

# Returning Fire Preview

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**Fj Harmon**

A MACE FRANKLYN MURDER MYSTERY

BOOK 2

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This work is dedicated first to all my avid readers, those, too numerous to mention, who supported and encouraged me to complete this story. However, a special recognition to my sharp-eyed readers Peggy Gordon and Liz Fuller.

### **Please Leave a Review**

So other readers may enjoy this exciting story.

Thank You.

## Chapter One

**At four in the morning**, a shrill buzz jolted Coria Brien from her deep sleep. Raising her head and squinting into the blackness, she groped for the offending alarm clock, slamming it off. She rolled her head, cradled in a tangle of long ginger curls, back into her pillow.

She rubbed her button nose, arms stretching over a bare blond headboard. The flight to Glasgow would be long with a two-hour layover in New York's Kennedy International. Her first semester at Detroit's Wayne State University had been more challenging than she anticipated, it wasn't her first choice, but a decision she didn't regret. It was also an opportunity to reconcile with her dad, something opposed by her mother, but what her heart wanted. Now it was back to mum for the Christmas holiday, and perhaps a chance to soften what kept her parents apart. She pulled the covers snug to her chin and rolled over on her side, thinking about her mum's Christmas cake, holly and red ribbon everywhere. She closed her eyes, remembering their dining table with so much decoration on it they had little room for plates. Those thoughts and more lingered until she remembered. She had a plane to catch.

She threw off her covers. It was five, her plane departed at eight. Shower, or straight to it? She

grabbed the outfit planned for the day, assessed her hair in the mirror. She contemplated a shower, but the process of washing, drying, and brushing her hip-length tresses would take too long. She gave her hair a hard brush, corralling it into a ponytail. She considered makeup. Her mouth drawn tight was small, barely stretching the width of her button nose, her cheeks freckled, she decided that with a daunting flight, anything she applied would only smear or run into her eyes. She was dressed in a simple white collared blouse and a tan corduroy skirt, adding a thin wool sweater in case of a chill. A quick mirror check, she was an hour behind, but if she didn't wait for a car service, but used the Audi A4 her father had lent her, she could make it.

Coria put her carry-on in the backseat and draped her coat over it. Her dad's four-year-old dark blue Audi was showing its age. It was five-thirty when she pulled out of student parking onto Warren Avenue and then I94. In regular traffic, it could take thirty to sixty minutes to reach the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, but at this time in the morning, Coria judged it would take twenty. That was okay, had her ticket, just the security check to worry about and, the way Metro was spread out, the long run to her gate. Coria double-checked her return flight, assuring herself she would arrive in plenty of time for her association board meeting. She had joined the local chapter of the Association of Women's Rights in Development as soon as she registered for classes. In Glasgow, she was elected president of her AWRD chapter and found herself propelled to activity chair at Wayne.

She was an outspoken critic with an extreme dislike for local politicians trampling on women's rights.

Five forty-five, humming along doing sixty on the interstate, and the drizzle turned into a dense fog fed by the waters of Lake Ontario. She slowed to thirty as the taillights ahead blurred to a pink glow. Anxious about traveling any faster, she became irritated with herself for not checking the weather, or fifty other things, she imagined she should have done. Tightly gripping the wheel, she forced herself to press down on the accelerator.

Traffic was light, and as she accelerated, she became aware of a black truck in the left lane hovering just within the visual range of her mirror. A red semi-tractor trailer loomed through the fog, she tapped the breaks and instinctively turned the wheel to maneuver into the left lane. Her blind spot alert sounded, and she quickly adjusted. The black vehicle slowly stepped past her. It was a flat-bed tow truck. She waited for it to pass, and then she pulled behind it and around the semi.

Six-ten, the lane in front of her cleared. Where the tow truck had gone, she wasn't aware. Not that it mattered. Coria realized she had passed Willow Run Airport, and she was more than halfway to Metro. She was also at a curious juncture in topography, where the Ann Arbor hills gave way to the flat plain leading to Detroit, and where the population thinned to a rural area. She would be in long-term parking in fifteen minutes. *A little tight, but first flight out, I should be okay.*

Then it happened. Headlights out, a wall of pitch in front of her; Coria scanned her dash for a clue. The instruments black. Instinctively she attempted pulling off to the breakdown lane. The steering wheel wouldn't budge. With both hands gripping the left side, she tugged it to the left. The car slowing drifted to the shoulder. It headed for the guardrail. She struggled with the wheel to the right and pressed on the brake. She didn't slow. She didn't turn enough. The shrill scream of metal grinding metal, she strained, pushing both feet on the brake pedal. After an eternity of seconds, her vehicle came to a stop.

Six-fifteen, there were no lights on this desolate stretch. *Now, what am I going to do?* Punching the emergency flasher button, and that worked, she swept her hair back from her face. She took stock; it was ten miles at least to metro, the next exit was half that distance. Walking for help would eat up all her time. No westbound traffic and nothing was coming on her side either. Grabbing her trench coat from the back seat and LED torch from the car's glove box, Coria attempted to get out her driver's side door, but with the vehicle wedged against the guardrail that proved impossible. She climbed over the center console and exited into the mist. The chill cut through her clothes, and she slipped into her trench coat and turned on her flashlight. The fog consumed the light from her flashers and torch and only illuminated three feet in front of her. Then it was a curtain of white.

Six-thirty, she walked around the front of her car. The rubberized bumper dangled above the concrete,

and the entire driver side of her dad's Audi gouged and pierced to bare metal, said totaled. The thought of trying to restart the suddenly dead engine, but standing in front of her vehicle, she noticed the left front tire facing inward and the right straight. That dispelled any thought of driving her way out of this.

“Problem, ma’am?”

Coria screamed and spun around. The source of the question was a doughboy looking man standing next to her, his face framed in a thin shaggy beard, hanging like Spanish moss from his face. He wore dark green coveralls with ‘Sar’s Towing’ on a breast-side patch and black stained cap tilted back on his head.

Coria put a hand to the base of her throat. “Oh, I’m sorry. You startled me. I didn’t notice anyone pull up.”

“Fog,” he said with only his lips moving, his eyes staring ahead and beyond Coria.

“Yes, it is terrible weather. I’m lucky you came along. Will you be able to give me a tow? I don’t know what I’ll do with the ...”

He wasn’t there anymore. His appearing disappearing act made her uneasy. Coria heard the snort of an engine and then blinding light. A large black flatbed tow truck crept passed her and pulled in front of the Audi and faded into the pall. More snorting and the red glow of taillights colored the

swirling mist. Bright lights broke through the shroud illuminating the shoulder ahead, and spots of orange on top and sides of the truck defined its shape. Coria heard the clattering of chains. The doughboy stepped out of the white and approached her, carrying two lengths of chain with soup bowl size hooks in his hands. He stopped in front of her, the hooks on either side of her.

He drew in a deep breath. “Got t’put them on.”

Coria’s heart was beating impressions on her chest, or so it felt. “Oh, the car. Yes.” She stepped to the left. The doughboy pried two square patches of plastic off the bumper and attached the chains to her vehicle.”

He turned toward his truck, and as he passed her, she said, “I need to get to—”

“Airport. Figured.”

Six-forty-five, the shrill whine of a large electric winch alerted Coria to step aside as the motor drew her vehicle towards the flatbed, it's rear tilted to the ground. *How much is this going to cost?* “Wait.”

The whining stopped. “Ma’am?”

“I need to get my luggage from the back seat.”

She popped open the rear passenger door and lunged across the seat to her roll-on bag. “Got it.”



Seated inside the truck with her luggage between her legs, she rubbed her forehead and rechecked the time. She tried to calculate the time needed to check-in at the kiosk, security, the gate. But her mind wouldn't focus, and what difference would it make. The driver was on the back deck of the truck. She rolled down her side window, but she felt the weight shift on the vehicle as he got down from the back. She rolled her window up and watched him heft himself behind the wheel.

Seven, if he dropped her off, could she make it? She smiled as he stretched the shoulder harness around him. Doughboy put the truck in gear as Coria slumped, releasing some tension. He placed an air mask over his nose and mouth. Coria looked puzzled, and he lifted the mask from his face. "Oxygen, asthma."

He turned a knob on a tank sitting between them, put on his emergency flashers, and slowly accelerated onto the highway. Coria took a deep breath and then let out a sigh of relief. The truck rumbled to highway speed. Her shoulders, her eyelids drooped heavy. *Exhausted already, and my trip hasn't even started.*

But it had.

She saw a sign 'Airport 8 Miles' and the truck pulling into a cross-over in the I94 median. That didn't make sense, and it was the last she remembered.

## Chapter Two

**“Mace, there’s no heat.”**

“I’m sorry, Sharlene said it was urgent, something about a missing friend. Relax, just go with it.”

It was cold, colder than anyone suspected for early September, and they were standing in the old waiting room of the abandoned grand old lady of Detroit, the Michigan Central Station.

“It’s a historical event, place hasn’t been used in decades, and Ford is giving it a new life. It’s their groundbreaking of sorts,” Mace said and moved behind Helyn. “Here, I’ll work on the heat for you.” He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around hers, and massaged her arms. “Not much of a start to the weekend, I admit,” he said and nibbled at the back of her neck.

Helyn drifted into his embrace, but as if an alarm went off, a rude memory pushing in on a warm moment, she twisted away from his arms. “I’ll focus on what you promised me would follow this, Joe Muir’s, an Irish coffee to warm me up, and broiled Lake Superior Walleye for dinner.”

“And don’t forget some great country-western from Sharlene and a visit backstage...”

“What, behind a drapery.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a publicity event, okay? She insisted we meet right away, so I’ll get the gist from her, and we can leave. Can I get you a coffee, now? There should be a refreshment bar on the east end of the station where the old restaurant used to be.”

“No, let’s just walk,” she said, “I love what they have done with the windows - replaced them.”

Mace cringed. *I’ve said something that’s sharpened her tongue. Moving in, putting our marriage back together is all I mentioned on our way here. She wants that, right?”*

Helyn waved him off before he said anything. “Never mind, I’m sure we can find an overpowered monster car to pique your boyhood.”

Ford purchased MCS planning on transforming it into a high-tech research campus and saving it from the wrecking ball. Grand soaring graffiti-covered arches crisscrossed the general waiting room. A light show of marketing slogans for the famous trains that once departed here illuminated the massive thirty-foot columns supporting them. Dotting the football field-sized waiting room were concept vehicles and historical displays. *Helyn’s right, I could spend the night checking out the beastly concept vehicles, all high-tech, and begging for attention.*

Helyn wrapped her long gray wool coat about her, her dense blond tresses draping over her shoulders. “How about that futuristic-looking car over there?”

She pointed to a cherry red Mustang with deep sculptured sides looking more like a jet in flight.

“So, what do you think?”

“That thing? You race it on the freeway or just fly over it?”

“Cute, Helyn. About our discussion on the way down here.”

“Oh, you mean your dissertation on the meaning of life, my life?”

“Getting a house together.”

Helyn traced her hand over the coupe roofline of the Mustang as she walked along the drive’s side towards the front. “Whose Sharlene McCrary?”

Mace shadowed her movement on the passenger side. “A favorite local country-western singer. We dated in high school. Haven’t seen her since. Kept in touch with social media, that’s all.”

“Serious?”

Mace stopped dropping his arms over the roof of the low-slung vehicle. “You’re bristling at going in on a house together, but what, your jealous of a woman I had a couple of dates with at Chandler High?”

“That so, then why are we here?”

“She’s performing after the dedication, and she wanted to talk, said she could use my advice.”

“Backstage.”

“Yes.”

“Behind the drapery.”

Mace needed a decision but felt this conversation wasn’t going anywhere but south. “It’s an event venue.”

“Looks very hot.”

“I wouldn’t know, I haven’t seen her in years.”

“I meant the car.”

“Right. Shar... Ms. McCrary is getting one just like it, except it will be an all-electric.”

“You did save my life, but—”

“You haven’t changed your name,” Mace said, rounding the scooped front of the vehicle. “You must at least be considering getting back together, admit it.”

Helyn crossed her arms and smiled. “Yes, Harper-Franklyn, Funny, how come you didn’t change your name? I’m a professional; you’re a professional. Kind of a sexist thing don’t you think, the name change thing when a woman gets married, but not for

a man. Ever consider changing your name, to, I don't know, Mace Franklyn-Harper?"

"Okay, Helyn Harper-Franklyn, point taken, set, and match. How about we look for the stage. They should begin soon."

\* \* \*

### **"Soundcheck, Mick?"**

Mick, a tall stick of a man, flicked his shagging head of hair back and yelled over a bundle of wire on his shoulder. "All good, Sharlene."

Sharlene was seated on a stool, one slender leg seductively jutting from a split in her tight blue sequined skirt. She felt good about herself, her workouts paid off, trimmed down again with all the curves in the right places. Sharlene adjusted her white blouse, the sequined design on it reflecting her western style, and pulled her white faux fur guitar strap over her shoulder. She fingered the strings of her Gibson Acoustic, silently running through her opening song, and then flipped through the music on a stand before her, the planned songs for the set. Then she remembered Mace. "Lesley."

Lesley Jenner, a thin girl, clutching a clipboard to her chest, her face tilted, was talking to a heavy-set man, his face framed in a thin shaggy beard, and wearing a blue Ford jacket. Her head snapped toward

Sharlene, her short black hair lagging the movement and wrapping around her face. “Yes, Ms. McCrary.”

“Come here, darling, I want to show you someone.”

Lesley came alongside Sharlene, who moved to the stage curtain and was peaking around the edge. “Take a look. You see that broad-shouldered guy with the to-kill-for tight curls for a head of hair?”

“Yes, ma’am, the one standing next to the older looking blond?”

Sharlene nodded. “I need to talk to him as soon as we finish the set. Keep an eye out for him, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lesley said and walked back to the off-stage Ford man.

Sharlene, returned to her stool and reaching down for her guitar, brushed her cinnamon-red hair off her face as she straightened. Something was missing. She felt her neck.

“Mick, where is my choker, my pearl choker?”

Mick raised his head above a pile of equipment. “I laid it out for you in the bus.”

“Best laid plans... Lesley!”

“I need my choker, it’s my signature song, and we go on in twenty minutes, get it from the bus for me, will you.”

“Yes, Ms. McCrary.” Lesley said, and whispered, “But uh, it’s Mr. Bigelow, says he is from Event Marketing. I asked him to wait, but he insisted on talking to you.”

“It’s okay, Les. Just please find my choker.”

Lesley pointed Mr. Bigelow to Sharlene and scampered off the stage toward the exit.

Sharlene stood and leaned her guitar against the stool. She extended her hand, “Mr. Bigelow, what can I do for you?”

“It’s what I can do for you,” he said as he shook her hand. He presented a clipboard holding some papers. “It’s about your car.”

“Oh, golly, the promotional payment, yes. I’m so excited.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sure they explained all the terms and conditions, but if you could sign here, then it’s yours.”

“What now? I thought—”

“After the show, yes. But well you see, your Mustang is the last on my truck, and I have eight others to deliver in Petoskey.”

“A long drive.”

He stroked his beard, and his face seemed to tuck into his shoulders. “Yes, could we, I mean, possibly do it now?”



“I’m on in less than twenty minutes, Mr. Bigelow.”

“Yes, of course, that’s a big ask, I understand, but if you could sign now, I’ll wait. Not a big problem.”

Sharlene smiled and signed the invoice. “Give a copy to Mick, and thanks.”

“Okay, and by the way, it is the same color as your dress, a midnight blue.”

Sharlene turned away and rolled her eyes as Bigelow walked toward Mick, still busy with cabling at the equipment pile.

*The first all-electric Mustang, they were going to deliver it days from now, but now, ooh and a photo op after the show, well, maybe.*

“Mr. Bigelow.”

\* \* \*

**Mace and Helyn moved from the ornate waiting room** to an equally-sized but the more functional architecture of the concourse. The room had a reconstituted black and white marble floor and rooms and walls showing signs of renovation progress. The white tented stage, a precaution against the somewhat-suspect ceiling, occupied a large corridor that once led to elevated rail platforms. The roof over the concourse, once a crystal wonder of glass and steel, was now a rusting skeleton picked clean by the vultures of time and weather.

A carpeted platform in front of the stage had VIP seating for a hundred, and a cluster of them, dark-suited and in animated conversation, gathered in a narrow aisle between two sections. A tall silver-haired woman in a white hooded coat, seemingly ready for a sleigh ride, stood out and gestured to Mace to join them.

Mace waved back. "Cassandra's over there," he said to Helyn.

"Always nice to see the Lieutenant Governor," Helyn said.

Mace hesitated in front of the platform. "Brings back memories."

"Not pleasant ones. You go."

"Meiler is still big in Michigan politics, and she is my boss, sort of."

Helyn looped her arm around Mace's. "How nice. Over it is."

Cassandra stretched her arms for a Hollywood embrace. "The Franklyns, how nice to see you both. What brings you here to Ford's big splash?"

Mace returned the gesture. "Sharlene gave us backstage passes."

"For behind the drapery."

"Helyn has a thing about that," Mace said, "but Sharlene and I went to high school together."

“Saint Claire?” Cassandra asked.

“Chandler,” Mace replied.

“Yes, of course. Well, you would have been a few years before me in any case,” Cassandra said.

“A few,” Helyn said, casting her eyes to the side.

“Well, this is going to be great for Michigan, and a boost for Detroit.”

“You’re speaking, I take it,” Helyn said.

“There are cameras, so of course, dear. But I wonder if we could chat a bit, Helyn. You are testifying before the State House Ways and Means, next week aren’t you.”

Helyn nodded.

A short black-haired woman touched Mace’s shoulder. “Mr. Franklyn, I’m sorry to interrupt lieutenant governor, I’m Lesley, Sharlene’s personal assistant, could we talk?”

“Politics is not my thing, so Cassandra, if you could excuse me.”

The women locked eyes and began a focused conversation.

Mace and Lesley stepped a few feet away. Lesley started explaining with searching for Sharlene’s choker. Mace half-listened and noticed a dark blue Mustang drifting through the east entrance to the

building. While Lesley continued to talk, it struck Mace as odd. There were no other vehicles on the concourse.

A split second later, he forgot about the car.

“Mr. Franklyn, Sharlene is missing.”

## Chapter Three

**With Mascara streaks trailing from her eyes,** Lesley looked more clown than a personal assistant, but Mace felt her anxiety. He nudged her in the direction of the stage. “What do you mean, Sharlene is missing?”

“Oh, God, she’s on in five minutes, I’m going to get fired.”

“Lesley, pull it together. When is the last time you saw her?”

“Ten minutes ago. She needed her choker. I didn’t know where it was...”

They mounted steps behind the stage. “Lesley, ten minutes, really?”

“You don’t understand; she is always on the stage a half-hour before. She never leaves.”

“Do you know why she did this time?”

“The Ford guy wanted to see her.”

“Ford guy?”

Lesley wiped tears with one hand, holding the pearl choker in the other. "I went to the trailer; I didn't know where it was, but ..."

"Lesley, what guy?"

"I had to find it. She never goes on without her choker."

Mace took hold of Lesley's shoulders. "Stop, just stop. Take a breath, Lesley. Now point out the Ford person to me."

Lesley sniffed and gazed around the room; her mouth opened, but she just shook her head.

"Did he have on a blue jacket?"

She nodded, confirming that he did. Mace saw Mick sitting on a pile of cables, his legs spread, and taking a long draw on something that its aroma said was not a cigarette. "Did you see which way Sharlene went?"

Mick jerked his head in the direction of stairs on the opposite end of the stage. "Parking, below."

Was this a case of new-toy-can't-wait-to-see-it, or something more concerning. Mace's gut said something was off. Mace jumped down the stairs taking two at a time.

A narrow corridor led to stairs for underground parking, but a chained gate blocked the stairwell after the first landing. Mace's jaw tensed. He turned to

retrace his steps but saw shoes protruding from under boxes stacked under the first flight of stairs.

Knocking the boxes aside, Mace found a balding man in a bloodied white shirt, a Ford nametag identified him as Roger Bigelow. Mace propped him against a carton and tapped his face.

“Mr. Bigelow, can you hear me? Are you alright?”

His eyes fluttered open; his free hand rose to the side of his head, clamping over a gash. A slight nod convinced Mace he was, and then blood oozing from his belt line convinced him otherwise.

Mace clamped his hand over the wound. “What happened?”

“I was...” He took in a deep breath. “I was coming from the carriage entrance, heard steps behind me, thought it was my partner. I turned...” Roger looked down at his side. “I think I’ve been stabbed.”

“Yes, you have, and you are bleeding badly. We need to get you help.”

Bigelow gave a slight nod and licked his dry lips.

Mace pulled his phone and dialed 911. “Do you remember anything? Any details?”

“Shaggy,” Bigelow said, and his eyes rolled back into his head.

“911, what is your...?”

“This is Mace Franklyn; I have a stabbing victim, a Ford employee at the MCS event in... hello?”

“Ple.. repeat.”

“He’s lost a lot of blood, MCS parking garage, east stairwell.” The static whispering back told Mace he wasn’t getting through. He moved his hand, and the bleeding increased. He clamped back down.

Mace set down the phone and tapped out a message to Helyn, giving her his location.

Car, there were at least ten on display in the general waiting area. Was the Mustang a ploy to get Sharlene? Or was there more?

Mace kept pressure on Bigelow’s wounds. It seemed an eternity, but his watch said it had been only five minutes when he heard the clicking of high heels. “Helyn, over here.”

Helyn and Cassandra rounded the bottom of the stairs, followed by two beefy men in black suits and comm gear, Cassandra’s security team. “Helyn, take over here. You two, get some EMTs here. He’s been stabbed.”

Helyn pulled off her scarf and pressed it against Bigelow’s wound.

“EMTs are on the way, ma’am.” One of the security men said.



Mace stood. "Cassandra, I think you should evacuate."

With that, her security spun Cassandra around, heading back up the stairs. Cassandra protested. "What, why?"

"Sharlene is missing, and it has something to do with a car," Mace said.

Her security prodding her forward, she twisted around to Mace. "A bomb?"

Mace brushed past Cassandra. "Possible, I might be paranoid, but better that than blown away."

"Notify DPD, Bob. We need to evacuate everyone, not just me."

"Yes, ma'am, and let's get you to your car."

Mace found a roll of paper towels at the back of the stage, ripped off some sheets, and wiped his hands. He scanned the scene around him. The VIP section in front of the stage was nearly full, and a small group of Ford officials gathered in front of the microphone chatting and smiling about their big day. A Ford security officer with stars on his collar interrupted the official's conversation. Their faces whitened to stone; the officer approached the standing microphone. "Everyone, please your attention. Attention, please. I'm sorry, things like this happen, but we have received a bomb threat. It's probably nothing, so please remain calm but do evacuate to the

front of the building. We will try to clear things and get back to our celebration as quickly as possible. Please go, please go now.”

Everyone in the VIP section stood and began moving toward the doors. Mace looked towards the carriage entrance and saw visitors still browsing the exhibits. Due to the acoustics, they likely did not hear the announcement.

Security guards spread out intercepting visitors and pointing them towards the central front entrance. Mace remembered the dark blue Mustang at the carriage entrance end of the concourse. A small family group, kids with balloons and mom pushing a stroller, were headed that way. Mace leaped from the stage and ran towards them. The family group stopped and changed course, diverting to an ice cream cart several car lengths away. *That is not far enough.*

Mace caught up to the family. “I’m sorry to interrupt your visit, especially the ice cream part,” he said, smiling at a balloon totting little girl, “but some crank called in a bomb scare. You need to evacuate, just as a precaution.”

“But I want my ice cream,” the girl said.

“Yes, well, this nice ice cream man is going to take his cart outside with you so you can have all the ice cream mom and dad will let you have out there.”

The girl smiled and turned with her parents, who strolled towards the exit.

Mace turned his attention to the blue Mustang. Except for the windshield, its heavily tinted side windows obscured everything. Mace was on the passenger side. He walked within a car length, and through the front, he could see someone was lying across the seat. He took a few steps closer. A tall thin man sporting a leather biker jacket and a Van Dyke goatee approached the driver's side.

“Hey, don’t go near that car,” Mace shouted.

Flashing his middle finger, he reached for the door handle. Too late, Mace saw the wire. He spun and dove for the floor.

The room blazed to white. A deafening steam-behemoth’s roar slammed his head. Dust and debris roiled with the force of raging rapids, tossing him as if a log across the floor. The blast slammed Mace, face down, into the wall, and pelted his back with fragments of glass and metal. When it stopped, he could only hear the shrill ringing in his sensory saturated ears.

Mace rolled over. Forcing himself up from the floor, the effort akin to peeling sagging January sap from a tree, he tried to focus. His eyes adjusting to a surreal haze, a soundless geyser of flame shooting from the car towards the high trusses of the concourse. Glass, metal, and exhausted plaster ripped from the walls by the blast, littered the floor. The charred body of the

thin man sat blackened against the opposite wall like a macabre beggar. There was no sign of the family.

Mace stumbled towards the mangled metal that was the Mustang. The shrill ringing faded, replaced by screams of the injured and deep thrumming hiss of the flaming geyser. Eyes regaining their focus, Mace saw legs protruding, and raced towards the inflamed vehicle. He took hold of the shoeless feet just as a surge of flame slapped at him, tossing his battered body back across the room and into the wall. His head throbbing, his legs sprawled in front of him, Mace stared at his hands. His final thought as his body shut down yielding to trauma: What's wrong with my hands?

## Chapter Four

**They stumbled out**, men, women, and children, engulfed in billows of black smoke. Choking and clinging to each other, they collapsed on the sod in front of the towering Michigan Central Station. Screaming emergency vehicles swarmed from every road leading to the station. An avalanche of men and equipment bounded from them as they jammed the access roads in front. In their midst, a black SUV, red and blue lights pulsing from behind a black gaping grill lurched to a halt.

Three dark-suited detectives with silver medallions slung from their necks, and Sergeant Anstice Behrenhardt jumped out of the vehicle. Brushing her auburn hair off her face, she barked orders into her communicator. “Secure the perimeter and hold everyone. Give EMTs access, but no one leaves.”

“Secure the site of the explosion,” she yelled at the men as they charged into the building. Ribbons of white fire hose shot out from two pumpers as the fireman raced inside. Anstice looked around for the white-helmeted battalion chief. Recognizing him, he stood between a specialized pumper, hook and ladder combination known as a quint, and initial attack truck shouting into his communicator.

Anstice sprinted over. “Charlie, preserve the crime scene, minimize the water.”

“And you sweet talk your perps into giving up their guns.”

“Charlie.”

He waved her off, just as numerous voices squawked at him from his radio. “You’ve got two bodies in there. Fires out.”

Anstice nodded. It wasn’t what she was hoping, but hard to avoid with fires, all the trace evidence down the drains with the water. She picked up her pace and jogged into the building.

The front main waiting area with its high vaulted ceiling was accumulating the smoke, and firefighters were already setting up massive fans to clear the building. She passed through the cavernous former waiting room, through the central train lobby, and into the concourse. She followed the hoses to the left and east side of the building. A blackened mass of melted plastic and twisted steel occupied the center of the east end, a yellow tarp over what was once the front seat told her she had a body. Another tarp draped on the north wall raised the tally, and EMTs were attending to someone on the south. She started there. “He still with us?” she asked of the attending EMT.

“Lucky. Caught a concussion, but his heavy jacket saved him from the flames.”

He had thick dark brown hair that dangled over his brow and a close-cropped beard that outlined a sharply defined jaw. Anstice squatted down in front of him. "Sir, can you hear me?"

Eyes closed. Mace gave a tenuous nod.

"What's your name, can you tell me that?"

"Mace... uh, Franklyn."

"Good. Can you tell me anything about what happened here?"

He opened his brown eyes and pushed forward from the wall. He fumbled with his back pocket.

"You want to show me something? Here let me help." Anstice pulled out his wallet and flipped it open. She saw his Michigan Bureau of Investigation ID.

"Oh, MBI. Your guys will be trampling all over my crime scene in five minutes. So, before they do, what happened here? Why were you near this car?"

"Sharlene McCrary."

"The singer?"

Mace nodded. "Staff said she was missing. She texted me, thought she was in the car."

"So, the body inside is McCrary?"

Mace shook his head. "Not sure."

“She texted you over, but you're not sure? Okay, did you know the other victim, on the other side of the hall, here?”

“No, triggered the explosion, though. Tripwire.”

The emergency medical technician returned, handing Mace a bottle of water, and with another EMT placed a flattened transport bed next to him. “We have to get him to Chandler Trauma and checked out.”

They slid Mace onto the bed and expanded it up onto its wheels. “Do you still have your phone?” Anstice asked.

Mace felt the front of his jacket and retrieved his phone. “Thanks, we’ll see who sent that text message.”

“Mace, Mace, are you, all right?”

Mace nodded.

“Are you related? One EMT asked.

“I’m his wife... uh, ex actually.”

“We’re taking him to DMC Chandler if you want to ride along.”

“No, I can’t, Mace... the bodies.” Helyn turned towards the medical technician, “I’m the state medical examiner, the lieutenant governor was here, and these bodies and any forensics are high priority.” Facing Anstice, she added, “Could you see to his car and get him back to Ypsilanti, uh, detective—”



“Sergeant, Anstice Behrenhardt, and yes, I will.”

“Let’s go, Mr. Franklyn, we can’t hold your bus forever.”

Mace tossed Anstice his car keys from his jacket pocket, and the EMTs moved Mace toward the line of emergency vehicles at the east carriage entrance. Anstice followed their movement until she caught sight of a tall scowling man, stridently approaching her from the center of the building, the site of the old train lobby. His head covered in a fuzz of gray, bent and thrusting ahead, gave the aura of a prizefighter entering the ring. She pocketed Mace’s phone. *Here comes heartburn.*

He held his ID in an outstretched hand as he approached. “Detective Sergeant Gavin McIlrath, Michigan Bureau of Investigation.”

“Sergeant Behrenhardt, Anstice Behrenhardt, DPD Major Crimes. Nice to meet you, McIlrath, but I don’t recall requesting your assistance.”

Gavin’s brown eyes narrowed as he gave her a thin smile. Anstice sensed an attitude, a taunt of sorts, as if anyone, not MBI associated, were backwater amateurs.

Gavin pocketed his ID. “Look, we appreciate your quick response and covering this incident for us until we could get here. Lansing is a bit of a—”

Anstice cocked her head. "Excuse me, covering? Detective, this is Detroit, not a rural township. Detroit has suffered many things, but we can still investigate our murders."

Gavin held up his hands. "I have no doubt. Lansing thinks highly of DPD's Major Crimes. However, Lieutenant Governor Meiler was here and thought we should be also. So, for now, could you just bring me up to speed."

"Fine, do you know Mace Franklyn?"

"Of him. He's a consultant, works directly for Director Ashford."

"Well, they just carted him away to be checked out at Chandler. He was searching for Sharlene McCrary."

"The activist singer?"

"Yes, she was due to perform, and her staff said she was missing. Mace thought she was in this car and approached it. Fortunately for him, that guy over there reached the car before Mace did."

"Have you verified the victim inside?"

"I was about to take a look."

The low pulsed growl of a diesel drew their attention over to the carriage entrance. The tall entrance doors hacked away by the firefighters now provided access for a flatbed truck.

“My crime scene or not, it looks like your FSD boys are coming for this mess.”

“Well, before they do, shall we do it together then?”

“Sure.”

They approached the burned auto. Anstice focused on the body, put the back of her hand to her face adjusting to the coppery stench, and pulled a pair of latex gloves from her jacket pocket. Gavin seemed more interested in the vehicle. Noticing Gavin wasn't putting on gloves, she yanked another pair from her pocket. “MBI short on supplies, or are you always this prepared?”

“I was at dinner when I got the call.”

Anstice nodded and reached over the yellow tarp and drew it back. Underneath, a blackened torso with splayed legs and fingerless arms contorted towards the chest. Sightless coal-black voids stared back at her from a skull devoid of features, and now a charred orb.

“Going to be tough to identify, Gavin, whichever forensic lab gets the body.”

Gavin was intent on smelling the melted mass of the wreckage. Anstice thought he was olfactory challenged. “This was no random act. Enhanced Napalm, triethylaluminium accelerant was used to burn at a higher temperature.”

“That is some nose. You an explosives expert.”

"No, just seen this before. Car fire like this is a known serial killer's hallmark. Someone we are pursuing, and that is why from here on, this is an MBI case. We'll keep you in the loop, of course."

Anstice smirked and shook her head in reluctant agreement.

The truck backed to within a few yards of the wreckage, its flatbed tilted towards the floor. "And I think they targeted Mace."

Anstice replaced the tarp. "Why do you think that?"

"Mace was once a special agent, FBI, claimed he knew the identity of a serial killer, dubbed the Vulcan by the press. He had a similar MO. But then Mace had some sort of breakdown, killings stopped, and then the Vulcan went silent. That was five years ago."

"So, you think the Vulcan did this?"

Gavin coiled his face into a sneer. "He did, and when I get him, which I will, he'll pay."

## Chapter Five

**Sharlene was aware** of her being tossed back and forth, her feet dragging across the ground. Questions rolled through her consciousness, intensifying and fading, like waves in a heavy sea. *Why was the door locked? Why drive me? Why so tired? Do I care?* The tiredness held her. It was a comforting grip. A spark in her brain summoned her attention. *Where am I going? Oh, let me sleep? How much champagne did I drink?*

Sharlene couldn't find the answers, her mind caged in a fog. Her arm scraped against rough concrete; the resulting shot of pain screamed *wake up*. She shook her head, the haze slipped two fingers from its grasp, and cracking her eyes, she saw a blur of white and gray. She heard heavy breathing, but it wasn't her. She slipped from the force, holding her up.

Down she was going down, falling, a feather-free, floating lower. It was okay. *No, what's happening.* She attempted to focus and reconcile the blur. But her head fell resting on something cold and hard. She couldn't lift it, too heavy to care. She felt it creeping over her, a dampness, a cold damp, like after winter rain. A wisp of air passed over her carrying a pungent smell that stung her nose. She twisted away; every inch was an improvement.

She opened her eyes and tried to focus, but just lay staring. She heard heavy breaking. Wherever she was, she wasn't alone. Bulky, dull brown shoes stood together inches from her face.

Sharlene spun over scooting on all fours, her skirt bunching up at her waist, she plastered herself against a wall. A stout man in black denim stood in the shoes. His arms and legs were thick and taut. He remained unmoving, a life-sized gargoyle.

"Mr. Bigelow? What... where are... why?"

His face, a large beak-like nose encased in a shaggy ring of beard, large rounded orbs for eyes, dark and hungry for her fear, stared down. "Bigelow had an accident; he ran into my knife." Then he smiled, a grin broad and long in the tooth, filled with a jagged mismatch of teeth each seemingly in a competition to supplant the other.

Sharlene started shaking; her grogginess flushed away by fear-driven adrenalin. "What does he want with me? Am I still at MCS?"

"Security."

Bigelow, or whatever his name was, burst into laughter, then with a mocking pout, slowly shook his head.

*No security.* Sharlene was fully conscious; reality throttled her brain. Kidnapped and against him, probably helpless.

“Stay away from me. Don’t move, or I’ll... just don’t move, okay.”

Her words were met with gurgling laughter, but he didn’t move. Sharlene swallowed hard, and with her back against the wall, inched herself upright, pulling down her skirt. He was no more than two steps away from her. To her left, she saw a stairway, the source of her earlier feeling of falling. *Likely the way out.* Fearing she would telegraph her intentions, she kept staring back at him. From her quick look, she judged it was four strides to reach the stairs. If she made it, she would have the advantage. Working the Stairmaster was central to her daily gym routine. Judging by his looks, he had massive strength, but at a cost to his endurance.

Sharlene glanced toward the stairs and then back at him. *What were the odds?* She surveyed the room. The walls were naked concrete; there was a damp, musty smell, and no windows. The man stood among a row of metal tables. Pale blue sheets covered two the farthest away, their irregular surface sending chills surging through her. *Were they bodies?* A third closer but several paces away from the man had metallic tools on it. One she eyed would make a decent weapon, she thought.

“What is this place? Why did you bring me here?”

“Ulama has need of you.”

“Ulama? Who the hell is this Ulama?”

From the shadows beyond the tables came a voice, calm, measured, almost mechanical. "I am he."

Ulama rolled into the light, his motion jerky, suggesting mechanical movement. He was sitting in a wheelchair and dressed in loose-fitting black pants and shirt. His face, hidden under a turban with an end wrapped across it, pronounced an oddity. The visible area around his eyes was dark, but his eyes, catching the light, were bright, burning. He rolled closer but remained in the shadows. "Did you fail me?"

"No, no, my Ulama, I did just as you instructed."

"He lives."

"Not for long, my Ulama, I have prepared his car. I took it to the hospital, and it waits for him now."

The Ulama nodded. "Excellent, now we must prepare. Time is short."

Sharlene didn't know who they were talking about, but they weren't paying attention to her. She had to act.

She twisted, hugging the wall, lunging for the stairs. A raised fist plummeted towards her. Hands raised, she ducked her head, but he connected crashing down on her before another step driving her into the floor. Everything went black.

Tugging at her blouse, impatient Sabriel, her blond curly-haired seven-year-old, was insistent.



“Mommy, mommy, wake up.” *Mommy’s here curly-cue, why do you think I’m sleeping?* Adrift on a frozen pond, a smooth coldness caressed her, and then a warmth lifted her slipping off her blouse. Her bra hooks released, her blue sequined skirt drifted from under her. Sharlene’s nakedness immersed in an icy touch, summoned survival, adrenalin surged. Eyes failing to open, her head twisted, her leaden arms struggled to lift, to push away, but they raised only a body hair off the cold surface.

Leather, the smell of it, a musky soap, landed smooth and broad over her legs, her thighs and chest restrained below her modest round breasts. A strap tightening against her throat spurred a gasp for air. Her eyes shot open.

“What are you doing?”

“Preparing you for my Ulama.”

He dropped a terrycloth sheet over her.

Warmth began to build into her limbs. She struggled against the restraints, but now rather than comforting, they cut into her flesh. If the Gargoyle covered her, he was not going to rape her, at least not now. If he were going to kill her, he would have done it already. No, he or they needed her for something. She needed help. She needed a friend, and the Gargoyle would have to do.

“What is your name?”

“No names.”

“You remind me of a bear. So, Bear, why did you bring me here? Why am I tied down?”

Bound to a cold surface, she explored using every nerve ending. She was on some sort of table. There was a space under her genitalia.

Ulama sat watching, just outside her restrained view. “Already you are trying.”

“I’m naked and strapped to a friggin table, what am I trying?”

“To escape. Your spirit is strong. Allah will be pleased with the sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? What are you going to do you perv, throw me into a volcano?”

She perceived Ulama was smiling, a thin smile, one of amusement, like watching a child at play. “That is the trouble with you corrupt Americans; you only think the way Hollywood tells you to think. I can tell you this, you will get your chance at freedom, but first, you must be purified.” He drifted back into the shadows. “Sar will attend to you now. You will awake with the others, and I’m sure they have much to tell you. But first, you must be purified.”

Sar, the stout man, moved closer to Sharlene, rolling a tall medical pole with an IV bag hanging on it. He wiped her arm with an orange-red substance.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleansing your skin. We don’t want you to die... yet.”

The IV line began to fill, Sharlene tried again to engage Sar. “What... what is this table used for?”

“Embalming.”

## Chapter Six

**His body sedated;** his mind continued processing the trauma.

Mace raised his head off the littered MCS concourse floor. A gaping blue door attached like crumpled paper to a blackened car frame exposed a pair of legs. “Vulcan, Mace, he’s back. I thought you took care of that.” Said a voice in his head, that of his old FBI boss,

A roar of flame brought his attention back to the car. The front seat a charred black hole, flames licking at every side. And the legs, unmoving, logs on a fire. No, there was something else; he had to get to her. They were Sharlene’s legs.

He struggled to get up, but some invisible force, rubbery and tenacious in its grip, held him down. Then inexplicably, he was at her legs. *Got to get her out.* He grabbed her calves, but something didn’t make sense.

The images jumped. He heard it before seeing. A deep hissing from flames hungry to add him to the pyre. Mace dove for the floor. A searing hand thrust over him, scooping him like leaves before the wind, tossing him across the floor.

His face contorted with the dream, struggling against medical restraints, synapses holding memories from a different time fired.

He was on a street corner. The corner street signs read *2nd Ave.* and *Ledyard St.* A lone slender figure, head down, dark hoodie shrouding his face, weaved through the eddies of abandoned sculptured storefronts on Ledyard toward Cass Street. Mace knew the cloaked man not by sight, not by voice, but by what he did. A gust blew his hood back, his hairless head twisted, their eyes locked, and Mace called, “Jirair, Jirair.”

Two hands, gentle, careful hands, tenderly pressed down on his chest. “Mr. Franklyn, Mr. Franklyn, you have a visitor.”

Mace blinked open his eyes, a glaring blur of white assaulting as he sought to focus on the soothing voice. *Why was I dreaming about Jirair? What brought that on?*

Gentle Hands had brown eyes and full lips, which rendered a welcoming smile. She wore a crisp gown of narrow pink stripes with her gray hair pulled tightly back.

She removed the restraint on his arm, inspecting the tube taped below his elbow as she did. “Careful how you move this arm. You should stay awake for a while; we have taken you off the sedation.”

“A visitor? What day is it, anyway?”

“Monday,” she said, raising the bed and punching up his pillow, “you suffered a serious concussion, we kept you over the weekend to monitor the swelling; it went down.” She said and flashed a smile.

“Good to hear,” he said and fell back into his pillow, his eyes closing. “Okay, I guess I’m ready to talk, show Helyn in.”

“Helyn?”

“Yes, my ex, my visitor.”

“Sorry, no, it is the police,” she said, pulling a privacy curtain to the wall.

There was another bed in the suite. It was empty. The nurse stepped into a hall separated from his room by a sliding glass door. She motioned to someone out of sight from Mace.

A woman in a light gray jacket and matching pants appeared. Her tightly-curved red hair framed a slender face, pale but, oddly, also seeming to have a red hue.

“Mace, hi, I’m Anstice Behrenhardt, detective Sergeant, Major Crimes, Detroit Police Department, do you remember? We talked briefly at Michigan Central.”

Mace pushed himself up, bracing against the pillows. “Yeah, it’s fuzzy, but I remember your voice.”

Anstice held up a plastic bag with Mace's phone in it. "I wanted to return this. We downloaded your logs. The text message was from Sharlene's phone, but we haven't found it yet. At least detective Gavin McIlrath hasn't said as much."

"Gavin?"

She put the phone on a side table next to the bed. "Oh, I thought you knew him, detective Sergeant, MBI. They took over the investigation."

"Great. No, I don't know Gavin, but I'm glad state is taking point on this. I have a lot of questions myself."

"Do you remember anything else about what happened?"

"I thought MBI was lead."

Anstice scowled, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Yeah, well, in case you haven't noticed, I'm not a mushroom."

"Kept in the dark, okay, I get it."

"So..."

Mace gave her a blank look.

"So, walk me through it. What happened?"

"Right. We were talking with Cassandra Meiler..."

"We?"

“Helyn was with me. Anyway, they wanted to talk about politics when Lesley, Sharlene’s assistant, tapped my shoulder and asked for my help in finding her boss.”

“Sharlene McCrary.”

“Yes, that’s right, Sharlene. I thought it was an over-reaction, but I was looking for a conversation exit. So I agreed to help. In hindsight, I shouldn’t have reacted that way. Sharlene wanted to meet because she thought someone was stalking her. I went backstage and found out she had walked off toward underground parking with some Ford rep to see her new Mustang.”

“Did you find it?”

“No access to parking, and worse, it was locked from the inside, that’s when I got worried. Retracing my steps, I found the real Ford rep, Mr. Bigelow, bleeding, and buried under some boxes. I put pressure on his wound and texted my ex to get help. She took over. That’s when I recalled a blue Mustang creeping onto the concourse earlier, and that is where I headed.”

“Directly to the car?”

“Well, almost. A family and an ice cream vendor were close by where the Mustang was parked, and I don’t know why, but I got all border collie about it and just had to move them away. That may have cost that other fellow's life.”



“John Black, the other body we found against the opposite wall from you.”

“Yeah, I guess so. He approached the car, I tried to warn him off, saw the tripwire on the door, yelled, and dove for the concrete.”

“Good thing you did. That and your leather jacket likely saved your life.”

“Actually, I was fine at that point. It was the second explosion that nearly killed me.”

“Second?”

“Yes, I remember rolling over on my back and seeing the car about twenty feet away, legs protruding from the front seat. Thought it was Sharlene. I scrambled to her and grabbed her calves to pull her out. But hell erupted. Next thing I knew, I was lying against the wall, and this woman with her hair on fire was asking me questions.”

Anstice smiled and nodded.

*Okay, I'm flirting. Why? Focus Mace boy, you still have to get straight with Helyn.* But he admitted to himself, it felt good, a spark of freedom.

“Did Bigelow say anything?”

Mace shook his head. “Have you talked to him? Oh... he didn't make it.”

“No, he didn’t,” Anstice said, shaking her lowered head.

They were silent for a moment, and then Mace cocked his head, looking at a blank space on the bed.

“You remember something?” Anstice asked.

“Yeah, he said, ‘shaggy.’”

“Shaggy? That’s all?”

Mace just nodded in reply.

“Look, um, you are probably getting out of here soon. I wanted you to know I had your car moved here to patient parking, last row in the back.” She showed him his keys and dropped them on the side table.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. Someday I will return the favor.”

“Good to hear, and this might be *someday*.”

“How you mean.”

“MBI, mushrooms, be nice to be kept in the loop. I don’t get many chances at big cases, being a woman, and some at DPD see a female detective more of a token oxy-moron than actuality.”

“Believe me, whatever I can do to keep you in the loop and me out of trouble, I’ll do. Sharlene was a

friend, and not the only reason for me wanting to solve this. More eyes, the better.”

Anstice reached to shake his hand, but realizing the drip line was in that arm, just tapped it instead. “Good, I left my card with your keys. Let me know when you are back on your feet.”

Mace gave a feeble wave with his other hand as Anstice left. Then recounting what he had said, he stared at his hands.

*What is it? I can't remember?*

## Chapter Seven

**Resting at home for a day** was all Mace could stand. Dorian's call for an early morning meeting was a welcomed surprise. Now Wednesday morning, Mace parked his BMW in the government center underground garage below Building One, next to a silver Mercedes, Director Dorian Ashford's, his boss. He then took the connecting tunnel to Building Three, and Helyn's office at the state morgue. His body bruised and reluctant to move, he had a feeling of dread. Something about the car explosion and fire didn't add up, and why had the incident triggered thoughts about his last unsolved FBI case.

The Vulcan murders were five years in the past, but his mind drifted back. Everything was going well. He was eighteen months into his marriage to Helyn, well thought of at Quantico's Violent Crime Center, and lead on the investigation, his big opportunity. Instead, what no one suspected struck, the case, his marriage, and his career all fell apart. That history hung like anchor-chain on him. Something he had pushed to the dark recesses of his mind, until Friday.

The morgue was in the basement. A dark, windowless place drenched in the blue-white glow of neon. He checked in at the security desk and deposited his Ruger into a lockbox. The Burn Lab

was a short walk along a gray-tiled corridor populated with askew, abandoned gurneys, and gaping specimen collections boxes.

Helyn met him at the door, hands thrust into pockets on a white lab coat, her gold hair coiled under a net. Mace managed a thin smile, but she stood business-focused and held up a hand, stopping him. “You can’t go in, Mace. We will have to talk here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should have checked in with your office, with Dorian, before you came down.”

“I’m off the case? I was there at the scene.”

“Exactly, you are a victim, collateral, but a victim nonetheless, and you have a history with the case.”

“History, this is a new case.”

“They said it was the Vulcan active again.”

Mace took a step toward Helyn. “Come on, Helyn. I want to get back to how we were back then, our FBI days, but no way can it be the Vulcan.” He said, placing a hand on her shoulder to turn her around towards the lab doors.

“Stop, Mace.” She pushed his hand away. “You can’t go inside. Sharlene’s body is burned to a crisp, no trace can be recovered. Believe me, I tried.”

“It’s not Sharlene.”

“You seem to be in sole possession of that information.”

“I’m telling you it is not Sharlene, I know it isn’t”

“Why? Because you’re having an affair with her like you did that bimbo blonde five years ago. What did that get you, the clap? Not that I care now, of course. It’s your life.”

Mace clenched his jaw, took a breath, and then said, “I’m sorry you were hurt, but your cooler head knows it wasn’t the clap. It was encephalitis, equine. The only intimacy I had was with a mosquito. And why won’t you move in with me, get a house.”

Helyn turned her back to Mace. She was obviously dabbing her eyes. Mace reached up, his hands hovering over her shoulders, but then he dropped them at his sides. “Look, I’m... I’m sorry, I... the explosion, I probably should have stayed at home, given it another day. But something is off. I went to pull her body out of the car, and it wasn’t right.”

Helyn turned around, sniffing, her hand under her nose. She swallowed. “How? How was it not right.”

“That’s what I can’t figure, I can’t remember.”

Helyn shook her head, gave a weak smile, and rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead. “Look, this is what I can tell you. The fire was very intense. Her hands were tied together with wire,

clamped over her mouth, teeth gone. All the tells of..."

Mace shook his head. "The Vulcan.

"They transported Sharlene here still attached to the back seat," Helyn said. "she wasn't alive when he touched her. There were only trace amounts of soot in her throat. We haven't determined cause of death."

Mac focused on his phone, continued making notes. "You're working on that, right?"

"Body is too badly burned. Flesh and body fat fused to blackened bones. No way to discover trauma or punctures, even a bullet would be a teardrop of lead, if we could find it. It was a high-intensity fire like I said."

"What about an MRI?"

"The Vulcan did it, Mace. What would be the point?"

"To determine cause. Hell, to determine anything, height, age, anything."

"We found trace, an accelerant, methanol, commonly called wood naphtha, and MEKP, it was in her epidermis. MEKP burns intensely and is very unstable. But something the Vulcan always used."

A grimace stretched across his face, not the words he wanted to hear. "Coincidence, that's all. Methanol is commonly available if you have the street smarts to

find it, and anyone working with plastics has access to MEKP.”

Helyn tilted her head and formed a face reflecting Mace’s. “We arguing semantics here, Mace? Getting methanol takes effort, but MEKP is only available in a diluted form. To get a fire, this intense would require an explosive concentration. Think that happened?”

“It is also a common terrorist compound. There are probably so many recipes on the web that you can have it in flavors and colors.”

Helyn folded her arms, her leg forward in a defiant pose. “He bound Sharlene’s hands so tight, that the wire left pipe thread marks on her wrist... another Vulcan trademark.”

“But not with steel wire.”

“And you deduced that because...”

“You didn’t mention it.”

“You’re right. It was twisted-copper wire, common household extension cord.”

*Good an inconsistency, not much, but it was something.* “Toxicology?”

“You really trying to get me in trouble here? I’ve told you too much all ready.”

Mace tilted his head, prompting waiting for her answer.



She sighed. “Negative.”

Nodding, Mace pursed his lips, trying to hold back the thought pounding to get out of his head. “I had to go Friday. You know that.”

Helyn shoved her hands into her lab coat pockets and glanced at a hall clock on the wall behind Mace. “Not even fifteen minutes, I was wondering how long...”

“You’re right, but I can’t let go. It seems so right for us.

“You’re pushing Mace, Too hard, too soon. A girl needs time to think. I mean a house together, that is more than being just together. I’m not sure I am ready for that.”

“Come on, Helyn, we have been, more or less, living together for six months. How is that too fast?”

“I have other bodies to work on this case, and I have been working long hours for days now. I have given you more than I should have on Sharlene.

“Wait, more bodies?”

Helyn placed her hands on his chest. I’m glad you are okay, but you need to talk to Dorian, Gavin McIlrath is lead. “Mace, I’m tired. I want to wrap it up, get back to my apartment, and get some rest. You have to go now.”

Mace leaned down to kiss her, but Helyn turned her head and took a step back. “I still have things at your

townhouse,” she said with a smile, “perhaps I can stop by sometime. We could have a drink.”

“Sounds like a date.”

Mace walked back down the tunnel. With more bodies, he had more questions. Sharlene was right to be worried and ask for his help. The question remaining: was that her in the car or someone else? He had to find out, his future was on the line.

## Chapter Eight

**Meeting with Helyn provided more questions** than answers, but gave Mace a chance to formulate his arguments for Dorian. In the tunnel heading to building one, he collected his thoughts. If it were a question of who was lead, Mace was comfortable in his consultant role. He arrived at the elevator well for One Government Way. *Gavin can have it, mostly paperwork anyway.*

Dorian, after all, was cautious and preferred experienced agents work high profile cases. Wrapping the Motel Murderer case last year should have checked that box. Stepping in, he punched the fifth-floor button, and his hopes rose with him. He reached Dorian's office, ten minutes early. Entering, it was not what he expected.

Everyone was already there, gathered around an informal setting of sofas and overstuffed chairs that encircled an oval coffee table embossed with the state seal.

Dorian seated behind his large oak desk, his gray hair combed slightly forward, cocked his head as Mace entered. His bushy black eyebrows accentuating steel-blue eyes, locked onto his. Dorian was dressed in his unwavering wardrobe of choice, a charcoal

gray three-piece suit, and had already banished the jacket to the back of his chair. Dorian motioned for him to join the group.

Mace flashed a grin and closed the door behind him.

“You know everyone, I believe, Mace. Lieutenant Governor Meiler, Emmett Loveland, agent-in-charge of the regional FBI office in Detroit, and Gavin McIlrath.” He said, and then tapping his forehead with one hand, continued, “Oh, no, that’s not correct, you would not have met Gavin, he is from the Sault MBI field office. Okay, that’s it, please sit down.”

Mace eyed the room, giving a thin and wary smile as he took note of a straight-backed wooden chair placed at the rear of the settee to fill the anticipated need. Cassandra, dressed in a black pants suit accented by a band of pearls, had her long black hair assemble into a bun on top of her head. Seated in a high-backed stuffed chair next to Dorian’s desk, she looked like a dark queen holding court. As lieutenant governor, for this meeting, as political head of the MBI, she was, in fact, the queen.

He moved to the chair, sensing the room. Over the weekend, the press and social media had associated him with the perpetrator behind Sharlene’s murder and tagged revenge as a motive. Mace was sure the resurgence of the Vulcan name would create political fallout less than laudatory for Cassandra. Damage control would be her sole focus.

Gavin and a familiar adversary, Emmitt Loveland, faced each other, occupying separate love-seat sized sofas on either side of the table. Gavin's agenda was a mystery, but he could hear Emmitt sharpening his knives. Mace was farthest from Dorian, his back against the wall. Gavin was looking at him stone-faced. Emmitt, sipping coffee, seemed reluctant to acknowledge Mace's presence. It smelled like an ambush.

"Nice to see everyone. I wasn't expecting such a warm welcome. I... I mean, I assume that's what this is."

"We are of course," Dorian said, "happy to see you in good health, but—"

"I'm canceling your contract." Cassandra said, "In fact, I don't want you anywhere near any MBI offices."

"What, why is that a problem—"

"Because you fucked it up the first time," Emmitt said.

Mace looked across the state seal to Dorian for a sign of where he stood. Dorian sat stoically, eyes unblinking, hands folded on his desk in front of him. But he had something to say. A habit of puckering his lips before divulging what was on his mind was the tell. It was more of a ruling on a disagreement than a statement, but Dorian wouldn't reveal it until all the heat was out of the room. Then he would push

back from his desk. This Mace had observed since his academy days, and during his stint as lead on the Motel Murders task force. Lips pursing Dorian wasn't moving.

"There were two other murders, you might not be aware," Gavin said. Gavin looked like his face was lifted in the winter from Mount Rushmore. A thin blanket of gray hair topped a chiseled face, every feature abruptly raised, and deep-set brown eyes bore into their target.

"Eighteen months ago, snowplow discovered a lass burned in her Audi A4 in Romulus, and six months later another, a BMW this time, in Wayne. Five months after that, Sharlene. Same MO, hands bound over a toothless mouth, intense heat, burning everything away. If you hadn't known Sharlene, had the files from these three murders laid out before you, based on your experience, your FBI experience, who would you say was behind these killings? Hmm? Be blunt."

Mace began a slow shake of his head. "It's not the Vulcan if that's your target."

"Why you in denial?" Mace's head snapped toward the source, Emmitt. Their eyes locked like lasers seeking their targets. "You have some crystal ball we don't know about?" He leaned back into the sofa. "You were really into the Vulcan case, obsessed even, no one could do enough until you screwed up

the evidence chain. You had a guy, didn't you? Jirair Houssain."

"Yes, my gut was that Jirair Houssain was the Vulcan. What is your point?"

"Funny thing, after you got the boot, poof, no more Houssain. Why is that? What happened to him? More importantly, to my career after you freaked out."

"I lost my job."

"Yeah, I had it worse. I had to stay in mine. I've worked my ass off got my rep back, and you are not screwing it up again."

"Vulcan is what the press is going to say," Cassandra interrupted, "they will use your involvement to substantiate their case, and your history will bring other cases back into the public eye. I can't have that."

"Okay, fine, I'm off the case. But I'm telling you now, Sharlene isn't dead, she is alive, and I think the others are also. So to me that says it's not the Vulcan."

"You are saying a kidnapping and a murder?" Dorian asked. "What has led you to this conclusion?"

"You're not going to like this, but right now it is just a feeling. Something happened at the explosion."

"Yeah, like you hit your head," Emmitt said.

“My head is fine. Thanks for asking. But if I could get a little time, I’m convinced I can prove they are alive. I just don’t know how just yet.”

Dorian pushed back from his desk and stood. “I agree with the Lieutenant Governor. Your public association with this case will make it more difficult to find whoever committed these crimes and raise the public’s level of anxiety.”

Fingering a tan legal envelope, Dorian walked toward Mace. “However, when you are not emotionally involved, your instincts are incisive. Therefore, I have convinced the Lieutenant Governor to offer this support contract for the state’s cold case task force.”

Mace accepted the envelope. “If you accept,” Dorian said, returning to his desk, “Sergeant Peter Mock will be expecting you in his office adjacent to the case archives in the basement this morning.”

Mace pulled the contract from the envelope, his eyes scanned the text, but mulling his next move, he did not comprehend the words. “Fine, but can I at least see the ME’s report. I mean, I did work the original cases, maybe I’ll see something.”

Dorian settled again behind his desk. “All right, but Gavin is MBI lead, the FBI, Emmitt, has the case, and everything you do, Mace, you run by me first.”

“Noted, Dorian, got it. Cold cases.”



“Right, good,” Dorian said, rising from his chair, Cassandra we must not keep you from your busy schedule, thank you for your input this morning.”

Everyone stood as Cassandra rose from her seat. She left. Mace followed, closing the door as Dorian in a muted voice called Gavin and Emmitt to remain.

In the hall, Cassandra turned toward the capital bridge, Mace, for the stairs. She took a step and then spun around to face him. “Mace, no offense, it’s just politics. I’m a ... making a run for governor and don’t want to raise ghosts. But, knowing you, I’m sure you’ll do what’s right, as you did with Roger.”

She resumed walking towards the capital building. Mace froze, wondering what just happened. Cassandra Meiler was the heiress of the oldest and wealthiest family in Michigan. She was the start-up money behind his profile consulting business, and Roger was her husband, Or at least he was until he used the MBI for his political advantage, and did everything he could to get Mace thrown off the Motel Murders case. Somehow his death had catapulted Cassandra into Michigan politics and the office of lieutenant governor. Mace got a lot of push back on that case, threatened with the loss of his license, and put Helyn in jeopardy. But he dug hard and deep and solved the case in spite of everything. Was that what she was suggesting?

He didn’t know.



## Chapter Nine

**“Mama, I had a scary dream, can I sleep with you?”**

Sharlene, on her side, hugging a pillow opened her eyes. They strained to focus. It was Sabriel. Her golden-haired seven-year-old with blue pleading eyes. Long strands of cork-screw ringlets fell over her shoulder, and glistening traces of tears streaked cheeks, still holding fast to their puffy origins. Sharlene smiled and attempted to raise her covers to offer a welcoming embrace. Her arms wouldn't move. Two hands emerged from the night behind her daughter, Sabriel screaming, they jerked her shoulders, dragging her into the black.

“Sabriel!” Sharlene screamed and rolled upright. She was on a bare mattress, the cold triggering a shudder through her body. From behind her in the pitch-black void that surrounded, a slender arm fell over, wrapping around her waist. Sharlene's eyes adjusted, finding a faint light. Someone was lying in front of her. Less seeing and more sensing, she determined the features of two bodies pressing against her. They were women. From their slow breathing, she recognized they were asleep, blending, curve and mound, fused to hers.

She pushed upward from a coarse cotton surface. “No,” a voice hesitantly mumbled behind her, “you... need... rest, sweetie.”

Sharlene hesitated. Was she in danger? What kind of women would thrust their bodies so close to hers? A cold wave roiled, she drifted down into their warmth. She wasn’t in the damp musky room; at least she didn’t think so. She became more aware. She was fully clothed, that was a plus. The top and back of her white silk blouse were damp. Her hair wet, perspiration on her forehead, another tremor racked the length of her body.

Her lips quivered. “Where are we? What happened?”

“Shhh.” The one in front of her breathed.

“I... I must know. Oh God, am I going to see my daughters?”

The woman behind her sighed. “I’m Coria. I was taken by Sar, I think the same way you were, almost a year ago. Trina’s been here six months.”

“A year, six months, oh my God, why?”

“That we can’t answer.” Trina said, “I see him every day. He doesn’t say much, except it will happen soon.”

Trina rolled onto her back and pulled Sharlene to her.

“No, what are you doing.”

“Trying to help you,” Trina said, “You are sweating, you have chills, you are sick. We don’t have blankets, just us to keep you warm. Give in. Lay down. You definitely will not see your daughters again if you’re dead.”

Sharlene gave in and laid on top of Trina. Coria climbed on top, clasping hands with Trina, who pulled them all tightly together.

Trina cradled Sharlene’s head. For an instant, Sharlene was afraid she was going to kiss her. “What we do know,” Trina said in a hushed voice, “is that Sar did some sort of bloodletting, and that is why you are sick.”

“Then the bastard raped you,” Coria said.

“Raped? No, that can’t be.” Tears began streaming from her eyes. “No, I don’t remember anything like that. How do you know?”

“Because,” Coria whispered, “it happened to us.”

Sharlene sobbed, her body shaking constantly, she felt her strength seeping away. She yielded to sleep, a deep healing slumber. But a stubbornness born of her heritage was clawing its way back.

## Chapter Ten

**Mace took his time descending the stairs to the basement.** He still had a paycheck, but as far as Sharlene's case was concerned, little else. He had promised to help her, and it wasn't giving up now. He reached the basement where a yawning door to the parking garage, it's closer loose and hanging precariously, idly knocked an adjacent wall. The sound waking his senses to the icy December air drawn chimney-like into the stairwell. He snatched the door handle, frosty from the wind, and yanked the door closed. He stared at his hands.

Cold. That's why his gut said it wasn't Sharlene. She was alive. The legs he grabbed in the burning car; they were cold, frigid, not those of someone just incinerated. In his mind, the air of certainty in Dorian's office, that Jirair, the Vulcan, was behind these murders just developed a horse barn odor.

He entered the basement corridor. It would be tough to prove, Cassandra locking him out of the case left him with little more than shoe leather for resources, and the precious window of time to save Sharlene was crashing closed. He had to find another way back in. *Is that what Cassandra was suggesting?*

The cold case section was in a small office carved out of a cavernous room, simply known as the archives, which consumed nearly the total footprint of building one. It was filled with five-hundred off-white rolling file cabinets, each capable of holding multiple evidence boxes spanning ten years of MBI investigations.

A simple wooden sign over the door read Mo's Place. Mace stood in the open doorway. The upper portions of the interior walls were large windows that gave an expansive view of the archives, Mo's office gave the impression that he didn't have any filing cabinets at all. Gray and white boxes striped with blue tape were stacked on his desk and along the wall below the glass and created a cardboard fortress image. But a plaque prominently positioned on the desk, stating Sergeant Peter Mock, Chief, Cold Case Processing, left no question. Mace was at his new assignment.

Peter was talking on his land-line phone. His physique, massive shoulders, and broad face dwarfed everything around him. A bear-paw sized grip buried the phone against a stove-pipe shaped head, an image made complete by his dense black curls. His muscular arms were the size of most men's legs, and his ample torso filled a black silk collarless shirt that seemed stretched to the limit around a thick muscular neck. His eyes caught an awkward smile from Mace.

He hung up the phone. "I take it your Mace?"

Mace nodded. "That's me, Pete."

“It’s Mo, and how come I only get the troublemakers. A consultant, now that’s rich, but it does tell me what the muckey-mucks think of my job – punishment.”

Mace moved a stack of two boxes from a chair to the floor and sat down. “I... I don’t think so, they just want me out of the public eye.”

“You’ve got that in spades, here. And you can’t leave those boxes there.”

“Oh, sorry, mess up your filing system?”

Mo pushed back from his desk, his hands splayed out on either side of him, a what-don’t-you-understand look on his face, and revealed he was sitting in a wheelchair. “No, cause I can’t get out.”

“Oh, sorry.” Mace moved the boxes into a corner. “How’d it happen?”

“Drug bust two years back, warehouse on Chalmers near Seven Mile, perp caught me from behind, and this is all I get, paperwork. Be nice to work a case again.”

“Sorry, Mo, must be tough to see a lead and not work it.”

“Yeah, don’t get out much, but that is where guys like you come in, that’s what you do.”

Mace felt the possibility of keeping current on the case getting stronger. “A’right, let’s get to work.”

“Hold up, what *did* you do to get stuck here?”



“Baggage from my days in the FBI. Didn’t go well back then, and the public associates my name and remembers what I bring to the case.”

“The car fires? The Vulcan, oh that FBI agent.”

Mace cleared his throat, stifling a bitter reply. “I rest my case. So, where is my desk?”

“Hmm, you’re at it.”

Mace spun around and realized the stack of evidence boxes behind him had wholly covered a desk.

“Your first task is to move those back into the archives behind us,” he said, nodding toward the interior windows. The bin, column, and shelf number are on tags, box top, and sides. Locate the bin, punch the column and shelf as a four-digit number on the bin’s keypad. It opens the bin, and you file it on the shelf. I search the cases in the database not being worked, usually ones dormant for twelve months or more. And you reverse the process, but only for case files marked for cold case follow-up, blue tape.”

Mace nodded. “Any cold cases involving a car fire in Romulus?”

Mo cocked his head and stared at Mace. “You are going to be trouble, aren’t you? Okay, just so’s you know, you owe me.”

Mo typed on his keyboard, and his computer screen, out of sight from Mace, responded. “Yeah, Romulus PD carrying an old case there, a cute dame by the

photo here, ID'd as Coria Brien, but it's off-limits, Gavin McIlrath has it flagged as part of an active investigation."

"Hmm, well, now I have a name. How about Wayne?"

Mo grimaced. "You are trying to get me in trouble. I don't need anymore."

"No, hey, forget I asked."

"Good, now you can file those cases and clear off your desk, while I tap a kidney," Mo said, and he pushed back from his desk and wheeled his chair around his desk toward the door. "My screen will go blank in ninety seconds."

Mace stepped out of the room as Mo rolled out the door and out of sight. He was liking his new assignment and his new boss. Mace understood the meaning of Mo's words and went behind his desk. He copied down the location information of the Brien file on a scratch pad and stuffed the note in his pocket. He filed two boxes from his desk into the automated archives, and as he did, he discovered his *desk* was a simple, well-worn table with a single drawer.

Returning, he grabbed the last evidence carton, and the description froze him in place. It contained files for a missing person case reported at the Eddystone Apartments on the same night he confronted Jirair. A memory he had managed to bury deep in his sub-

conscious. But the car fire and this box were changing that.

“Lewis Tuller the third,” Mo said as he wheeled behind Mace to his desk.

Mace’s eyes followed Mo. He set the box down on his desk.

“His great grandad Lew Tuller built the Tuller, Park, and Eddystone hotels back in the ’20s. Others torn down years ago, but the Eddystone without its fancy canopied entrance lasted longer. Lew, the third, was living there until one night he wasn’t.”

Beads of perspiration began to form on Mace’s forehead. He sat down. *Was this a coincidence or something more?* “Five years and no body, no contact?”

“You’re holding the cold case file, pal. Should tell you something.”

“Yes, guess that’s the answer.”

“I hear it still has the grand staircase from when it was a hotel. Something to see, I understand.”

“Mind if I take a run at it.”

“Knock yourself out. Going to implode the building soon as the last tenants get moved out. Not many left, I understand. So, you are holding a real iceberg of a cold case.”

A journey back to the Eddystone apartments might reveal the truth of what happened that night, but Mace couldn't help but wonder if he would suffer Pandora's fate.

## Chapter Eleven

**Mace sat in his** car in the Henry W. parking garage facing Park Avenue. From his vantage point, he could see the roof and the signboard where it happened. The memory of it disturbing, he needed answers.

*That morning I got a cell phone hit and was able to locate him finally. An hour later, they terminated me. A CI called said Jirair was at the Bookie's Hideaway, a dive at Clifford and Henry, three blocks south of the Eddystone Hotel. I waited across the street. Some abandoned store, a pawn shop, I think, yeah, the Rainy Day. The weather was just that, a cold, relentless, sometimes freezing drizzle. Typical for October. Fever and chills racking my body in the cold, I wouldn't let go. Stubborn, stupid stubborn, but it was my last and only chance. I spent hours watching that bar. I felt like a turtle. My head drawn into my heavy P-coat, I shuffled my feet to keep warm, but the frigid chill penetrated to my bones.*

Mace shook the memory from his head, exited his car, and took the nearby stairs to the street, mid-block on Park. He looked North towards Sproat and Park. A renaissance of retail space had the block bustling with foot traffic, but gone were the recessed doorways flanked by expansive display cases,

common back then. As he stood, his thoughts returned.

*I waited and waited. The sunset, the frigid air seared my lungs. Nothing happened until nine. Jirair came out. He moved North in spurts, snaking through the shadows of Clifford's U-shaped storefronts, frequently stopping to check his surroundings. He didn't want to be seen, and I didn't want to be noticed. I held back. That was a mistake. He got to Sproat and Clifford, and I was mid-block. He had three ways to turn; I was losing him. He went into a convenience store on the corner, and I thought that was my chance to catch up. My encephalitis clogged my head and gnawed away my breath. I struggled but managed to step quickly along the opposite side of Clifford to the corner. I spun around looking, but he was gone. Then, I got lucky. My eye caught movement down the short block back to Park. I ran, hoping it was him.*

A truck rattling by brought him back to the present. Mace crossed Henry and walked the long block to a pearl from the golden era for hotels during a booming Detroit. The Eddystone, no longer a hotel, had a belt of boarded-up retail stores on the first floor and dark lifeless apartment windows populating the twelve stories above. A weathered sign over the entrance suggested the building's demise; it was now the Eventide Senior Residence.

Unmarked police vehicles occupied the curb fronting the hotel, and much of the Sproat beyond. Mace maneuvered around a ramp leading to a long moving van and headed towards the main entrance. A few steps in that direction and then a familiar head of red, trussed in a tight ponytail emerged from one of the police sedans. She had on a short black leather jacket with her badge showing from a breast pocket.

“Mace, what brings you to the Stone,” Anstice said, placing herself between Mace and the entrance of the building.

“They still calling it that?”

“Habit, it’s been the Eddystone for years, since forever, Eventide just the past three. So, what’s up?”

“Oh, cold case, Lew Tuller, just following up.”

“Five years ago, yeah, I remember, high profile, but that case is Artic cold.”

“Right, well, I thought I might talk to the apartment manager, any resident, see if anyone remembers anything before it is all gone. What brings you here?”

Anstice nodded. “Evictions, sheriff doing the heavy lifting, I’m making sure everyone has a place to go.”

“That normal rotation for a major crimes detective?”

“Just volunteering today.”

“Good for you, I’m sure they appreciate the support. Say, do you know where I can find the manager?”

“Al, yeah, sure, I’ve got to check on miss Linda anyway, so follow me.”

Inside, the lobby was as Mace remembered it. The sweeping grand staircase Mo mentioned reduced to an L-shaped boxed affair with a mid-level landing, and the crystal chandeliers were now bare bulb fixtures. The perimeter retail spaces had been converted to apartments, and the area reduced to a stairwell, a bank of post boxes on one wall, and an out of order elevator on the other.

Anstice walked to the open door of a converted apartment. “Al, you have time? We need to ask you some questions.”

A portly man, bald with vanity strands of hair combed back over his head, emerged. His sleeves rolled up; he finished toweling his hands. He wore black baggy pants held up by red suspenders over a white shirt, and he had dark eyes deep-set, made to seem more so by a bulbous nose. He licked his thick lips and cocked his head back. “What, questions I’m done here.”

“Al, this is Mace Franklyn. He’s with the Michigan Bureau of Investigation—”

“Actually, the state police, cold case division.”

“Really, when did that happen?”

“This morning.”



“Well, anyway, Al, he would like to ask you a few questions about Lew Tuller’s disappearance. I have EMTs coming to help Miss Linda down the stairs. I’m going up to check on her.”

“Tuller,” Al said, tossing the towel back into the apartment, “can’t remember, that was years back, memory doesn’t go that far back anymore.”

“Give it a shot, Al. What can you tell me about him.”

“Kept pigeons, reminded of that every day.”

“How’s that?”

“Kept them on the roof, still flock there out of habit, I guess. The only thing he ever did was worry ‘bout those pigeons.” Al paused, then scratching the side of his head, said, “Come to think of it, last time I saw him, he was headed up there to tend to ‘um.”

“On the roof, can you show me that?”

“What, you crazy, thirteen floors.”

“Not going to have many more opportunities, Al, our last shot at justice for Lew.”

Al rubbed his chin, then nodded. He walked over to the elevator, inserted a key in the control panel, and the doors opened.

“That safe, Al?”

“It’s old, funky, slips now and then, but you get used to it.”

“Why you posted the out-of-order sign?”

“That, and, at my age, it’s better for me.”

Mace gripped a rail, mounted inside the elevator, anticipating a faltering ride, but they rode in silence. The only hint of ponderous progress was the glowing numbers, on the floor indicator over the door, grudgingly marching across until their jump from twelve to fourteen, the thirteenth floor. From there, they took the access stairs to the roof. Al unlocked the door and ushered Mace forward.

The high-pitched cooing and slapping of wings surprised Mace as twenty startled pigeons took flight. To the left of the door, their forgotten roost, a leaning matrix of rusting chicken wire covered in white bird dropping, stood precariously. To the right corroded trusses backed a signboard that once declared the grandeur of the Eddystone, and now torn red ad copy hawking cigarettes was its forlorn message.

“That’s it,” Al said, pointing to the tilting structure, “spent most of his time, cleaning, feeding, letting them go, and dancing when they returned. He loved his pigeons.”

Mace noticed metal brackets protruding from a corner of the roof over the stairwell. “You had cameras up here?”

“He did. One back that way too,” he said, pointing to a second stairwell roof behind the coop.

“Where are the tapes now?”

“Don’t know,” said Al shaking his head. “Look, you can hang around up here as long as you want. I expect you’ll want to look at his apartment. Nothing changed there since he left. Estate still owns it. His apartment was thirteen-oh-three. But I’ve got to get back to my packing, that moving van out front is for me, and tick-tock if you know what I mean. I’ll unlock thirteen oh three on my way down.”

Mace nodded and looked around the roof, then back down the stairwell as Al descended out of sight.

*Jirair had sprinted from the convenience store to the Eddystone Apartments. I was lucky to notice him enter when I reached the corner. When I got inside, the lobby was more extensive then, but empty. Breathing heavy, it was all I could hear. I took a deep breath and held it. That is when my gut paid off again. I heard faint, quick steps fading upwards on the grand staircase. I grabbed the railing and lunged up a few flights. But my body revolted, almost lost my lunch, my head was spinning. I closed my eyes, but that made it worse. I couldn’t hear any footfalls. I had to keep moving.*

*At the fifth-floor landing, I collapsed gasping for air, cursing my stupidity. Another life was at stake; I couldn’t wait for the snail pace flow of evidence to the forensic science lab. It was a small thing, a discarded bit of chewing gum. It was Jirair’s I was sure, found alongside the latest Vulcan victim. I*

*jumped the chain, tried to get Brok to see it my way. But he was and still is a passionate FSD tech. He refused, and in the end, he was right. The evidence was inadmissible.*

*On that fifth-floor landing, I held my breath again. There was no sound of movement. For a moment, I believed I had lost him in some apartment, one out of the hundred above me. I got myself up and continued to climb.*

*“Jirair? Jirair Hussain?” I yelled, that sound echoing in my ears.*

*I was convinced, then, that Jirair anguished over a mind at odds with reality and mired in the rapture of a terrible fantasy. If I only could confront him, something would slip out in his denial, a ray of truth. That’s what I needed. After three more flights, I paused. Only faint steps below and the sound of my gasping breath. Where was he? What floor?*

*“Jirair, I just want to talk,” I yelled. Movement again, rapid footsteps, loud and moving higher. A door slammed, heavy metal. A surge of adrenalin and I roared up the final flights of bursting through the roof access door and falling to my knees.*

Mace scanned the ground where he had fallen, and then to the next thing he saw. The roost. The roost doors were open, and the cameras were there. A detail that had stayed suppressed until now. The

signboard, he remembered, was the only source of illumination.

*I called Jirair's name again, and at first, all he heard were the birds. But then...*

*"Why are you chasing me?" Jirair asked, his voice shrill and cracking, "What do you want?"*

Mace stepped around the block walls of the stairwell and stared at the section of the low roof-perimeter wall where Jirair had stood.

*I raised my hands, palm open, I didn't want to spook him. "I want to help you, Jirair."*

*"Help me? No, you don't. It is I who help you. Did you enjoy finding my playthings? I pleasure them before I burn them, punishment for seducing me. You didn't know that, did you?"*

*ME's results were always inconclusive, something we couldn't determine, impossible with the fire. It must have shown on my face. He laughed – something else I had forgotten. Yeah, he did. A long rolling laugh. I stepped closer. "I already picked out my next one," he said, "she is right down there, only fifteen."*

*The pigeons burst into flight from their cages. He yelled, "No, what are you doing?" I screamed a roar; my mind went black except for a nightmare image. Jirair raised over my head at the roof's edge.*

“Mace, Mace, don’t do it.” A voice shouted behind him.

Mace turned. Anstice grabbed his jacket and pulled him back off the wall.

“What are you doing? You all right?”

Under his jacket, Mace’s shirt was soaked in sweat.

“What... yes, what is going on?”

Anstice guided Mace a few feet from the wall.

“That’s what I was about to ask you. I thought you were going to jump.”

“No... no,” Mace said, forcing a laugh. “I just remembered something I thought happened here.”

“You mean Lew Tuller? You think he jumped?”

“They never reported a body,” Mace said, staring blankly across the roof.

Anstice jerked her head back, her face questioning what he just said. “No, they didn’t. That’s why they call it a missing person’s case.”

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