a tube in my throat and not eating, to being tubeless and trying to swallow what was placed in front of me and advertised as food. There wasn't the slightest resemblance between what was offered on the menu the dietitian brought me and what later arrived on the tray.

Jimmy had left earlier in the day to catch up with the Padres in Philadelphia. He gave me one of his team's logo hats to wear. I would deal with my hair when I was released from the hospital.

My parents had also departed. I loved them, but they were beginning to stress my already damaged brain, so I had asked them to go home, and they were happy to comply.

That left me with no one, which was – in a way – a relief, until I realized there wasn't anyone who was going to come and visit me. All my friends worked at the *Post*, and so far, none of them had come into my room or worse, bothered to call, text, or email me.

*But Carter is here.*

He brought in fresh flowers every morning and afternoon, which was great, but this was even better. He had arrived with an evening meal, the smells of which filled my hospital room and made my gastric juices flow.

I sniffed. Hot dogs and onion rings. I sniffed again. Baked beans and potato salad.

"Give, it up, buster," I said. "Give me the food."

He placed a hot dog on a paper plate he'd brought with him, and then put little paper cups of ketchup and mustard beside it.

"Is that from Jimmy?" he asked, nodding at my Padres baseball hat.

"Yep. I needed to cover up my new haircut."

The onion rings were next. He put a little cup of a dipping sauce beside them.

"Maybe I'll buy a White Sox hat for you, if this one gets dirty," he said.

"I might have to clear that with Dad. I'm not sure where he stands about rooting for an American League team, you know with the DH and all."

"What about your brother?"

"With Jimmy, any team but the Yankees is okay. He hates the Yankees."

"As a lifelong White Sox fan, so do I."

I squirted on ketchup and mustard and wolfed down the hot dog in three bites.

"This is amazing," I said. "Where'd you buy this stuff? I don't see any wrappers."

“I prepared it.”

“Including the onion rings?”

“And the dip, baked beans, and potato salad.” He took some more covered dishes out and opened them. “You ate the first hot dog before I could totally prepare it.”

“Chili?”

“Without beans, of course... And chopped onions, green relish, and American cheese with a slight dusting of finely chopped jalapeños.”

My stomach was rumbling, as I watched him put all of the toppings on another hot dog.

“There’s only one thing missing,” I said.

“I agree. I wasn’t sure about the hospital rules, so I was forced to resort to subterfuge.” He handed me an empty Venti Starbucks cup. Out of a small ice chest, he pulled a jug of apple juice. He poured the contents into my cup and that was when I knew this relationship was going somewhere.

*Heaven.*

There was ice-cold beer in the apple juice bottle.

## 9

After my hospital discharge, Carter drove me to my condo at the Broadmoor, an aging L-shaped, nine-story Art Deco brick building on Connecticut Avenue in northwest D.C. It was one block from the village of Cleveland Park.

When I had attempted just a tiny step in the hospital, it felt like large pieces of broken glass were grinding around in my pelvis. The excruciating, knife-like pains meant I wouldn’t be walking very far for a while, so Carter had to push me in a wheelchair from the elevator to the front door of my top-floor condo.

“Carter, I think I can manage from here,” I said.

House cleaning isn’t one of my strengths. This would be the first time he was going to see my condo, and I didn’t want him to have a heart attack when he pushed me inside.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Your mother assured me that she had totally cleaned your place while you were in the hospital.”

*Oh, boy.*

“I won’t be able to find anything for the next six weeks.”

“My mother does the same thing when she comes to visit. It drives me crazy.”

I opened the two locks on my front door, and he pushed me into my small living room.

“I’ve never been in one of these condos,” he said. “You have a lovely place.” He walked over to my front windows. “This is a superb view of Cleveland Park.”

“It’s one of the charming things about this old building.”

Unfolding my walker, he set it up beside me. He put my medicine bottles in a row on my coffee table, went in the kitchen, and returned with a glass of water.

Placing it next to the pills, he then helped me out of the wheelchair onto my black Eames chair, the only nice piece of furniture I owned. My grandmother gave to me.

“I know you would like some time to yourself, so I’ll leave,” he said. “Is there anything you want me to do?”

“No, I’ll be okay. I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for me.”

“It was my pleasure, believe me.” He gave me a kiss on the cheek and left.

## 10

Carter was right about me needing some private time. I lived by myself for the past eight years. No roommates to borrow my clothes. No live-in boyfriends to leave the toilet seat up. No one but me>

*And that’s the way I wanted it.*

Being in the hospital was the worst. There was always a nurse or lab tech lurking around, waiting to work on me.

I struggled to climb out of the chair and used the walker to go into the kitchen. A latte would be a perfect welcome home treat, but thanks to Mom’s cleaning, I couldn’t easily find my machine, and my body hurt too much to search for it.

She had put fresh milk and orange juice in my refrigerator, but my jar of chunky peanut butter was gone, along with my frozen stash of peanut M&M’s and the pint of Ben & Jerry’s Phish Food ice cream. She’d even found the large Hershey bar I had hidden behind my pots and pans, all of which she had moved to a new location.

Green tea was my only option, so I brewed up a pot.

When it was finished, I inhaled the aroma, which helped calm me. After I took a sip, I decided to get it over with. I hobbled into the bathroom and took off my Padres hat.

*Oh. My. God.*

My mother had told the nurses to keep me away from any mirrors, and they had done their job. This was the first time I'd seen my head, and it wasn't pretty. The entire right side was hairless, except for a fresh, red, three-inch semicircular scar above my ear. On the left side was a smelly, tangled mass of hair that resembled a dark purple-black dry mop.

I found scissors in my top drawer and began to whack off the rest of my hair. For the first time since the accident, I began crying. The more I snipped, the more I sobbed.

When I finished, what was left of my hair still looked disgusting. I was not meant to be a stylist. I was able to find my razor and shaving cream. Fifteen minutes later, I was done, now a clone of Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane*. My voice was still hoarse, so I sounded like her, too.

Running my fingers over my scalp reminded me of doing the same thing to Jimmy when he had a buzz cut as a kid. Then, it felt fuzzy and tickled my fingers. Now that it was my head, it sucked.

## 11

Even with pain pills, sleep was impossible. Part of my problem came from the intense burning caused by the broken bones in my fractured pelvis and the pain in my abdomen and right side of my chest when I wiggled around attempting to get comfortable. But worst were the vivid images of the explosion that bombarded my wounded brain each time I shut my eyes.

My night was endlessly disrupted by a flash of light and a thunderous explosion, followed by earsplitting screams and the smell of burning flesh. I had witnessed the utter chaos of mass catastrophes during my time in Afghanistan, but this time I wasn't an observer watching with binoculars.

I was part of it.

After four hours, I surrendered and struggled out of bed. The pain was excruciating, but I finally was able to sit down at my desk. A sense of dread hung over me as I sat at my computer, but I forced myself to wave it away and read the stories about the explosion. When I scrolled down to the *Post* website and saw the picture of the destroyed clinic, I threw up in the wastebasket next to my desk.

Including me, twenty-eight people had been seriously injured, my scorecard for chasing after a story I hoped would be my first Pulitzer Prize win. At least no one had been killed.



And if I hadn't been in the building – if I had obeyed Wiles order and stayed in my car – maybe none of it would have happened.

*I need to talk to someone.*

I called Carter. The bombing was much worse than I assumed it had been, and I needed to talk to him about it.

Twenty minutes later, he sat next to me on the old couch I'd inherited from the woman who owned the condo before me. We discussed the bombing, and he slowly talked me off the ledge. As I began to calm down, my brain function came back online.

*Why have I ignored you?*

And Carter isn't exactly easy to miss. He is about half a foot taller than my five feet eight, with short, sandy hair; sparkling, blue eyes; a strong, angular face; and pale skin. He is nearly seven years older than me and has never been married.

When we finished talking about the bombing, there was one more question I had to ask.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why, what?” he responded.

“I enjoy all this attention you've given me, but why?”

“To be honest, I'm in awe of your drive and your talent. I've attempted to connect with you on several levels, but you never seemed interested.”

*He is so right.*

“That's my fault. I've been so busy working on stories that I haven't made much time for building relationships. Almost getting killed has made me realize how stupid I've been.”

“Everyone in the bureau admires your zeal to write terrific stories. No one works as hard as you do, and you have two Pulitzer nominations to show for it.”

“But you won one, and I didn't.”

“With your talent, you will.”

I didn't want to admit to him that there was another thing bothering me. I was thirty-two and could have died without really falling in love, or getting married, or having kids.

Tears begin rolling down my cheeks. This time it wasn't about my hair. “Can you do something for me?”

“Certainly.”

“I need a hug.”

He held me in his arms the rest of the night. I rarely cry except at movies or about my hair, but I sobbed the whole time. It wasn't only the pain from the physical injuries.

Something had happened in my brain.

## 12

The next day, Carter offered to make dinner for me, but I wanted to go to *Lavandou*, one of my favorite restaurants in Cleveland Park. We had passed by it when he drove me home from the hospital. At that time, I hadn't been hungry for anything except sweets, but this afternoon, as I stared down at the restaurant from my front windows, I craved their chilled cucumber soup and escargot.

He helped me into the wheelchair and pushed me to the elevator, and back out into my old world. We left the lobby and crossed the street into Cleveland Park. I hung my head and didn't make eye contact with anyone, certain that everyone was staring at me because of the mass catastrophe I had caused.

It became worse when we entered the small restaurant. Once we were at our table, I felt trapped and couldn't breathe.

"Carter, please take me home," I said, my voice a timid whisper.

"What?" he asked.

"Get me out of here." My voice was firm.

"Is something wrong?"

"I can't breathe!" I didn't scream it, but I wanted to.

He wheeled me back out onto the sidewalk and knelt down by my side. "Should I call your doctor?" he asked. "Maybe it's your lung."

I shook my head. "No, not my lung," I said. "My brain."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No, let's try it again, but see if we can get a table by an open window."

Since it was early, the table was available. We could watch the action in the neighborhood, especially the people coming and going from the Cleveland Park branch of the library, which was directly across the street from the restaurant. It was strangely comforting to see normal people doing everyday things, with no bombs exploding anywhere in the neighborhood.

After a long perusal of the wine menu and a few questions of the sommelier, Carter ordered a Roger Sabon *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*, 2000. After the bottle was opened and the wine poured, he lifted his glass in a toast.

“To a rapid return to normal health,” he said.

We touched glasses. “Let’s hope,” I said.

When I first sat down, the broken pieces of bone in my pelvis had ground against each other, causing me to wonder if coming to the restaurant had been worth the terrible pain. But with the first sip of the spicy-herb-flavored wine, I knew it had been a terrific idea.

*This man knows his wines.*

Swirling the wine, I studied him over the top of the glass. We would make a stunning couple, if I managed to avoid doing something to screw up this nascent relationship.

Before I was blown up, I had dumped a couple of potentially special guys because my career had always come first. Now, I wasn’t sure if writing was something I ever wanted to do again.

“May I take your order?” the waiter asked. He had a thick French accent.

“*Soupe froide de concombres, escargots beurre d’ail, and truite au fenouil,*” I said.

It wouldn’t hurt to let Carter know that I could converse in at least one other language, even though the only French I knew came from reading the menus in this restaurant.

“And you, sir?” he asked.

“*Soupe de moules aux epinards, poivrons rouge farcis au chèvre et anchoïade, and lapin en paquet du Luberon.*”

“Yes, sir.”

“And for dessert we will have *gateau au chocolat fondant*, if that is acceptable to the lady,” Carter said, glancing at me.

The waiter waited. This item was new on the menu, and since I didn’t converse in real French, I wasn’t sure what it was.

*I heard the word “chocolat,” so it has to be yummy.*

“Fine. A perfect choice, Carter.”

We began eating our entrees.

“How did you become interested in the abortion clinic bombings?” Carter asked.

Since he worked at the *Post*, it was easy enough for him to know that I hadn’t been assigned the story by one of our editors.

“Two months before the bombing, a dissident member of the Psalmists contacted me by email.”

“Isn’t that the radical splinter group of the Army of God, the right wing antiabortion group?”

“It is.”

“Why were you contacted?”

“The person had seen me do a short segment talking as a head on CNBC during which I profiled this vile and abhorrent form of protest. The person had liked the tone of what I’d said and offered to be a mole in the organization for me. Then, as proof, I received an email from the source of previously undisclosed facts about the bombings.”

“How could you be certain this person was legitimate?”

“The bombings had been happening with increasing frequency over the previous two years. I’d spent a month researching them and talked to the police in the involved cities. I gave them the information the source had given me, and they confirmed that it was factual information and had not been released to the public.”

“And this led you to believe that the person was authentic and would act as a mole for you.”

“Yes, it did, especially after the source wrote that the bomber was going to place an explosive charge in the clinic on the third of July to gain maximum national exposure over the holiday. My contact didn’t know where the bomb was going to be hidden, or what time it was going to be detonated.”

“What about the bomber? Did your source describe him?”

“Their only contact had been by email.”

“Your informant never met the bomber?”

“No.”

He took a small bite of his rabbit breast and a smaller sip of wine. “And you never met your source.”

“I did not. I don’t even know if it’s a man or a woman.”

“But you assume the previously undisclosed facts you received in the email proves this mole is the real deal.”

I felt heat begin rising in my face. Maybe this was going to be another short-term relationship after all.

*You're beginning to piss me off, buster.*

“What’s your point?” I asked. “I was the one who was blown up.”

He reached over and put his hand on top of mine. “You misunderstood me.”

I pulled my hand back. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you finished?” the waiter asked, interrupting our conversation with his sudden appearance.

“We might very well be,” I said.

## 14

We sat in silence as the waiter picked up the plates.

“Tina, after your accident, I went through all your notes on the story, and one aspect of it troubled me,” Carter said.

Now he was the expert.

*Guess that’s what winning a Pulitzer Prize did for your ego.*

“I wonder if you were set up to gain national exposure for the bomber’s cause,” he continued.

“Why do you think that?”

“Previously, he never blew up a building when it was occupied. He always did it late at night. This was the first time he did it in daylight with a building full of people.” He took another sip of wine. “And he might have kidnapped a patient.”

I put my glass down so quickly some of it spilled on the tabletop. “He did *what?*”

“There’s one female, Summer Teft, unaccounted for. She was scheduled for an abortion and would have been there at the time of the explosion. The FBI thinks the bomber abducted her and escaped by using her car.”

There was another victim: an innocent girl had been kidnapped.

“The only positive is that one or both of your shots hit their mark,” he said.

“How do they know that?”

“There was a lot of blood spatter near the exit door to the parking lot. The DNA from the sample does not match any of the other victims. There was also a partial fingerprint on the exit door, also unmatched by anyone in the building.”

“Did they run the print?”

“They did, but he’s not in CODIS, or AFIS, or any of the other data bases. His blood DNA wasn’t a match, either.”

My stomach began to churn. “He’s out there, and no one knows who he is.”

“That’s true, but from the amount of blood they discovered, the feds think he might have died from his wounds.”

“But if he didn’t, he’s seen my face.”

*He knows who I am.*

We sat in silence, my statement hanging in the air.

“If the abortion clinic bombings stop, I’ll know for sure he’s dead,” I said, hopefully.

“True, but what if they begin again?” he asked. “Will you stop pursuing that story?”

Wiggling in my chair to get comfortable caused the pain from my pelvis to intensify, reminding me of what had happened.

“He tried to kill me,” I said. “I’ll never forget that. So, yes, if he’s alive, I’ll go after him.”

“I can understand that, but what if he’s dead?” Carter asked. “Can you stop from chasing after other dangerous stories?”

*A question I can’t answer.*

Find out Tina’s answer by reading *boom-BOOM!*, the first novel in the Hamlin Park Irregulars series. Also check out the video I made on site in Tina’s Chicago neighborhood of Lakeview. You can access it on Facebook, my blog, or YouTube.