

Under Contract

There was something spectacular about fire, almost spiritual.

I watched as streams of water arced toward the flames, colliding at the intersection of beauty and tragedy.

I never imagined that violence could feel so pleasurable, all but sensual.

I could have stayed for days.

Unfortunately, a shout from Dennis McBride brought me back to attention.

I turned, and he glared at me. "Meet me in my office at eight o'clock. You're getting a partner."

Partner.

I did not like the sound of that word.

What the hell had gone wrong?

CHAPTER 1

Eleven days earlier, Dennis McBride had hired me, on a Friday morning in the second week of September.

"Two houses gone. Do you mind?" He removed his sweatshirt, loosened his belt, and whipped down his zipper before I could reply. "I have a meeting with investors after we're finished here."

I steadfastly maintained eye contact.

He continued in a calmer voice. "Try to ignore the mess. The wife and I are between houses. We sold one in Cherry Hills, had to be out by the end of August, and we can't get into the new house until next week. Everything we own is in semi containers, and we're camped out at the Marriott. My Audi's so full of crap, I can barely squeeze in to drive. How's that for a sorry tale!"

He gestured in aggravation at the clutter that had spilled into his work environment.

The corporate offices for McBride Homes were located on the seventh floor of a mid-rise in the Denver Tech Center, off I-25 and Belleview Avenue. Dennis held down the southwest corner, and beyond two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, he had a panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains, all the way to Pikes Peak.

The décor inside wasn't shabby either. The suburban office had wool carpet, cherry paneled wainscoting, crown molding, heavily textured walls in butter yellow, ceiling medallions, and antique iron sconces and light fixtures. The writing desk, hutch, bookshelf, filing cabinets, and banker's chair, all in cherry, added to the rich look.

Too bad disorder suffocated the design.

A duffel bag, a tennis racket, golf clubs, shoes, umbrellas, and a pull cart were tangled together in a corner by the door, while balls, bats, mitts, and baseball memorabilia were clumped on the couch. A fireproof safe sat on top of the desk, crumpling blueprints below it, and clothes were strewn across the room.

I tendered a faint smile. "Couldn't you move into one of your company's houses temporarily?"

Dennis yanked plastic wrapping off a lavender, long-sleeve shirt. "I don't have a vacant one. I don't break ground without a contract."

"That's good news, that the homes are selling," I said brightly.

"Tell my wife. She has room service and housekeeping, but can't stop complaining about the hotel closet. It's not big enough for her, not by a football field. Who knew? I've barely had time to get to know her, much less measure her wardrobe. Usually, when we're together, she isn't wearing much," he said, with a randy chuckle.

"You haven't been married long?"

He twisted his wedding ring, a titanium band with blue topaz and diamonds. “What’s today? Friday. That makes it six days.”

“Congratulations.”

Dennis shook his head, mystified. “Damned if I know how it happened. I broke off a relationship in February. Marla and I met in March. I proposed in June. We tied the knot in September. I’m scared to think about what’s next.”

He was in no hurry to put on his shirt, all the while daring me to look away, which I did, happily.

Too much chest hair, too early in the morning.

A blonde-gray mat on the pecs of an offensive lineman who hadn’t played in thirty years—not a pretty sight. He had the same color hair on his head, and he’d brushed it up and back, to where it fell just below the ears. His square head and jaw were proportional to his large frame, and a broken nose added to the hardy look. A distinctive birthmark covered his right cheekbone.

I had to look at something other than my client’s half-naked body.

For the time being, I chose the mounted warthog head near my feet. Out of the corner of my eye, it seemed as if the animal’s body were stowed below the carpet, a less unsettling visual than muscle turned to flab.

“Is this your first marriage?”

“One and only. Make yourself comfortable wherever you can.”

I chose the only flat surface that would bear weight and sat, awkwardly. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to find out who’s trying to ruin me.”

“The police don’t have any suspects?” I said, picking up a thread of conversation we’d begun on the phone the day earlier.

“My houses burned to the ground, and they’re treating me like a suspect. I almost forgot to offer, you want something to drink?”

“What do you have?”

“You’re sitting on it,” he said, gesturing toward the red and white plastic cooler.

I opened the top of my “chair” to a stash of hard liquor, all at room temperature, no ice. “I’ll pass. How about you?”

“Better not. I don’t want the investors to smell booze on my breath.”

I replaced the lid and repositioned myself. “You have to admit, two fires in three months is suspicious.”

Dennis put on his shirt, buttoned it, and rolled up the sleeves. “Damn right it is. That’s why I know someone’s out to get me. One fire’s bad luck. Two has to be intentional.”

“Or worse luck.”

“No chance. The first investigation, at Landry, everyone was nice and friendly. This time, at Southfield, they won’t tell me anything, other than the cause of the fire is undetermined. A friend of mine who went through an arson investigation warned me that they’ll be digging into my financials and interviewing anyone they can. Neighbors, partners, employees. I’d be a fool to sit by while they tear into my business and personal life.”

“You made the right move, calling me.”

“Why would anyone think I set those fires? How does losing two properties under contract benefit me?”

I pulled a notepad from my purse and began to scribble. “The fire at Southfield happened when?”

“Two nights ago. At dusk.”

“And the one at Landry?”

He sauntered over to the revolving rack next to his wastebasket and selected a dark blue tie, which he knotted expertly. “About three months ago, on June 11. Two weeks before the house was supposed to close.”

“Have you considered hiring a security guard? I could make a recommendation.”

“What kind of image would that portray? I sell people on the idea of family-based communities. I can’t have armed goons running around the neighborhood.”

“They don’t have to be armed, and usually they don’t run unless they’re chasing someone,” I said evenly.

“Forget it,” he said, in an end-of-discussion tone.

I sighed. “Okay. Let’s start with details about the first fire, the one at Landry. Tell me everything you know.”

Dennis sat, leaned back, and balanced his bare feet on the desk. “We were building one of our standard, two-story models in the northwest neighborhood at Landry. We’re calling the collection Hunter’s Field. At completion, we’ll have seventy single-family homes. Price range: mid fours.”

“What day of the week did the house catch fire?”

He laced his fingers and put his hands behind his head. “Sunday. One of my workers dropped by the job site around noon to pick up tools for a ‘honey-do’ project. He saw flames and called 911. Firefighters came in five minutes, but the structure was a total loss.”

“What’s the exact address?”

“1125 Trinidad Street.”

I shifted uncomfortably on the cooler. Good thing I hadn’t worn a short skirt, or I would have had impressions from the lid’s bubbles on my thighs. My cropped-length, soft seersucker pants with artisan embroidery provided at least a little protection. “I’ll go by the site after I leave here.”

“Feel free, but there’s not much to look at.”

“What’s the name of the worker who discovered the fire?”

“Glenn Warner.”

“Do you have any reason to suspect him?”

“None. He’s one of my best foremen. I’ve known him twenty years.”

“Did fire investigators label the Landry fire suspicious?”

“Not at the time. They chalked it up to oily rags and sawdust left behind by a crew from Stan’s Flooring Company, which ticked me off. Have you seen how much sawdust comes from hardwood floor installation? Bags and bags. Glenn told them not to toss anything into our Dumpsters because of the fire hazard. They were supposed to dispose of sawdust and rags off-site. So much for that plan. They admitted they left them in the house over the weekend. By Sunday, they’d caught fire.”

“Did you agree with investigators, that the fire at Landry was accidental?”

Dennis sat upright and folded his hands in his lap. “At the time, I did. I’ve seen fires like that before, but someone always smelled something and caught them before they could do any damage. It’s a miracle there aren’t more fires at construction sites, with all the flammables and combustibles. You have to watch what you’re doing, but I can’t seem to drill that into my employees, much less subcontractors. They get sloppy, cut corners, you know how it is.”

“Did the fire set off an alarm inside the house?”

“No. The hard-wired system wasn’t connected.”

“Two weeks before closing?” I said, unable to contain my surprise. “What about battery backups in the detectors?”

He rubbed his lips. “We hadn’t installed them. We do now.”

“Was the hardwood floor treatment finished at the time of the fire?”

“Just about. Stan’s had installed the floors, stained them, and applied two coats of polyurethane. A spark from an electric outlet may have ignited wood dust, or the oily rags spontaneously combusted. Investigators couldn’t say for sure.”

“Had you hired Stan’s before?”

“We’ve used them for years.”

“Are you still using them?”

“For the time being. They do good work, on time, and they have a clean showroom where my buyers can make selections.”

“Did Stan’s lose equipment?”

“Quite a bit of it.”

“Have they bought new equipment?”

“I don’t know,” he said irritably. “They have rotating crews. I can’t tell who uses what.”

“Could you find out?”

“I could get Glenn to look into it.” He rummaged around on his desk until he located a Blackberry.

“Nothing struck you as unusual at the time of the Landry fire? Nothing before or after?”

Dennis propped his elbow on the desk, inserted his chin into his right hand, and stared ahead thoughtfully. After a moment, he spoke loudly. “Come to think of it, Glenn did mention something about cardboard.”

I felt a surge. “Cardboard?”

“The Dumpster should have been full of it, from cabinets and appliances our guys unpacked on Friday. On Sunday, there was no cardboard in the trash.”

“Maybe someone moved the cardboard into the house and used it as fuel for the fire.”

Dennis emitted a snort of derision. “More likely, some bum took it for his shelter. They trespass on my property all the time.”

I returned to my notes, slightly deflated. “Who had a contract on the Landry house?”

“Barry Christensen. Stand-up guy.”

“Could Barry have torched the house to get out of the contract?”

Dennis shook his head. “Never. He loves Hunter’s Field and Landry. We moved him into a house down the street. A contract fell through, and we had one available. Everything worked out.”

“Has the insurance company settled with you on the first fire?”

“Not yet, but we’re close.”

“At fair value?”

His lips tightened. “It’ll do. You know how it goes. They say a number. I say a number. We both piss and moan. Eventually we arrive at a figure.”

“Okay, let’s talk about the house in Southfield. What’s the exact address of that one?”

“3022 Visalia Street.”

“How far along was it when it burned?”

“We were finishing up plumbing, electric, and HVAC. Drywall installation was scheduled for next week.”

“Who legally owns it?”

“McBride Homes until we turn over title, but we have a purchase agreement with Fritz Jubera. Now there’s a piece of work. He tried to make a custom home out of one of our standard models. Sixty-two change orders. We moved walls, doors, windows, electric. I don’t know what I got myself into.”

“Why did you agree to the customization?”

“Do you know the markup on changes?” he said, flashing a greedy smile.

“But the hassle . . .”

Dennis retrieved a baseball from underneath a pile of papers on his desk. “Tell me about it! This guy’s a real know-it-all. He’s insulted every one of my employees who’s had contact with him, cussed them out for no reason. My salesgirls won’t deal with him anymore. They cry every time they see his Hummer pull up to the model. He’s threatened me with lawsuits on three occasions, over minor glitches. I offered to let him out of his contract. Full refund of earnest money, option deposits, change order deposits, the works. Full escrow back, every cent. I’ve never done that in my life.”

I stretched my neck, trying to earn relief for my sloping shoulders. “Fritz refused?”

Dennis nodded grimly, tossing the ball from hand to hand. “He estimates he has \$30,000 in appreciation waiting for him at closing. I can’t stand the son of a bitch. I was looking forward to his closing on September 21. I couldn’t wait to get rid of him.”

“It wouldn’t have ended there. The closing’s the middle of the relationship with a builder, not the end.”

“You’re probably right. Jubera would have had a twenty-page punch list and sued me if I didn’t fix every little problem. I can’t stand the thought of that jerk living in one of my properties. I’d almost rather have it burn to the ground than turn it over to him.”

“Legally, you don’t have to rebuild?”

Dennis set the ball on his desk with a decisive smack. “Not for him. In the purchase agreement, we promise substantial completion of the property six months after the start of framing. If it’s delayed past that, either party can terminate the contract. I’m sending Fritz a notice of termination this week.”

“You can’t complete the house within the six-month time frame?”

He smiled slyly. “I can, but I won’t. This is my chance to get rid of the jackass.”

“Could Fritz Jubera have set fire to the Southfield house?”

Dennis McBride didn’t hesitate. “To spite me? Damn right.”

“Do you have any other people who hate you?”

He bellowed with laughter. “I couldn’t begin to name them all.”

“Try,” I said pleasantly. “Any ex-employees?”

He stared at me as if I were brain dead. “This is the construction trade. We fire as many as we hire.”

“Could I look over the employment records of every employee you’ve fired in the last six months?”

Dennis picked up a wooden letter opener and began to rub its handle. “Be my guest. I’ll have my human resources gal make copies.”

“Meanwhile, let’s compile a list of other people who might wish you harm.”

“How much time do you have?” he said, almost proudly.

Two minutes later, I had the names of nineteen people who had ongoing feuds with Dennis McBride.

Those were the ones he could remember off the top of his head, but he promised more.

“Do you have any suggestions about where to begin?” I said, disconcerted by the crowd.

He came around the desk, leaned over me, and flicked at the first name on the page. “Daphne Cartwright.”

I looked up. “Any particular reason Daphne—”

Dennis McBride spoke over my words. “She thinks I tried to kill her family.”