



# FIRE SIGN

*Featuring Dr. Anja Toussaint*



m.a. petterson

## About

A beautiful forensic engineer hiding a tragic past reluctantly teams up with a troubled cop to stop a serial arsonist targeting churches.

## **FIRE SIGN**

by m.a. petterson

The church burned down while I was teaching.

It was packed with people for an evening service when the four incendiary devices in the crawl space ignited.

The flames spread rapidly. Four different hot spots gnawing relentlessly up at the old, dry flooring, spreading thick smoke throughout the crawl space interior.

The smoke detectors shrieked out the first warnings.

The adults acted irritated, assuming that this was just an inconvenient practice drill. Some of the kids giggled.

But the acrid smell of smoke grew sharper.

Then four different areas of flooring discolored. Wisps of pale smoke rose.

Within seconds, the discolored flooring charred black, collapsing down into the inferno below.

Thick choking smoke vomited upward.

Followed by the angry relentless flames.

Children screamed and wailed, rushing out from Bible School, choking and gasping for air, tears flowing, panicked and terrified.

Mothers shouted names, fighting through the toxic fumes and scorching heat, willing to sacrifice their very lives if necessary.

Men broke out windows with chairs. Helped others out or leapt out themselves from raw fear.

9-1-1 calls flooded the switchboard. Within scant seconds firefighters churned into their bunker gear and leapt aboard their vehicles.

Ambulances roared out into city traffic.

Police accelerated down the streets, light bars strobing, speeding to the fearful catastrophe.

Meanwhile the seething flames clawed at wall hangings, ignited furniture, chimneyed up between the walls, spilling out from one room to another as smoke and hot gasses roiled angrily around the ceilings, just seconds away from flashover, simply needing the right mix of oxygen.

The church elders never imagined that they would need a fire plan, someplace safe where all could meet up, where heads could be counted.

Most of them were outside now, yelling, screaming, crying, coughing. One elderly gentleman clutched his chest in agony as his heart gave out.

Already some lucky parents had reunited with their children, embracing them, clutching them tightly, as new red flames tore through the roof and burned through trusses and plywood, melting the asphalt shingles.

Frantic parents continued to shout out names into the melee, not being heard above the awful roaring and crackling, other yells and cries, and soon the howling shriek of approaching sirens.

The first responding fire company roared up with sirens silenced, but red lights still strobing.

The highly-practiced men and women leapt to the ground, rushing about in the choreographed efficiency drilled into them from countless hours of practice.

The attack began with three 2-inch lines, spewing steady streams of water into the church windows.

Two firefighters caught a hydrant, dragging and wrestling a heavy six-inch relay hose from the engine and mating it to the threaded hydrant opening. With that task accomplished, the engine's almost-depleted tank would fill with the city's water. More lines could be aimed at the seat of the fire.

An aerial arrived next, extending outriggers to secure its base as the long ladder slowly climbed into the sky, there to cascade thick geysers of water down from above.

The cops surged onto the scene, sought to gain control of the milling crowd, to move everyone back out of the way to a place of safety.

Three ambulances turned in, set up triage stations, readied the oxygen bottles. Someone pointed to a figure, lying motionless on the ground, an old man. Two paramedics raced toward the flaming structure, oblivious to their own safety, to see if they could save him.

A shrieking woman called out her daughter's name, pointing into the raging inferno, recklessly trying to return inside.

A cop wrestled her back as a two-man entry team, dragging a line and wearing air packs, crouched low and crawled forward, fogging the fierce flames as they inched inside, praying the lost child was close by.

Behind them another team cascaded water over their backs.

I could see the glow in the distance from my classroom window. I had heard the sirens, of course. Ironically, the class I was teaching was advanced Fire Science. My students were rookie firefighters and other first responders, too soon comparing my theoretical lecturing on fireground behavior to the real

world.

But I knew the theories well. By trade I am a forensic engineer. As part of my duties I teach.

“Dr. Toussaint,” a student called, raising his hand and asking a simple question about the chemical decomposition of cellulose in the presence of open flame. I answered by rote, my mind and eyes still focused out over the night-shrouded city toward the dull red glow in the distance.

They wouldn’t need me at the scene tonight. But tomorrow, when the rubble was still smoking, they would want my preliminary assessment of cause and origin.

For I am the city’s arson investigator.

My cell phone vibrates and I glance down at the message.

*Anja*, the text read, *call me. Urgent*. It was sent by my boss, the State Fire Marshal.

Somehow I’d known, when I first spotted the spreading orange blossom, that there was more than just flame on the horizon.

There was trouble. For my boss seldom used the word *Urgent*.

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I was up before dawn for I realized it would be a busy day.

I showered, then forced myself to stand before the full-length mirror. My personal ritual. Out of love. Out of hate. Out of hope.

I had my mother’s pale golden eyes. May she rest in peace. I had my father’s flaming red hair. May he be damned forever. I had the scars of my own making, staining my pale skin in angry red blotches. May I one day find the peace I seek.

Creighton C. Calderwood arrived at my office at eight a.m. sharp.

He is a burly man, hair silvered at the temples, quick with a smile or joke, always shaking hands. He is the State Insurance Commissioner and so my direct boss. A fact that greatly rankles the traditional fire department hierarchy here in Chandlertowne.

They have no authority over me.

Creighton is a consummate politician. Were it not for his patronage, I would long ago have been run out of town.

But of that I have no worries, for arson is a growth industry and, unfortunately, my skills are always in demand.

“Anja,” he greets me as he settles into a hard wooden chair. He glances around at my cramped basement office with distaste. He has tried numerous times to find me someplace befitting my title. But this little room is the city’s

way of showing their distaste at my independence, and also my refusal pay homage to the old boy's network.

"I spoke with the battalion chief last night," Creighton says. "Another arson." *And all of them churches*, I reflect.

"The police are getting crucified. No arrests."

"I've told you all that I know," I say. "The triggers are rudimentary – a wind-up alarm clock, kitchen matches attached to a mousetrap, and enough crumpled newspaper to begin the chain reaction."

"I don't doubt you're doing everything you can," Creighton says. He knows how hard I work, that I have no social life to speak of, and maybe he even suspects why. After all, it's rare for a 28-year-old woman in her prime to live like a nun.

But it was the life I chose, for now.

He holds up his hands. "The governor's getting serious pressure." And since the governor was Creighton's boss, he was on the receiving end of some of that pressure.

"I'm averaging four hours of sleep a night," I say.

"I'm not here to crack the whip," he says. "I'm here to create a diversion." *What does Creighton have planned for me?* I wonder.

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We set out in Creighton's car, a large sedan the city owns, ungainly and as nimble as a motorboat.

"New tie?" I ask.

Creighton beams. Rumor has it that he has commandeered one of his bedrooms solely to store his huge collection of ties.

"Special order from Thailand," he says. "Silk. If you look closely, you can see elephants and tigers peeking out from the jungle."

He holds up the green, orange, and brown tie for my admiration.

I smile. Rumor has it that his wife regularly sneaks into his commandeered bedroom and fills up a box with ties destined for Goodwill.

"You mentioned a diversion," I say.

"Bad word," he replies. "I want you more visible, with a heightened profile. We're out to build consensus."

*What a useless phrase*, I'm thinking. But then, I'm not a politician.

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Fifteen minutes later we pull over and park next to St. Francis' Cathedral, the city's largest church, occupying an entire city block.

Creighton leads me up the steps and through a side door. A young man, perhaps around sixteen, greets us. By his brown robe I know him to be one of the church's acolytes.

"Absalom," Creighton says, vigorously shaking the youth's hand. "Allow me to introduce Dr. Anja Toussaint."

I sense the boy's nervousness, smile gently and reach out to shake his hand. His grip is weak, what I would call timid. He nods, but says nothing. Then he turns and leads us down a richly carpeted hall. The walls are dark paneled wood, hung with old portraits of old people. Saints, I assume.

Absalom raps on a door, then opens it and leads us into a sizable office.

"Monsignor," he says to a man seated behind a large and ornate desk. The elderly gentleman wears the deep red robes of his order, and takes several moments to finish reading from a paper on his desk before looking up.

"Mr. Calderwood," he says in a voice surprisingly high pitched. He does not stand, but holds out a hand heavy with rings.

Creighton approaches and I briefly wonder if he means to kiss the outstretched hand, but he gives it the usual vigorous shake. He gestures in my direction. "Dr. Toussaint."

The monsignor does not hold out a hand, but simply nods.

"I speak on behalf of the United Church Coalition," he begins. "They expect results."

The monsignor does not invite us to sit, and I bristle inwardly at this rude demonstration of his rank and power. But, working here in Chandlertowne, I have grown accustomed to petty bureaucrats who exercise their self-perceived status.

"We are deeply disturbed by this rash of arsons targeting houses of worship. We have expressed our concerns through the proper channels."

*All the way up to the governor, I am thinking. How does Creighton put up with this puny malarkey?*

"The governor has directed me to form a task force," Creighton says. "Its one and only function will be resolving this issue."

The Monsignor tilts his head as if considering. "And this task force consists of..." he lets the question trail off.

"Dr. Toussaint, our distinguished forensics investigator."

The Monsignor raises a single eyebrow.

"With a police liaison," Creighton quickly adds. "Plus, the expedited resources of every city department."

“Very good,” the Monsignor says. “Please update me daily.” Then he looks back down at the paper on his desk and, with that simple motion, dismisses us. Absalom silently shows us out.

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I am not happy and make it known on the ride back.

Creighton makes conciliatory noises.

“I always work alone,” I reiterate.

“The cop has arrest powers,” Creighton says.

I pull out my red, gold, and black badge and offer it up. “What about this?”

“That,” Creighton says, “is symbolic of the true importance of your official position.”

Meaning it carries absolutely no authority. “I heard the former fire marshal spent three grand on this,” I say.

“Which is one reason I replaced him.” Creighton pulls up next to a fire hydrant in front of the decrepit municipal building where my office is located.

“The cop is just a liaison. You’ll be in total charge.”

“I want that understood by everyone.”

“I talked with the captain. He is in complete accord. The officer is just for show.”

*What kind of cop would want such a lame assignment?* I ask the name of my liaison.

“Gil Dolan,” Creighton says softly.

My day has just turned worse.

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I first met Sergeant Gil Dolan a year ago when I was investigating a suspicious tenement fire.

The half-burned building was abandoned, so there were no casualties, but the owner paid taxes on it and kept the insurance up-to-date.

Which put him on my radar of potential suspects. Along with any number of homeless squatters who might’ve tipped over a candle during the night. Or some drug user dropping a match after cooking up his spoon. Or some kid out for thrills. The list went on.

I remember that it was early morning and though the rubble still smoldered, I donned my turnout boots, ducked under the yellow caution tape and stepped

carefully within to look around.

Sometimes a fire scene can tell a trained investigator a great deal, sometimes it will say nothing.

I was seeking the fire's point of origin, beginning my search with the least-burned areas and working inward.

I could easily tell which way the fire had moved, even how hot it had burned.

If this was arson, I might find signs of a liquid accelerant or multiple ignition points. On the other hand, lightning might be the cause, or an overloaded breaker box. If I was lucky, the fire's birthplace would show up as a cone – point down – sooted against some wall.

I worked my way up to the second floor, passing a shattered window frame, when I heard the sounds of squalling tires right outside. Not an unusual sound for a city.

I carefully edged my way around the perimeter of the large room I was investigating. I was about to duck through a doorway into an adjacent area when I heard heavy footsteps, clomping up the exterior fire escape.

“Tour's over, lady,” someone barked. “You're trespassing.”

I turned to see a man rapidly approach me, one hand holding out his police shield while his other hand rested on the pistol in his shoulder rig.

“Stay away from me,” I ordered.

“It's just a misdemeanor, lady. Don't make it –“

Without warning the floor under him buckled and fell away, dropping him unceremoniously down onto the first floor and into the dark stinking sludge, made from water and ash.

“Are you alright?” I yelled.

He cursed at me for at least a minute. Then he spent the next month litigating me over the cost of a new suit.

That was my first introduction to Sergeant Gil Dolan. Never at blame. Always the victim.

After receiving the summons to magistrate's court, I did a little digging into just who was serving process.

All off the record, of course. But I did not need to build legal evidence, just find out some background information.

Tawdry and sad were the words that came to mind.

Sergeant Gil Dolan was a career cop with 17 years on the force. No distinguished accomplishments. Just putting in his time. He had a wife and teenage daughter.

The wife was pursuing her doctorate, something no stay-at-home mom should do, according to Dolan. *Neglecting her own family*, was how he



characterized it to one acquaintance.

She was also actively engaged in an affair with her university advisor. Dolan confronted the man. Bloodied his nose. The result was a restraining order. Then a separation.

The daughter was fourteen, going on twenty, staying out late, shoplifting, sexually active. Rebelling against everyone and everything. That was from the high school counselor, who placed much of the blame on Dolan's *my way or the highway* attitude.

It didn't help matters that Gil liked to drink. A lot. But who am I to throw stones?

The tipping point came one night when Gil responded to a robbery in progress. He turned on the dash strobe and roared down the street. Speeding fifty, at least, in a twenty mph zone.

He raced toward the lighted intersection, just blocks from the crime.

Then a mini-van ran the red light and Gil Dolan t-boned into the vehicle's side.

The van caught fire.

Gil Dolan saved the eight-year-old boy. The mother and father perished.

His victim mentality prevailed. Now it wasn't just his family, but all of life conspiring against him. He proudly donned the mantle of martyr. The role fed something inside him.

No one wanted to work with him anymore.

Sometimes life deals you a very bad hand. I know all about that. I still bear the purple burn scars on my flesh, though they are fading.

The scars in my head will never fade.

I admire the department's loyalty to one of their own. They want him to hang on for his pension. They want to keep him safe. So they give him various make-work assignments.

Now he's assigned to me.

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I sit in the bull pen at Sergeant Gil Dolan's desk. The watch commander said he was out, nothing more, not even when I flashed my red, gold, and black badge of no authority.

But at least it got me to the second floor.

After fifteen minutes of waiting, I get bored. So I turn on his computer monitor. He's password protected it, of course. It takes me all of thirty seconds to violate it.

I don't care about his email, or his case notes, or what websites he likes to visit. I want something more private. It takes me no time at all to hack past the department's barrier. I find Dolan's file and skim over it.

I'm sure it's been sanitized as much as the department dares, but you never know.

I find very little of interest and turn my gaze over to the single framed photo on his desk that shows Gil and his wife in happier days, standing next to a smiling daughter.

"My desk, my computer, my personnel file," a voice grates out behind me. "Find anything interesting, Dr. Toussaint?"

I turn and read his scowling features. Sergeant Gil Dolan is still trim and fit, wearing his light brown hair short, though streaks of gray etch both sides. But his dark eyes tell the tale, bloodshot and pouched, a map of what's inside.

"I don't want this assignment any more than you," I say.

"Won't hurt my feelings if you want another partner."

"First off, we are not partners. And if your performance doesn't meet my expectations, I shall request another department liaison."

He fights back a retort, but recognizes his position, knows he's on a short leash, understands the politics behind this. "Thanks for the new suit," he finally says.

Indeed, after I wasted three hours in a magistrate's court, after Dolan lost his action against me, I sent him a gift card to a local clothing store.

I stand and toss him my car keys. "Ready, liaison?"

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We climb into my dented, white Cherokee for the ride over to the burned church. The silence is heavy.

Finally, I say, "What is it you resent about me? My doctorate? I have two, you know."

"There's two kinds of education," he replies. "Book smarts, and what you get out there." He gestures outside.

"I respect your education," I say. "But you need to respect mine. Over a billion dollars went up in flames last year. Arson is a growth industry."

"So is consulting," he says, referring to what I do on my off time. "I hear you make two grand a day."

"More," I say. "And I'm worth every penny." What I don't say is that I have to keep busy, to keep from thinking, to keep from remembering.

We round a corner and pull up to the cordon of yellow police tape

surrounding the charred hulk of the church. It still smokes a little, resembling in my mind some blackened and burned skeleton.

I walk to the back of my Cherokee and open the tailgate. Inside are a hardhat, shovels, trowels, rakes, cameras, UV lights, an aromatic hydrocarbon detector, and various other tools of my trade.

I see my stun gun among the jumble and toss it into the back seat. Won't do me any good where I can't reach it.

Gil stands beside me, then reaches over and picks up a glass jar. He studies it curiously and then a look of revulsion crosses his face.

"Burnt fingers," I explain. "In case we bring in dogs."

I hand him a pair of turnout boots and latex gloves to put on. When he's finished, I give him a flashlight and a couple of new pint-sized paint cans for collecting evidence. I hand him a step ladder, too. He tucks it under one arm and hangs the cans from his thumb.

"Follow me carefully," I say, heading for the ruined church. "Step exactly where I step. If you fall through a floor, I'm not buying you another suit."

He does exactly as I say as we work slowly into the carcass of the church.

"What are we looking for?" he asks.

I shine my flashlight on a light bulb hanging from a cord. On one side the glass has softened and elongated. "Pointers. Indications of the fire's origin."

I turn my beam onto an exposed wooden joist. "Notice how the charred wood is deeper on one side. That indicates the direction of the fire."

"Flames were moving that way," he gestures.

I nod, then push into the char with a metal ruler, marking it with my thumbnail. "Depth of burn reflects intensity of combustion. Flames were running at sixteen hundred fifty degrees here."

"Give or take," Gil says.

"No. That's pretty exact."

He snorts under his breath.

I point to a wall. "Set the ladder there."

When he complies, I mount the ladder and then stretch up onto my toes.

"See anything interesting?" he asks.

"Chemical deposits, smoke residue, a certain discoloration not consistent with the flammable materials present." I glance down and catch him staring at the seat of my jeans. "How about you? See anything interesting?"

We move into another area. "Keep on the lookout for signs of liquid accelerant. Puddling or fingering."

"Like a burned lake," Gil says.

"Not necessarily. The interior of the puddle may not be charred."

“Wait a minute. You douse the floor with gasoline, it burns.”

“Actually, it’s the gasoline vapors that burn. The vapors ignite furniture, wall hangings, anything above the floor. But the floor itself may remain untouched.” Then I add, “But today’s discriminating arsonist prefers kerosene to gasoline. Much safer.”

I halt at a section where the floor has burned completely through.

“Fire burned down through the floor,” Gil says.

“No, burned up through the floor.”

I lead the sergeant outside and back to my Cherokee. I retrieve two sets of coveralls measured to my height and hand him a pair. “Only size I have.”

We return to the remains of the church and creep into the crawl space. Gil struggles within the confines of his too-small coveralls. Then I hear the sound of cloth ripping.

“Shall I bill you or the department for those?”

He responds to my attempted humor with an expletive. This will not stand. I must somehow rid myself of his presence. Hopefully in a way that will not diminish what small career he has left.

The ground we crawl over is a muddy mix of char, ash and water. I inhale the pungent, acrid odor, and wish I’d brought a mask.

We reach the area where the fire burned up through the floor. The point of origin. I play my light over the soot-covered alarm clock. It is affixed to a board close to a mouse trap. When the alarm sounded, string from the wind-up mechanism pulled taught and triggered the mouse trap. The trap’s striker bar set off half a dozen kitchen matches which ignited the crumpled newspaper that surrounded the charred remains of a whiskey box.

Whatever was inside the whiskey box then ignited with great intensity. I collect a trowel full of ash for analysis. Unfortunately the lab work may take weeks.

“Not much to it,” Dolan says.

“Simple is better,” I reply. From this one device I see three charred trailers leading off. The trailers are no more than long strips of newspaper overlapping end to end, but enough of a flammable path to convey fire to the three other incendiary locations.

Simple is always better.

“Put a sample into the evidence can,” I instruct Dolan. “Let’s see where these trailers lead.”

My elbows chafe as I crawl deeper within the underside of the church. I should’ve worn knee pads, I reflect.

We approach the blackened remains of another whiskey box. Above it the

floor is rudely, but efficiently, burned through.

I shine my light on a nearby piling. “Notice the spalling. How the intense heat cracked and chipped the outer facia of concrete. See how it flakes right off?”

“What could’ve generated that much heat?”

“Any number of easy-to-make concoctions.” I use my trowel to scoop more detritus into another evidence can.

Fifteen minutes later I am through collecting evidence from under the church and we crawl back out. My coveralls are muddy and damp, but I don’t bother changing. I walk a slow perimeter of the burned building.

Dolan points. “Door looks jimmed.”

“Good call. But did the arsonist do it? Or the firefighters?”

“Can you tell?”

“We’ll look at the responding departments’ reports. If they broke this door it will be noted.”

“Lot of glass around,” Dolan says.

“The intense heat causes the glass to expand past the frame until it breaks out. See the crazing?”

Dolan indicates another window. “Looks like the glass has been punched in.”

I gaze through the opening and see long rectangular pieces. “Most likely the firefighters routing another line through here.”

Dolan nods, then points up to a tall window with a single hole that was shattered near the very top. “So why would the firemen smash a hole up there?”

“They didn’t,” I reply. “That was done by the arsonist.”

“Why the hell does he vandalize the church?” Dolan asks. “He’s about to burn it down.”

“We found four hotspots, roughly at each corner,” I reply.

“So why’d he break out the window?”

“Set up a draft. Give the flames something to breathe.”

“He wasn’t leaving anything to chance,” Dolan says.

I look at the sergeant. “You keep saying he. What makes you think the arsonist is a he?”

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My clammy coveralls irritate me enough now that I scrape off what mud I can and strip them off. Dolan does the same.

I tell him to drive us to the firehouse.

“Arson’s already been established,” Dolan says. “Why waste time talking to

the guys who put out the fire?”

“Because they observed it firsthand. And the fire’s behavior may present additional data germane to the incident.”

“Germane,” Dolan mutters.

We pull onto the apron in front of the firehouse and park far enough over to let the big rigs roll past, should they get kicked out.

A couple of firefighters sit outside, enjoying a little sun with their lunch break.

“Church fire last night,” I say. “Who delivered first water?”

“Capello,” one says.

“And Dietz,” replies the other. “Engine three.”

“They got mess duty,” the first one says. “You’ll find them in the galley trying to poison us.”

We walk onto the apparatus floor, passing the highly-polished trucks and engines. Along the wall I see assorted mementos: a fire bell, an old and cracked leather helmet, a stuffed horse’s head from the previous century. I stop in front of the portrait of an elderly man.

“World’s oldest fire chief, huh?” Dolan says.

“Saint Florian,” I reply. “Patron saint of firefighters.”

We find Capello and Deitz in the galley. One peels potatoes, the other pats ground beef into hamburgers. I glance at their nametags to see who is who, then make my inquiry.

“By the time we got there the church was fully involved,” Dietz says.

“Tell me about the flames,” I ask. “Any unusual colors?”

“About what you’d expect for that type of structure,” Capello replies.

“How about the smoke?” I continue.

“Nothin’ black or greasy to indicate an oil fire.” Capello looks over at his partner. “Mary save us. Not more garlic. I’ve got a date tonight.”

“Lock up your pets, boys,” Dietz yells to half a dozen firefighters lounging around the mess table.

“Did you encounter any blowback?” I ask.

“No. And I didn’t smell any kind of accelerant. Did you, Capello?”

Capello shakes his head. Then adds, “But I did notice something strange. The four hotspots? It was almost like they were timed.”

“How so?” I want to know.

“Hard to explain, exactly. But it was like the fires were set in a way as to herd people out.”

“Yeah,” Dietz agrees. “Fire that big, spread that fast, miracle is nobody was hurt.”

I've learned all that I need to know and lead Dolan back out through the lounge. Four firefighters play cards, a few watch television, and one old-timer snoozes peacefully in his chair.

"Man, did I pick the wrong profession," Dolan says.

I glance over at him. "You really don't know much about being a firefighter, do you?"

"Sure I do. Find me somewhere soft to lie down and I'll show you."

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My irritation with Dolan approaches the limits. So many people have absolutely the wrong impression of first responders. If they don't die in the line of duty, stress often gifts them an early heart attack. Along the way are a high rate of divorces, or affairs. And untold numbers simply fall by the wayside from post traumatic stress disorder.

I have Dolan drive me out to Chandlertowne's Fire Academy.

We cruise onto the campus, past scorched car hulks, a tenement mock-up, classrooms, the main burn building, and a formation of fresh-faced prospects jogging in tight formation.

You don't just suit up as a firefighter without passing extremely stringent physical and mental requirements. The wash-out rate here is sixty percent.

I motion for Dolan to pull in behind a building near a group of firefighters surrounding an instructor.

"Before you're even issued turnout gear, you spend eight weeks here," I say, "Then once a year you return for a week."

Dolan shakes his head. "This isn't the kind of work you need an advanced degree for. Throw enough water on a fire and it goes out."

"You make it sound simple." I exit the vehicle and Dolan follows.

A group of recruits stand around a burning pile of metal. Scattered around the fire are numerous fire extinguishers and a charged fire hose.

I approach the instructor, a lanky man with a shaved head and faded blue tattoos etching his sinewy arms. O'Reilly and I have known each other for years.

I offer up my red, gold, and black badge for effect and he laughs. "What's shakin', Anja?"

"My partner here. He thinks if you put enough water on a fire, it will go out."

O'Reilly's smile fades and he gestures at the heap of flaming metal. "Be my guest."

I turn to Dolan. "Class D fire. Burning magnesium. The type of fire you might get on a flight deck or an airport."

“Crashed helicopter, right?”

“So how would you put out this fire?” I ask. “Show me.”

Dolan marches directly to the charged line. He doesn’t notice the class as they back off. “Put enough wet stuff on the red stuff, is how.”

He raises the charged line and levers open the nozzle, directing a stream of water into the fire.

The flames instantly explode into a towering fireball, exactly as if the hose was spraying out gasoline.

Dolan curses and leaps backward, tripping and falling onto his back, still clutching the hose which geysers water into the air.

O’Reilly valves off the line and it slowly wilts in Dolan’s hands.

“You just observed water burn,” I say.

“What do you mean?” Dolan replies, scrambling to his feet.

“A hot enough fire separates water into its two basic components – hydrogen and oxygen, which, as you just demonstrated, are both highly flammable.”

“You tricked me,” Dolan mutters. “How many times is your average fireman gonna come up against a magnesium fire?”

“There is no average firefighter,” I say. “And there is no average fire.”

“Walk softly and carry a big hose,” Dolan retorts, regaining his arrogance.

“You still think it’s that simple, don’t you?” I say.

I lead him over to the 4-story burn building. The sign over the entrance reads *Code Three Motel*; code three referring to a life-threat response requiring lights and siren. I point to a complete set of firefighter turnout gear.

“No tricks,” I say. “Just put the wet stuff on the red stuff.”

He flashes me a superior smile.

It takes him several moments to struggle into the heavy boots, thick coat, gloves, and helmet. I strap an oxygen tank on his back, check to see if it’s full, then hand him the face mask.

“Each team has a specific objective,” I say. “Ventilate the fire. Control and contain. Seek and rescue anyone who is trapped inside. Your job is seek and rescue.”

“No sweat,” Gil says.

“The building will be on fire,” I say.

“I kind of figured that,” he says, slipping the bulky oxygen mask over his face. “Anything else?”

“Remember there are always two ways out of a burning building.”

“Yeah?”

“The first way out might be up or it might be down. It might be in front of you, or in back of you, or to either side. You’ve got to read the fire.”



“Thanks for narrowing it down,” Dolan says. “So what’s the other way out of a burning building?”

“In a body bag,” I reply, tossing him a Halligan tool.

\*\*\*\*\*

O’Reilly joins me as I sit in the observation booth. The burn building is packed with closed-circuit television cameras and microphones. I intend on monitoring Dolan carefully. I don’t want to kill the pathetic sergeant, just motivate him to scuttle off somewhere far from me.

“Friend of yours?” O’Reilly asks.

I just smile and activate the cameras and mikes. Every hallway and every room is now portrayed in gray on the monitors. *They should spring for color*, I think, but know the budget’s tight.

Dolan stands alone in the vacant hallway, staring down a simulated motel hallway, lined with doors on either side. I can hear him breathing through the mask, calmly and evenly. That will soon change.

I toggle the switch initiating the exercise.

A sudden whoosh breaks the silence as flames gush out of a doorway halfway down the hall.

“Oh, yeah,” Dolan says. “Let the party begin.”

He strides to the first door and rattles the knob, but it is locked. Then he slams the Halligan tool between the door and sill and wrenches it open.

I watch his progress on another monitor.

“Hey,” he calls out. “Anyone here?”

He sweeps the room quickly, looks inside the bathroom and closet, but the room is empty. He jogs back into the hall.

The air roils with smoke now.

Dolan reaches another door, pounds on it, tries the knob. The door swings open.

He enters and spots a figure in the corner, slumped in an overstuffed chair, long auburn hair drooping over the head.

“Score one for the gipper,” Dolan says, racing to the rescue.

He reaches down and soon finds he’s cradling a skeleton wearing a wig and dress. A cigarette dangles from bony fingers, touching the scorched armrest.

Dolan jogs back into the hall. So far he’s making good time.

Then he hears it – a muffled child’s voice calling for help. He orients to the sound, then rushes toward the stairs. Behind him more flames and smoke gush out of doorways.

He sprints up the stairs, passing a glass case containing a fire hose. The child's voice sobs out again, incoherent with fear.

Dolan stumbles on the last few steps, dropping his Halligan tool as he falls face forward onto his mask.

I assume that he has cracked or broken the plexiglass when he lifts the mask to see. Not a good idea as the noxious fumes choke and blind him.

The child wails, closer this time.

Dolan races down the second-story hall, pounding frantically on doors.

"Hey. Hey," he yells. "Where the hell are you?"

He reaches the end of the hallway when he hears the child cry out again behind him.

He zeroes in on a door.

"I'm here. I'm here," he yells, twisting at the knob.

But the door is locked.

And his Halligan tool is back within the stairwell.

Without warning he attacks the door with his fists and shoulders and feet until it literally splinters.

I watch him as he frantically searches inside the room. Under the bed, in the closet, in the bathroom, everywhere. No sign of the child.

He scans the room again and I know what he's thinking: *Where would a terrified child hide? Where?*

He rushes back to the closet again. Sees a chair. Sees suitcases piled on top of the chair. Then he looks up at the overhead shelf stuffed with blankets.

He pulls the blankets down and discovers the child-size mannequin.

"It's okay, it's okay," he soothes, exactly as if he was comforting a living child.

I look at another monitor as Dolan bursts out of the room, hugging the mannequin close.

Flames and smoke surround him.

"Shit," he yells.

Then he bends low and rushes back into the stairwell. Below him he sees an ocean of flame.

He turns and sprints up to the next landing. He pushes the door open and is immediately driven back by a solid wall of fire.

Below him more flames roar up the stairwell.

I watch him frantically wipe the soot off his face shield. He whips his head one way and then another, looking for escape.

Then he looks below him at the glass case containing the fire hose. Flames encircle it.

Still he rushes down, shatters the glass, grabs the hose and spins the valve.

The line instantly charges and spews out a powerful bolt of water, suddenly jerking, ripping out from Dolan's grip. The bronze hose nozzle gyrates around wildly, slamming into the wall, the floor, threatening to cripple him.

He drops the child to wrestle the flailing hose. The mannequin flip-flops down the stairs.

The metal hose head smashes into Dolan's neck, driving him to his knees. He cries out in pain.

O'Reilly reaches for the switch to end the exercise. I touch his hand, stopping him.

Dolan grapples the wild hose into submission. He stares one level down at the mannequin, red tongues of flame lap at the doll's clothing.

Now he looks up at the door leading into the hallway. I know what he's thinking, measuring his own safety against the false heroics of rescuing some practice mannequin.

A sudden cloud of thick smoke blocks the lens. I can see nothing.

Then the stairwell door bursts open and Dolan emerges into the passageway. He has stuffed the mannequin protectively within his bunker coat.

The hall in front of him resembles a hellish tunnel surging with dancing flames and swirling fumes. But he levers the nozzle to fog position and inches forward, spinning about to douse the flames rolling after him, then turning back to attack the flames in front.

The smoke churns so thickly visibility is reduced to mere feet.

Dolan drops to his belly, cradling the child, pushing the hose out in front of him. He rounds a corner and I switch monitors. Then he stops and yanks at the hose. But it has run its full length.

He struggles awkwardly to his feet.

He is running out of oxygen now.

O'Reilly looks over at me. I shake my head.

Then Dolan leans over, screams like a banshee and charges ahead.

He has spotted the dull glow of the Exit sign.

\*\*\*\*\*

I drive Dolan back into town. My opinion of him is improving.

He twirls a tissue around the inside of his nose. "Black as shoe polish," he says in a voice gone hoarse from smoke.

"Besides this recent string of arsons," I say. "Any other suspicious fires you can remember?"

“I need to change,” he mutters.

“I’ll search the newspaper archives,” I say. “Do you know where the university library is?”

“That’s where my wife spends all her time. Researching her dissertation.”

I recall the long hours I spent in pursuit of my doctorate in fire science. The quiet solace of the library was like a soothing balm to my troubled, crazy thoughts. When I was released on my eighteenth birthday, Grandmama picked me up and drove directly to the university admissions office. It was only after she died that I found out that she had mortgaged her lovely beach cottage so that I could spend the next eight years pursuing an education. Never once did she comment on the paradoxical nature of the major I chose.

I pull around to the back parking lot at the precinct house and Dolan points out his car, a small compact hatchback. The hatch is halfway open and I see a boy’s bicycle wedged within.

“Do you have a son, too?” I ask.

“Just a kid I know. His birthday.”

He blows his nose again, appalled at the result.

“It’s only carbon,” I say. “Won’t kill you for another twenty years.” As he exits I tell him when he’s done to meet me at the library.

\*\*\*\*\*

I sit at a computer console, deep within the university library. I’m surrounded by students, slogging through their own research.

On the monitor a newspaper headline reads, *Church Fire Kills Youth*. The story is from five years earlier. I depress a button to print it out.

This is all I have found for the last ten years. I glance at my watch. I am impatient to meet up with Dolan and resume the investigation.

Then I have an idea, clear the screen, and key in the search words, *Sergeant Gil Dolan*. I get three hits.

The first headline reads, *Off-duty Officer Involved in High Speed Accident*. The subhead states, *Two Dead – Child Listed as Critical*. A photo shows a horribly mangled van. Inset next to it is a photo of a smiling man, woman, and young boy.

I key in the second occurrence. *Officer Placed on Administrative Leave Pending Investigation*. The accompanying photo is of Dolan.

The last headline reads, *Several Questions Left Unanswered*. I start reading.

Suddenly Dolan plops down next to me, grinning widely. I wipe the screen clear. He places a manila envelope in front of me.

“What did you find?” I ask.

“You first.”

I wouldn’t normally put up with this, but his performance at the Academy impressed me. Maybe there’s something more to him.

“Only serious church fire occurred five years ago,” I say. “A ten-year-old boy perished.”

“Five year break between fires,” Dolan says. “Like somebody was doing a little time in between torchings.”

A couple walks by, deep in conversation. The man has his arm around her waist. She leans into him, murmuring softly. With a jolt I recognize the woman from the photograph on Dolan’s desk, his wife.

Dolan’s eyes flick their way, then back. He makes no comment.

Instead, he slides out several photos from the envelope. “Fire scene photos from the last arson. Here he is.” He points to a circled face. There is a prominent tattoo on the man’s neck.

“Guy just finished doing a nickel for arson,” Dolan says.

I hold up my printout of the church fire. “Authorities ruled this indeterminate cause.”

“Yeah, mister indeterminate right here.”

“How did this guy operate?” I ask.

“He was a square badge, a security guard. He’d set a fire, miraculously discover it, then become an instant hero.”

I shake my head. “He’s not the one, then.”

“How the hell you know? Arson is arson.”

“It’s the motivation behind the fires. Ask yourself, why churches?”

“Hate crime. Simple.”

“No,” I reply. “This is different. Somebody’s sending a message here.”

“Message to who?”

“You set a church on fire,” I say, “you’re sending a message to God.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Dolan calls me early the next morning. Requests I meet him at the precinct house. I shrug into jeans and a blue turtleneck, lace up my black sneakers and wolf down a power bar.

He meets me at the front door and gets right to the point. “I don’t buy this bit about God. Guy that burned down the last church isn’t sending a message, he’s getting his rocks off.”

“What do you base your theory on?”

“The facts.”

“Well, the facts don’t bear you out,” I say. “Statistically speaking, arson is a woman’s crime.”

“If I’d said that, you’d call me a chauvinist. So what turns a woman into a firebug?”

“Most commonly, it’s an unfaithful partner.”

“Yeah, well, the guy I showed you has a track record.”

“Storage building fires. Not the same thing as churches.”

“Five years since his last gig. Guy’s making up for lost time.”

“I’ll prove you wrong. You got his file?”

“Better. I got him.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The suspect sits in a small interrogation room. Since he’s not handcuffed, I assume he is not under arrest. But if he hadn’t agreed to this meeting, they could’ve violated his parole.

He wears jeans, white t-shirt, and engineer boots. His hair is buzz cut to the skin.

I study the tattoo on the side of his neck, some sort of tribal symbol. He wears more cryptic emblems on his muscular arms, some professionally inked, others etched in the ragged color of jailhouse work.

Dolan sits across from him, on the other side of the desk. He taps one of several fire scene photos where the suspect’s face is circled. “It’s you, there’s no denying it.”

“Name, rank and serial number,” the man replies.

“Let me guess,” Dolan continues. “You saw the fire, figured it was a Hitler Youth rally and came over to help burn books.”

“Exactly.”

I point to a large and distinctive tattoo on the man’s bicep. “What’s that symbolize?”

“The Aryan Oath. A commitment to genetic purity.”

“Shoot a minority for Christ,” Dolan says.

“Not at all,” the man replies. “I believe God created all minorities. But I don’t believe She intended dysgenic zoophylia.”

Dolan scowls and I interpret, “Sleeping with another species.”

“What about Catholics? Protestants? Unitarians?” Dolan asks. “They another species?”

“It’s not a crime I’m in that photo,” the man says.

“So where were you an hour before the fire? Maybe stopped for gas? Bought a beer? Visited with a friend?” Dolan asks.

“I was just driving around. I do that when I want to think.”

“What were you thinking?” Dolan asks.

“How much I miss the good Samaritan, Dr. Mengele.”

“I look at these pictures,” Dolan says. “I don’t notice it’s raining, yet you’re wearing a poncho.”

“Weather channel predicted thirty percent.”

“Out of everybody in the crowd,” Dolan continues, “nobody else is wearing a raincoat. Not even carrying an umbrella.”

“Is this going somewhere?” the man asks with a bored tone.

“I’m looking at this closely, you and your poncho, and I don’t see your hands. Where are your hands?”

Dolan slides the photo right under the suspect’s nose.

“What I want to know is why didn’t you help put out the fire? You know, maybe stood a little closer while you were jacking off?”

The suspect smiles faintly. “You must have me confused with your father.” Then he stands and leaves.

“Smooth,” I say, after the door slams shut.

“Rattle his cage a little. Worth a shot.”

“He’s not the guy. The church was deliberately planned. Vanity fire-setters are opportunists.”

I draw one particular photo back to my side of the table and study it.

“What a pathetic cross section of humanity,” Dolan says. “Freaks, losers, degenerates, you name it.”

“How would you characterize this particular cross-section?” I ask, sliding the photo over to him. “Upper left quadrant. She look familiar?”

Dolan studies the photo. Then his eyes close. “My daughter,” he says softly.

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Both of our phones vibrate almost simultaneously.

I read my text message and smile.

“Let’s roll,” Dolan says.

It takes us fifteen minutes to reach the Chapel of St. Sebastian.

The frame building is small and unassuming. Strobing emergency lights flicker rudely over a delicate stringcourse of angels hovering over the modest door. The calm demeanor of the stained glass figures staring out counterpoints the raw urgency of police vehicles and ambulances.

“Don’t, if you don’t want to,” I say to Dolan as I exit the Cherokee.

“Let the bomb squad handle it,” he says again.

“Why don’t you round up some coffee and donuts, then,” I say, heading for the back of my Cherokee. “I won’t be long.”

As I slip into my soiled coveralls he appears at my side, scowling as he forces his arms and legs into the pair I previously loaned him. It is still ill fitting, and he reaches down to the torn crotch area and angrily rips it larger.

We approach the yellow police tape cordoning off the area and a uniformed patrolman holds up his hand to halt us.

Dolan flashes his shield as we duck under the ribbon. “Bomb squad’s five minutes out,” the cop says. “Who are you?”

“Suicide squad,” Dolan mutters, keeping up with me as I jog to the chapel’s crawl space door.

I point up at a tall window, to a jagged hole smashed through the top portion.

Then we hunker down on our bellies and wriggle underneath.

It is cool and smells pleasantly of earth instead of charred cinders. I swing my flashlight beam around, spot a whiskey box near the center of the church and worm forward.

“What was the rector doing under here?” Dolan wants to know.

“Rescuing a litter of kittens,” I say.

We halt in front of the corrugated whiskey box. The scenario is familiar, but without the mantle of ash and water – an alarm clock affixed to a small board, brown string attached to the trigger of a mousetrap, and match heads secured to the striker bar secreted within a nest of shredded newspaper. The techs may very well find some workable prints. The newspaper mounds up around the sides of the whiskey box and I ponder what fire load might be within.

“Hear that?” I say.

“I don’t hear anything,” Dolan says.

“Cheap clock. Stopped ticking.”

“No tickee, no burnee.”

“I wonder if it’s booby trapped,” I say, slowly tilting over the whiskey box to look inside.

Then without warning the clock’s alarm sounds, winding in the string, triggering the mousetrap with a sharp snap and igniting the kitchen matches deep within the pile of shredded newspaper.

I turn to look at Dolan. His eyes are round as saucers and sweat beads his forehead.

“Help me pat out the fire,” I say. Then add, “You’re looking a little peaked. Want to catch a buzz?”



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As part of my teaching arrangement with the university, they lease me a one bedroom efficiency on campus. I chose this particular cottage because it has a fireplace. I enjoy the irony.

Other than the fireplace, I don't need much more. I don't want much more, either, even though I can certainly afford it.

I pass my days as a nun would, working, studying, sleeping, filling my time as fully as possible to crowd out unpleasant thoughts.

But I am not a nun, I am a woman in the prime of life. I stay fit. I watch my weight.

Dolan sits on my secondhand sofa as I bring the bottle and two glasses to a second hand coffee table, darkly scarred from cigarette burns.

"Tequila," I say, splashing three fingers worth in each glass.

Dolan stares down at the golden liquid, but doesn't move. I hurl back my glass. I love that first burn as the liquor hits my gut. A previous therapist judged me an alcoholic. My present one does not.

I study Dolan. He seems in shape. He's not bad looking. Maybe I misjudged him. Maybe I could grow to trust him.

"Want to know what I saw inside the whiskey box?" I ask.

Dolan tears his eyes off his glass and nods.

"Copper sulfate. Paraffin. Cellulose."

"What's that in English?"

"A fire log."

"You telling me that's gonna burn down a whole damn church?"

"After a few modifications, definitely."

I walk over to my fireplace and unwrap one of my own fire logs. I place it on the kitchen counter and take out a serrated steak knife.

"First you cut off thin sections," I say, sawing off two. "Then you chunk it up and heat it in the microwave."

I place the crumbled material inside a bowl, stick it all into my small oven and push the timer.

I return to the coffee table and pour myself another three fingers. Toss it off quickly. Dolan still hasn't touched his.

When the microwave beeps, I remove the bowl. "Nice and mushy. See?"

I open the pantry and pull out a box of moth crystals. "Next we add naphthalene. Now drizzle gently with lighter fluid." I give the mixture a good squirt. "Mix together well."

I pinch off a portion the size of my thumbnail and center it on one of my

Goodwill plates. I grab a match from the box near my fireplace and sit down next to Dolan.

He watches me intently as I scrape the kitchen match against the table.

Then I bring the flame to the pinch of stuff on the plate.

With a tiny whoosh the mixture flares up with unbelievable fury, pulsing angrily, spewing out a miniature streamer of hateful-looking smoke.

Then the flame subsides, but what's left on the plate continues glowing like a small chunk of coal, still red hot, still capable of igniting anything flammable close by.

Whether Dolan is impressed or not I cannot tell. He rises from the couch and wanders over to my well-packed bookcase.

"You got a hell of a library here," he says, taking down a thick book entitled *The Anarchist's Bible*.

He opens the book and riffles through. "Look at this stuff. Pipe bombs. Molotov cocktails. Bathtub napalm. Everything you need to know."

"Just staying current." I reach for the bottle and pour another few inches of elixir.

"Got anything on how to make an A-bomb?" Dolan asks.

"Not handy," I say, sipping slowly now, just surfing the burn. "But you can look it up in the library or find it on some website."

Dolan shoves the book back into its place.

"Tell me about the car wreck you were in," I say.

He turns. "It's none of your damn business."

"What's the department hiding?"

"Nothing."

"Was there a cover up?" I ask, standing. "Is that why they keep you off the important cases?"

I walk over to him. My blood surges hotly, lifting me up, empowering me. Too much time has passed since last a man touched me. I yearn to feel flesh against flesh again. Hot breath. A wet tongue. Strong hands pulling me in tight.

He's about to say something, but I interrupt.

"Enough foreplay," I say.

I grab his necktie and lead him into my bedroom. Then I push him down so he's sitting on the bed. All around are candles. On the bureau, in sconces, on the window sill. I burn through three matches lighting them all.

My room flickers in a warm dangerous way.

I lean down and press my lips against his.

"How do you want it?" I whisper. "Rough and hard? Or slow and soft?"

I abruptly shove him backwards. "I don't do slow and soft."

I kneel next to him and undo his tie. Suddenly I rip his shirt open, digging my fingers into his flesh.

“Nice chest,” I say.

I strip off my turtleneck and straddle him. He doesn’t seem aroused. *Do my scars repulse him?*

“Touch me,” I order.

He raises his hands and cups my bra. I reach behind my back and unhook the clasp. The material falls away and Dolan stares at my breasts. Or is he staring at my disfigured skin?

He has no idea how much he could hurt me right now.

I pull his left hand to my lips. His gold wedding band reflects the candlelight like a tiny crescent moon. I suck that finger slowly into my mouth, fellating it. I bite down gently on either side of his ring and slowly tug. When I pull his finger from my mouth the ring is gone.

I make my lips into an O encircling the wedding band. I try and push the tip of my tongue through the hole.

But instead of exciting him, his arms fall limply to his sides. He stares at me for a moment, then shuts his eyes.

Rejection is a razor that never dulls. I have made a terrible mistake.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

I spit the ring down onto the sheets. *Still in love with his wife*, I tell myself this time.

Then I stand and turn away. “Get out.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I pick up Dolan the next morning in the precinct parking lot. I notice that the boy’s bicycle is gone from the back of his small hatchback.

As soon as he buckles up he turns to me. I meet his stare head on.

After a moment he says, “I want you to talk to the lieutenant. Tell him we need a stakeout on that Hitler wannabe.”

His arrogance has returned. Of course it has. I refuse.

“But if we follow this guy, we’ll catch him in the act.”

“The person you dragged in is not involved. I won’t waste time on him.”

“Humor me, then. Convince me you’re right.”

This is why I don’t like partners, having to connect the dots gets tedious. “For starters, we’ve ruled out a for-profit motive and the instant-hero motive.”

“You’re forgetting a hate crime. That Aryan oath bullshit.”

“Look,” I say. “You go to prison you’ve got to join a club. Lifers, bikers,

racists, whatever, but you've got to wear the colors." I knew all about that.

Dolan crosses his arms. He's not convinced.

"The problem with your line of thought is you're totally focused on male-dominated motivations."

"So Mrs. Whacko firebombs the church?"

"I think we're dealing with someone younger here, an adolescent female."

"Maybe didn't get invited to the prom," Dolan says.

"I think it's worse than that. I think our little arsonist is a victim herself."

"Victim of what?"

"Somebody molested her. And probably still is."

I turn into the spacious parking lot of St. Francis' Cathedral. Sanctified faces stare down at me from the stained glass windows as if in stern rebuke.

"You haven't made the connection," Dolan says. "Getting molested – burning a church."

"Young girl gets abused by her father, uncle, whoever. She'd seek help from an authority figure."

"Go to the mother."

"Unlikely. Much more probable that the victim would seek someone outside the family. Someone traditionally to be trusted."

"A priest," Dolan says, catching on. "Or minister."

"Exactly. And he'd listen sympathetically, pat her on the hand, and then the goddamned sonofabitch would send her right back home."

"Jeez," Dolan says. "What've you got against –"

"Forget it," I say, getting out.

We trudge up the side steps to the ornately-carved wooden door. As if on cue it swings open and the youth from our last visit stands there.

"Hello, Absalom," I say. I put out my hand and after a brief hesitation he reaches out to shake it.

"Monsignor will be available shortly. He's extremely busy."

I'm glad that I called ahead and confirmed this meeting. Monsignor strikes me as much too important a person to just drop in on.

I let my eyes adjust to the shadowy gloom of the hallway. Same old ancient saints on the walls staring at nothing. The air is close, and I smell a hint of incense, mixed in with mildew.

I turn and face the youth in his brown robes. "My Hebrew's a little rusty. Absalom... peace?"

"My Father is peace. From the Old Testament, Kings Two."

"Hebrew," Dolan mutters.

At the far end of the hallway a doorway opens and the Monsignor briefly

stands there, backlit from the lights in his office. Then he turns and retreats within.

It's as good an invitation as any and we follow Absalom across the deep carpet and once again into the ornate office.

The Monsignor sits behind his regal desk, fingers laced together, not offering to shake either one of our hands.

"Dr. Toussaint," he nods at me, then turns his gaze at Dolan. "A pleasure to see you, Gil. It's been quite a while."

"We don't..." Dolan starts out, "The family, that is. Sundays are kind of, you know, work and school and stuff." He trails off.

"And Tracie?" the Monsignor asks benignly.

"Real good."

The Monsignor turns his eyes toward me. Chitchat is over.

"Five years ago there was another church fire," I say.

"Very tragic. A young man died, one of our acolytes."

"Were you the..." I can't think of the right word to use.

"No, that was Father Jake's church. He and the youth who perished were extremely close. I transferred Father Jake shortly thereafter. His grief was excessive."

"It would be helpful if I could speak with Father Jake."

"He passed away two months ago. Is there something else I can help you with?"

"What we're looking for, sir, is a record of someone who might've gone to Father Jake for help."

"Many people went to Father Jake. He listened. That's what I tell the young clergy today. The key is listening."

"Would it help if we narrowed the search down?" I ask. "A young girl, maybe ten or twelve."

"And why would she have sought out Father Jake?"

"She was being molested."

"Ah," is all the Monsignor says.

"She might've gone to Father Jake. Confided in him."

"I'm afraid that presents a serious problem. I cannot breach the sacred trust of confession."

"She wouldn't have told him under the seal of confession. This is a young girl going to her priest for help."

"I'm truly sorry. There is nothing I can do."

I nod my thanks. I do not trust my words. Absalom leads us out as my fury grows.

I manage to get into my Cherokee, start the engine, and pull into traffic before my rage explodes.

“That posturing bastard,” I yell. “There’s a young girl out there in need of help.”

Dolan looks over at me. Then like a fool he says, “So what are you going to do? Sue the church?”

“You know,” I say. “That’s a very good idea. The trust of confession is one thing. Withholding information on a crime is another.”

“Sue the church,” he says. “You’re crazy.”

I stomp on the brakes and we slew into a screeching stop. “Don’t you ever call me crazy,” I whisper.

\*\*\*\*\*

I kick Dolan loose back at his precinct house. I cannot stand to have him around anymore. I have no doubt he will run inside and complain to his Lieutenant about what an insane bitch I am. How I want to sue the church.

But I sense that everything would come together if I could get into the church’s records. I know in my heart that sometime in the past a vulnerable, innocent young girl contacted someone she knew and trusted.

It wouldn’t be at confession. Damn the Monsignor for blocking my efforts.

I call up my boss, Creighton Calderwood, the State Insurance Commissioner. He is the only one I know with any clout.

I explain to him what I need and why.

He doesn’t sound at all surprised. Of course, someone has already informed him of my intentions. Damn this city, too many people behind the scenes pulling strings for their own agendas. But then I remember that Creighton has kindly worked behind the scenes on my behalf. If he didn’t have his own strings to pull, where would I be?

“You can’t litigate this,” he tells me. “What you want is a motion to compel.”

*A court order*, in other words. Which no judge in his right mind will grant me, based solely on gut feelings.

“Father Jake’s personal correspondence is not the confessional. Someone might have written him, asking for help.”

“Well,” Creighton says after a long pause. “On the one hand are the legal issues. On the other hand are the politics.”

I understand his oblique warning and I realize that nothing like this is simple and straightforward.

“Which means it would take too long and any number of things could derail

it,” I say.

“Exactly,” he enthuses at my kindergarten-level understanding of how things work.

\*\*\*\*\*

I watch as the firefighters knock down the blaze later that evening. Response time for the responding company was short, so there is probably not too much structural damage inside. But the cleanup within will be substantial just from the soot and water. Plus, the telltale stench of the fire itself must be dealt with.

This is nothing more than a store-front bodega recently converted into a church, serving the poor who live in the surrounding tenements. *Rejoice Ministries*, the sign reads.

“How the hell did you get here so quick?”

I turn and see Dolan, looking as if he has slept in his suit. I picture him watching TV at home, dozing fitfully by himself on the couch.

“Scanner,” I reply.

Two firefighters, in their bulky turnout gear, manhandle a stretcher from inside the smoke-shrouded building. I recognize the Aryan oath suspect from the other day. Dolan recognizes him, too.

“There’s book smarts,” he says. “And street smarts.”

“Copycat,” I say. “Impressing his friends.”

“Copycat,” Dolan says, giving me a hard look.

Before I can respond, a uniformed cop approaches. “You in charge?” he asks.

“Who are you?” Dolan asks.

“Manahan. I called it in.”

“Go on,” Dolan orders.

“I was responding to an assault. Saw the flames.”

“Then what?” I ask.

“I ran up to see if anyone was inside. Saw that guy –” he gestures at the stretcher being loaded into an ambulance. “He was on fire. Clothes, hair. Not moving, though. Figured he was dead.”

“Meet me at the hospital,” Dolan tells me, spinning on his heel and striding off.

\*\*\*\*\*

We walk alongside a harried intern with no time to spare, dressed in blue

scrubs with a stethoscope draped around his neck.

“Talk?” he says to Dolan. “His lips are charred off. Third degree burns over half his body. What was it, gasoline?”

“Most likely,” I say.

“This is a major candidate in a serial arson case,” Dolan tells the intern.

“Right now he’s a major candidate for hypostatic pneumonia, staph infections, and a lot of pain. Morphine’s going to do him about as much good as aspirin.

Dolan and I take the elevator down.

“Poetic justice,” he says, almost smirking.

“You ever been injured like that?”

“You set a fire, you get burned. Eye for an eye.”

I dig out a butane lighter, ignite it and hold it up to his face. “Eye for an eye. You got any unpaid debts, Dolan?”

\*\*\*\*\*

I’m back at the tenement storefront bright and early the next morning. I wear my turnout boots and rake through the cinders. Mostly for show, but you never know.

A car approaches and stops. I look over and see a hatchback. Dolan opens the door and hefts himself out.

“Congratulations on wrapping the case,” he says.

“Look around,” I reply. “Everything is different. Accelerant, ignition device, delivery mechanism.”

“Still flogging that theory. Young girl gets molested, sends a pyrogram to God.”

“It’s not theory. It’s fact.”

“Don’t bet on it,” he says, climbing back inside his car. Then he calls out, “I got a question. Why are your juvenile records sealed?”

I turn away and sift through more rubble. My thoughts are as hot and bitter as the smoking ash surrounding me.

\*\*\*\*\*

I cannot stand the waiting. Waiting for a call from Creighton. Waiting to get thrown off this case. Waiting for Dolan to accuse me of setting the fires myself.

But I know I can help this young girl. If only I can find her first. Otherwise,



there is only one way for of all this to end.

Then I have a thought and head for the university library, closer than the computer in my office.

“Religion,” I tell the librarian behind the desk. She tells me which floor and which aisle.

I find the section I need and pause to breathe in. I love the smell of old books. So much knowledge, or adventure. Or whatever else one seeks to discover. Books don’t hate. Or hurt, or misunderstand. Or kill.

The book I remove from the shelf is decades old, and probably hasn’t been looked at since it first arrived. I find a comfortable seat and riff through, noting down the pages I need. Then I find a nearby copy machine and begin feeding in coins, copying everything I think I may need.

*I should have thought of this before*, I reflect.

In a city with seven thousand churches, how would one innocent hurt young girl go about selecting targets?

By name, of course.

The first arson occurred at St. Jerome’s, the patron saint of abused children.

Next came St. Sebastian, protector against enemies of religion.

After that was St. Aloysius Gonzaga, protector of church youth.

And the most recent was St. Jude’s, the patron saint of hopeless causes.

Now all I had to do was guess which was next, and wait. For I knew I could help this poor child. I just knew it.

\*\*\*\*\*

The late afternoon sun burns a dull orange from the chronic smog that afflicts Chandlertowne. Unfortunately my circuit runs east to west so the glare gnaws at my eyes like a dull hangover.

*Lost mariners?* I wonder. Probably not. I eliminate shepherds, bakers, musicians, and anything else without some shred of connection.

I cruise by St. Matthew’s Chapel. Too small. Too unlikely.

Next is St. Gabriel’s, neglected, abandoned, boarded up for years.

A cheery sign in front of St. Peter’s reads, *Please Pardon Our Growing Pains!* It is undergoing massive renovations.

I have reached the middle of the city now, halfway through.

Then I see it in the distance, and my heart whispers out, *this is the one.*

St. Francis Cathedral, the largest and most majestic church in Chandlertowne. I pull into a vacant parking space and gaze up at the ornate spires and towering bell towers stretching several stories up toward the heavens.

The structure occupies one full city block, absolutely overpowering anything else in view.

Good old St. Francis, the patron saint of fire.

Evening vespers will commence in an hour. I reach behind me into the backseat and retrieve my stun gun. I don't want to hurt this girl, just talk with her and let her know she's not alone. But right now she's thinking crazy thoughts. I know all about that, too.

\*\*\*\*\*

The service is beautiful, serene, powerful, comforting. The candles sputter peacefully high up from wall sconces. Passing car lights reflect in through the stained glass windows, shading the walls with reds, greens, blues, and golds.

I sit alone in a rear pew, the dark wood rubbed smooth from countless others sitting here before me. I hope that they have all found the peace and solace that they were seeking from this place.

Then, like a gentle wave, all heads bow in prayer. It is time for me to disappear. I retreat into the shadows where I had scouted out a small utility closet. I close the door behind me as softly as a baby breathing. I had previously placed a small folding chair within it, and sit down. All I can see is the bar of light shining under the door.

The time creeps by.

Footsteps shuffle past outside. Muted voices murmur just low enough that I cannot make out exact words. I hear a child giggle. At last all grows quiet. Then, finally, all the interior lights are doused.

The bar of light under the door fades to black. I wait another twenty minutes.

When I creep out, my eyes are adjusted to the dark and I can see well enough. I look around and observe no one. I listen intently, but hear no sounds.

I must venture deeper inside. Find where my little lost angel will start her last fire.

And then I spot him, facing away from me, watching the side door, unlocked still, where he figures I will sneak in.

Detective Gil Dolan is here to detain me. He believes I am the arsonist, a *copycat*, not unheard of in my profession.

I have no time for this misguided nonsense.

I glide in his direction as quietly as fog. If he turns now, all is lost.

Blue flames crackle out as I hold the stun gun tight against Dolan's back. He falls like a dropped brick, spasming, limbs twitching. When he grows still I find his shoulder holster and remove his service revolver. I pat his ankles, but he

carries no backup gun.

For a moment all is quiet. Then, I clearly hear footsteps running off. A door slams shut.

I am discovered.

Somewhere in the distance an alarm clock rings.

There is no time to lose.

I set off like the wind. But this church is huge, colossal. As I race past the baptismal font, I chunk in Dolan's weapon.

I try and put myself in the girl's mind. She is thinking crazy, but with terrible purpose. No one has answered her pleas for help. If only I can find her soon.

*Where would she be?* I wonder. *Everywhere.* I remember the four hotspots in the other church. I have no doubt there will be dozens here. All bursting into flame within moments of each other. All spreading out with fury and purpose.

The church is probably doomed.

But, she is not.

It is then that I smell it, the first faint whisper of smoke.

I let my nose guide me down a long carpeted hallway. When another hall intersects I pause to orient myself. But as the spoor of smoke grows, I realize it approaches from all directions.

I quickly retrace my steps. I throw the door open, back into the vast nave and almost collide with someone.

"Who are you?" I bark.

"Caretaker," he says, looking wildly around, ready to bolt.

I grab his arm. "What's beyond those doors?"

"Refectory. Nursery. Classrooms. Which floor you talking about?"

Wispy gray tendrils of smoke, delicate as spider webs float past us. By the sharp odor there is much more smoke nearby. "Find a fire alarm," I yell. "Then get the hell out."

I rush down the ambulatory. The smoky stench thickens.

I turn a corner and race by a classroom. All the curtain hems blaze as if someone had just trailed a match along the bottom length of them.

I sweep past the library and see a burning pyre of bibles, piled high against one wall. Directly above the paint blisters and curls, soon to ignite.

The nursery is next. I see gaily-colored stuffed animals everywhere, each one engulfed in flames.

I pass a closed door. Intense light glows out from underneath. I touch the wood and it scorches me. I know better than to open the door.

Each room from there on is a nightmare echo of the one before: the chapel, auditorium, thrift shop, refectory, cloister, side galleries. The flames run rampant

beyond my wildest imagination. Everything has spread faster than I thought possible.

I find the stairwell. Steps lead down to a basement, I assume. I make a choice and stampede upward.

I reach the second floor and sprint down the hall, throwing doors open as I pass. All are offices. All are still blessedly dark.

I race back into the stairwell and jog up again. My lungs ache from the growing tang of char.

More offices. I sprint along, throwing open doors. Looking for what, I don't know.

Then I reach the rector's office. Unlike the other offices, the lights inside are all ablaze. I immediately see that the computer monitor has been turned to the door. I approach it and read what's on the screen:

Sin not against the child  
Genesis 42:22

A terrible scream shatters the night.

I spin around and rush out, spot the door marked *CHOIR LOFT*, and burst through it.

I instantly throw my arms up to shield against the incredible heat of the conflagration below. The entire main floor of the church is ablaze. Flames bend hungrily over the balcony.

Before me I see Absalom. I was right, but I was wrong. The victim was not a young girl, but a young boy. He turns a tormented face to look at me.

"Second Samuel 14:30," he says. "From the Book of Kings, Old Testament."

A column of beautiful sparks rushes heavenward.

"And he said unto his servants, I would see the king were it not for Jacob."

*Father Jake*, yes.

"This night, then, we will set fire to his fields and all he owns."

Black spots begin charring at the front of his robe, wisping gray smoke.

"So they made preparations," the young man says. "Waiting half the length before dawn, then set out with torch and tinder. And the servants did as Absalom commanded."

"Did he touch you?" I ask.

He nods faintly.

"Did he touch your friend?"

"Nobody cared," he chokes.

"I care," I say.

Absalom looks out at the flames. "I'm going to hell."

"No. You've served your time."

He looks at me again. I see his tears. I feel his tears. I am his tears.

"Father Jake knew, didn't he?"

"As long as he was alive, I was safe." Absalom says.

"It's okay to hurt. It's okay to feel angry." I hold out my hands. "Come to me."

I stare into his terrified eyes. I command my heart to reach out to his.

The entire front rail of the choir loft dances with fire. A low runner of flames separates us.

He tries to speak again, but cannot.

I step over the flickering barrier between us. I feel nothing. I wrap my arms around Absalom and feel everything.

"What are you doing?" someone shouts from the balcony door. It is Dolan. He uses his arms to shield himself from the terrible heat. "Hurry!" He holds out a hand. "Hurry!"

"Save yourself," I shout back.

Scorching tendrils of flame pluck at us. All around the air shimmers, vibrating madly. Loud poppings and dull boomings counterpoint the strident roar. Something twists beneath me.

With a juddering moan, the loft folds in on itself, collapsing.

Hands suddenly grab me, dragging me back.

I clutch Absalom. He shrieks. My hands are fierce as iron claws, welded to his robe.

Abruptly, my feet slide out from under me. Dolan jerks me back, jerks too hard. Suddenly all I hold are two scraps of cloth.

Then all I can do is watch the boy's lost eyes as he plummets into the boiling cauldron.

"You bastard," I shriek at Dolan, kicking him, scratching him, forcing him back down the hall with my fists and teeth and all my might.

*I could've saved the boy. I should've saved the boy. Like no one had ever saved me.*

Then I turn and run off, crazed with guilt like I once was, buried in grief like I have been ever since.

\*\*\*\*\*

My thoughts are an explosion of jagged splinters which I cannot control. All that's left is some wild thing, fueled by pure adrenaline.

Thick smoke surrounds me, choking, blinding. I hold my blouse over my nose and mouth. It hardly matters.

I find my way back to the stairs. All below is an angry orange glow. Nothing to do but rush up.

I make it two more flights before the steps end. The stairwell acts like a wind tunnel, sucking the fire up, chasing me relentlessly.

Flames dance brightly at either end of the hall, chewing along the carpet in a slow march.

I sink to my belly to breathe easier, an entirely futile act.

I suspect this last hallway means the end of me.

Then the heated draft rushing up from the stairwell pushes aside the black smoke for a brief instant.

Directly in front of me the door reads *BELL TOWER*.

I crawl to it, reach up and pull the door open.

As the fresh welcome air surrounds me, I spy the brown string attached to the inside knob. I hear the metal clang above me and then the telltale chug of liquid emptying from a container.

I can guess what the liquid is. No one is meant to escape from this place.

I understand, then pull myself up and take to the stairs with all the determination I have left.

The old wooden steps follow the walls, winding up, and I know they will make for a fine fuel load. Especially soaked with gasoline. The thick bell rope dangles down through the hollow center.

I don't look behind me, I don't want to see what might be gaining.

I reach the top landing and stumble over the empty gas can. I kick it back down the steps. Then I close the door behind me in a pointless gesture of defiance.

I am out in the open now and suck in lungful after lungful of cool precious air.

Before me is a huge bell taller than I am. I duck under it and find myself perched on the highest point of the cathedral. Below me dozens of fire engines and police cars swarm about, moving like frantic toys.

I have reached as far up as possible. Now it is time to go down.

I grab the thick bell rope and haul at it, hand over hand, dropping what I've pulled up over the outer edge. It seems quite long and raises my hopes.

Then I clutch the rope tightly, sit for a moment on the edge, and gently ease off.

My heart wrenches as I immediately drop several feet. I pull up sharply at the same time as the mighty bell tolls out a single mournful note.

Below me, apparatus and emergency vehicles continue rolling up in a steady stream. Firefighters rush about, police herd back the crowds, emergency personnel set up aid stations.

I have seen the drill before. But never from this vantage point.

There is no need for emergency lighting down below as the cathedral is fully involved, radiating out immense waves of heat and brilliance.

At this height no one is likely to notice me as I scale down the highest spire, inch by slow inch. My only company are the occasional gargoyles, mocking my small desperate struggle.

At one point I find myself bracketed by two beautiful stained glass windows lit brightly from within. Suddenly they explode out, vomiting flame and smoke.

My muscles ache beyond agony. How much farther can I descend before my strength leaves me, I do not know. Then I run out of rope.

I do not think I have the will to pull myself back and look up to see how far that might be. The rope above me is now on fire.

Below I see a first responder pointing up at me. But no aerial will ascend this high.

My final hope is a nearby stone parapet.

I push out with my legs, swing a few feet, then swing back. I do it again. Like a pendulum.

With each swing I approach a little closer to the parapet.

One last swing should bring me close enough.

Once more I push out, using all my strength. I swing just far enough to hook three fingers over the retainer wall. Behind me the rope resembles a long ribbon of flame.

My strength ebbs. The effort is too much. My fingers slowly slip their precarious hold.

I am strangely calm.

Then, without warning, two hands clamp over my wrist. I look up into the wild eyes of Gil Dolan.

Behind me the heavy bell rope severs from the flames and jerks roughly out of my other hand. It almost carries us both down.

But somehow Dolan maintains his grip and slowly drags me up the rough stone surface and over the parapet.

His clothes are ripped, smudged, streaked black in places. His hair mats wetly to his head and the whites of his eyes stare out from behind a mask of grime and fear.

“Just like the drill,” I rasp out. “Two ways out.”

We rush to the other side of the parapet and look down. My worst fears are

confirmed. No way down from here and still too high for any rescue.

Then I notice a commercial-sized exhaust duct jutting out from the wall, maybe six feet below us.

Dolan lowers me to the top of the duct. I kick and stomp at the cover, trying to dislodge it.

Suddenly the duct tears away and I hurtle down. My feet land on a carved stone angel just two feet below. I balance precariously

Then I look up.

Dolan is nowhere to be seen. I call out his name with a throat torn raw from breathing smoke. I hope he has a guardian angel.

There is no time to waste.

I carefully push myself into the duct. It is coated with thick rank kitchen grease. I squirm ahead, pushing through the sludge.

The smell of smoke grows stronger as I reach the end of the duct. I look down through a square grill. I am over an industrial-sized range. I pound down with my fists until the louvered vent breaks free. Then I lower myself down into the kitchen.

Wisps of angry smoke coil around hanging pots and pans as I rush to the swinging kitchen door. On the other side of the window bright flames dance.

I touch the metal, just to be sure. It burns my flesh.

Rushing to the sink, I wrench the faucet on full. Then I gather up nearby aprons, soak them and cram them under the door jamb.

I fling open another door, but it is only the pantry. I glance behind me and see the aprons crisping to black.

Then a square opening in the wall catches my attention. It is a dumbwaiter.

When I slide open the door, I spot a double rope hanging down.

The window to the kitchen door shatters and flames curl hungrily in.

I frantically hoist on the dumbwaiter rope and when the top of the delivery box arrives, I crawl into the shaft and lower myself down.

The smoke is less dense here. That will change soon.

I pass by a door on the floor below me and gingerly touch it. Burning hot. I watch as the paint blisters and peels.

I continue lowering myself floor by floor. No escape anywhere. Sparks sprinkle down around me. I look up and see orange flames licking in from the doors above.

With a dull thud, the dumbwaiter halts. End of the line.

The sprinkle of hot sparks around me turns into a shower.

I pull myself to my feet and stomp down. Again. Then again. I pull myself up the rope several feet and then drop, hoping not to break any bones.



What breaks instead is the wood.

I lower myself part way into the box and kick at the wooden door. Then, I remember it slides. I open it, then squirm and wriggle and worm through, tumbling out.

I am in the basement.

At one end, I see steps leading up. Fierce flames reflect violently down from above. The roar of the fire deafens me. Dirty water cascades down the steps like a river from the hoses outside.

Without warning the subfloor at the other end of the basement collapses, leaving a clear view of hell.

Behind me the dumbwaiter shaft blazes like a furnace stokehole.

I stand in the middle of the basement, ankle deep in filthy water, listening to my future thunder closer.

Then I hear a hacking, rasping cough.

But, the room is empty. All I see is an old dirty mattress in the corner. The hacking cough sounds again. From under the mattress.

I grab the edge and haul it off Gil Dolan. He clutches a fire ax tightly to his chest.

“How did... how?...” is all I can manage.

He points up to a corner of the ceiling, to a ragged hole. Incredibly, he has chopped his way down through floor after floor.

Dolan stares at me, his eyes growing dull. He is losing his will. Soon he will pull the mattress back over him in one last, vain, helpless gesture.

I double over from a violent spasm of choking and coughing, then collapse to my hands and knees.

My end approaches, slithering, roaring, raging red, down from above.

There is nothing else to see but the river of water cascading down the steps and rushing madly past my hands and knees.

And then I comprehend.

I leap to my feet and wrench the fire ax from Dolan’s weakening grip. I follow the river of water to find where it all drains down through the floor. Then I jam the point of the fire ax in between metal and concrete and lever up the big iron grating.

Beneath me the huge underground storm drain surges black, choked to capacity with frothing, thrashing, churning water from the deluge outside.

I look over at Dolan, gazing back at me with a flat, blank expression. The mattress half covering him chars and smokes, flaming around the edges.

“The world’s full of martyrs,” I scream at him. “Get up and live.”

Then I leap down.

\*\*\*\*\*

The rain patters gently, soothing and restful. I sit on a stone bench in the courtyard of a chapel I visit occasionally. Along the horizon, dirty gray clouds build in the distance and scud this way.

The courtyard is needy, unkempt. Few ever visit. Weeds clot the grass. Tendrils of faded green ivy droop along the stone arch leading within.

The dressings on my forearms, parts of my face and legs, grow damp and then cool from the light drizzle. The doctor insisted that I stay in the burn ward, but I left this morning.

Of all my professional colleagues only Creighton came to visit, bringing a cheerful card and bright balloon. He wore a new tie to show off, bold as a signal flare.

He informed me that the Monsignor was still missing.

Gil Dolan recuperated across the hall. A steady stream of his cop friends showed up, many with flowers, one even snuck in a six pack.

His wife visited every evening, usually accompanied by their daughter. Sometimes their stay would be brief, sometimes longer.

Busy with living their lives, I guess.

The patter of rain grows heavier, matting my hair, drenching my clothes, rivering chills across my flesh.

I need the chills, the cold. I need the cooling counterpoint to my most recent wounds, blistering painfully.

Would that I could open my head and let the rain cool down my thoughts, chill the burn of long-ago wounds.

Perhaps with time.

Now the rain washes down in liquid torrents, obscuring my vision so much that I can barely see past the old stone archway.

But, as I look over, the force of the rain drags lower the tendrils of ivy running across the face of the arch, uncovering an old faded inscription.

It is why I keep returning, to read the carved words again.

*Forgiveness, thy name is salvation.*

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## **SOOT ANGEL**

by

m. a. petterson

The outline of the body is in stark contrast to the surrounding char; a small, pale white tracery on an otherwise burnt and blackened mattress.

The rest of the undersized storage area, used as a bedroom within the vacant warehouse, is in shambles: spalled walls, shattered windows, pools of filthy water from the fire hoses.

In one corner the roasted hulk of a dresser squats, the cheap wood alligatored from the flames. *From how far away did the homeless family drag that here?* I wonder. Above it dangles a worn electrical cord. The light bulb hanging from the end is misshapen and elongated, molded into a pointer indicating the direction of the fire path.

But my eyes keep drawing back to the mattress. A child has died here, and all that remains is the blanched, unburned outline of the little body.

What we in the business call a soot angel.

### **CHAPTER ONE**

The task always seems impossible at first glance: a charred, demolished pile of blackened debris puddled from the hoses, muddied with ash to clog every foothold.

What the fire hasn't destroyed is then ruined even more by the overhaul: the process where the firefighters tear out walls, pull down ceilings, and hack through floors to search for any remaining smoldering spots hidden away from

the normal line of sight.

It is a forbidding mess; stinking, dangerous, very often still leaking toxic fumes. I never wear heels or expensive clothing on-site. My job today is twofold: first, to hopefully find the origin of the fire. And from that, hopefully, to determine the cause. I use the word *hopefully*, because rarely is determining cause and origin an exact science; or even within the realm of possibility in some too many instances.

I will initially focus on three broad areas. This fire could be intentional. It could be accidental. Or it could have resulted from an act of God. I will check the meteorological reports for any indication of lightning during the night. That would be the easiest line to cross off. I do not recall any storms during the previous twenty-four hours, so I am not optimistic.

An accidental cause is more probable, especially in such a structure as this – an old and unused warehouse, formerly specializing in storing and rehabbing boats. A place like this would normally keep numerous highly flammable chemicals around. Proper storage is paramount. Even something so seemingly innocent as filling a container with rags damp from tung oil can initiate spontaneous combustion. Bad breakers or faulty wiring might also be responsible. So too, a defective appliance. And the list goes on.

But as for arson, that is certainly an odds-on favorite. Not because of anything I've uncovered yet, but because arson is one of the country's fastest growth crimes. Over six hundred million dollars went up in flames last year and much of it, more than was ever proved, was intentional.

The call came in at two thirty-eight in the morning according to the first responder's report. An anonymous call from a pre-paid cell phone. Response time was under five minutes; Chandlertowne boasts some of the fastest departments in the entire state. Unfortunately, there was no preplan of the interior of the warehouse. And access for the initial size-up was hampered by a tangle of several security fences, though the chain-link barriers topped with razor wire had not kept out the family of homeless tenants.

Here amidst the jumbled and charred remains I am as far removed from the theories and principles I teach in the classroom as can be. It has taken many years for me to learn all that I know, eight years at various universities to eventually attain my two doctorates, and now more years in the actual field.

What I do requires a good working knowledge of building construction, chemistry, physics and the behavior of fire. I must be up-to-date with electricity as a source of heat, the law, motives, the human body's reaction to fire, and the myriad of psychological disorders that are currently believed to be connected with fire-setting behavior.

I am a forensic engineer in name, and a fire investigator by trade. I sift through burned-out rubble and try to determine cause, and also from whence the fire originated.

For the most part I work alone, with no one underneath me and only one person over me – the State Fire Marshal. It is a pleasing arrangement since I seldom see my boss, who is that rare and appreciated employer who lets me perform my functions as I see fit. Yet because he is a political appointee, I am here only through his whim. Should the political tide turn or a less sanguine governor be elected, my position could likely end. But of that I have little worry for my trade, unfortunately, is always in demand.

Fire speaks a language all its own. Today what is left from the fire will speak to me. I will cast a wide net at first: examining the outside, then moving inside and following a track from the least damaged portion back to where the fire burned most intensely. This usually indicates where the fire started, its point of origin; and from that, perhaps, I can determine the cause.

The warehouse is an old structure, built around the turn of an earlier century. Where it faces the street it is one-story, filled with offices and storage rooms and work rooms. The back half is perhaps three stories high and abuts on the Wild Wind River.

This is a sad, neglected and run-down part of the city. Sections of the streets are still paved in the faded old stones that were used in the 1800s. The other parts of the street are pocked with potholes and cracked asphalt. Half a block down squats the corroded carcass of a car. Piles of drab garbage clot the spaces between the buildings.

The warehouse itself is built of bricks so old the edges are rounded off. Most of the windows are broken, from vandals or the firefighters venting or from some other cause that will be determined in good time. Judging from the height of the weeds around the walls and the rusted metal vents, this structure has been abandoned for a lengthy time.

I have interviewed the company that arrived first with the usual questions. Nothing they gave me makes my job easier. No suspicious characters loitering about, no one fleeing the scene, no tell-tale odors noticed, the closest hydrants were serviceable and undamaged, even the flames and smoke were consistent with a structural burn. However, this was a structure that had once stored and refurbished boats so the presence of flammable liquids would not be out of the ordinary.

Were this warehouse in operation I would no doubt be struggling into a bright yellow Class A HazMat suit, complete with a self-contained breathing apparatus. But the first responders have reported that, for the most part, the

structure is empty of volatile and dangerous chemicals. So instead I shrug into my turnout gear, the same sort as worn by the firefighters, for the protection it will give me from sharp objects and other potential hazards. I have saved the city a small amount of money, since once worn Class A HazMat suits cannot be reused again, except for training.

The firefighters have used cutters to sever large openings through the chain link fences and I follow their path around to the back. The river is wide at this point and in the distance a tanker surges slowly to the ocean, trailing a bright wake of white water. Closer in, the river view loses its beauty, littered with old tires and bottles and other unpleasant scum. A small, rusted merchant ship rests at anchor in the channel, waiting for dock space, no doubt. It flies no flag that I can see and the stern is obscured or I might be able read the country it calls home.

An old wooden jetty thrusts out from the dark maw of the warehouse where boats could pull up and dock. Above it all are two steel rails where electric lifts could raise the smaller boats and move them within for a more complete overhaul.

A shadow briefly scuttles along the jetty and then disappears. The fire hasn't frightened the rats at all.

I mirror my circuit on the other side of the warehouse and find it much the same.

Around front the main entry door has been efficiently prized open, and so noted by a firefighter from the first-due truck company.

Once inside I find a warren of offices, storage spaces and other rooms, both large and small. Quite out of place I see an old shopping cart, rubber wheels and plastic handle destroyed by the flames. I pass by my little soot angel's room, but do not enter, for such a tragic demise is utterly repulsive to me, even though I understand that most fire-related deaths are due to carbon monoxide intoxication, notwithstanding the often grisly condition of the remains.

As I wade deeper into the building I watch to see if the fire-spread seems natural, and if the intensity of the flames seems natural for the conditions within. I will begin taking photographs and collecting samples on my second circuit.

So far the building continues to speak. I examine such effects as the depth of char to determine the length of time a wooden structural member was exposed to flame. Deep rolling blisters, also called *alligatoring*, would suggest a liquid accelerant that burns at a higher temperature than wood, but I see no such evidence at this point. I let my eyes scour the floor, the walls, and the ceiling as I process information, but make no assumptions yet.

As I proceed out of the office area the ceiling above rises straight up for two

more stories. This is where the larger boats would be labored on, stripped of their paint and coatings, then varnished or otherwise refinished in the custom of the time. Two small black-charred boat hulks rest in cradles, projects long since abandoned, yet welcome fuel for the fire.

Above me, on left and right walls, run iron catwalks. Below and against the brick partition squats an occasional small container, most with their lids blown off from the heat. As I approach closer to the docking area and the river, the intensity of the fire-damage diminishes, most likely from the delugement of our city's fireboat.

But what catches my immediate attention is a truck to one side, sooted darkly from the smoke. It is some sort of large transport vehicle with six wheels, a late model, and from its design, some sort of military truck. Besides the homeless residents, someone else has been here, too. For what purpose and to what end raises questions. Arson is a convenient way to destroy clues, yet it is apparent that the fire did not originate within this vehicle.

I approach and shine my flashlight into the cab, then open the door and peer under the seat. Nothing. Around back the cargo space is equally empty. After taking several photographs, I place a call to the city impound yard. I request that the truck be towed in on a priority-basis and stored in the quarantined evidence section. I will schedule a forensic examination to inspect the vehicle and determine the identity of the owner.

Close to the truck lie scattered wooden shards of what I assume to be a smashed crate. Inside it is subdivided into twenty-five cubicles that perhaps stored cans of solvent or paint. I snap pictures of four letters evident on one edge, a manufacturer's marque or product I.D., I am hoping. Below the letters is a skull with crossed bones, the universal sign of something lethal. Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for workers fifty years ago to daily deal with injurious chemicals.

I walk to the open edge of the warehouse abutting the river. There is no door, for it would have been huge and of little use. I look over the wooden jetty stretching maybe thirty feet out into the river. The wood is rotten and a hazard; I remember the rat, so won't venture farther. I turn back for my second circuit.

I pause and photograph anything and everything of interest, describing them into my recorder, positioning a ruler alongside as indication of size. Everything must be noted, for not only must I prove in exacting detail where the fire started, but also where it did not start.

Case law in this state is very specific, and if called to testify in court, I cannot simply say that the fire was incendiary in nature. That is the work of the jury. What I must do is offer testimony suggesting that the fire was not an accident by

describing all of the steps I have taken to eliminate every possible accidental cause.

It is time-consuming and meticulous, but it is work I love, the work of logic and scientific fact.

I thread my way back into the office area. I have brought along a variety of metal, plastic and paper containers that I can use for collecting evidence, but so far there is nothing that seems to need any technical analysis.

I have not proceeded far when around me the damage and ruin intensifies, for I am approaching the point of origin. I come to one room and shine my light through the terribly charred opening.

Inside and to my left and right are rows and rows of narrow racks used to hold blueprints, ship's plans, or other rolled-up drawings. Across from me stretches a long metal table, obviously used to spread out the plans for reference. More importantly, above the cindered remains of some documents left on the table is a textbook-perfect V, or funnel pattern, spreading up from a narrow point and widening as it rises higher. My job has just become easier as this pattern clearly indicates the point of origin.

From within this room, where the fire first started, roiled out the choking smoke and harmful toxic gases that spread lethally down the hall to overcome any living thing in its path. Soon after would follow the fierce and marauding flames.

But now I must determine how these combustible materials ignited.

I study the surrounding floor, looking for anything out of the ordinary. An empty gas can would be too easy, and the remains of a wind-up clock would tell me something interesting as well. Yet nothing do I see. However, if someone had simply placed a lighted match on the papers, that would have served well enough.

I hunker down onto my knees, not so easy encased in heavy bunker pants. I peer under the table and spot something of interest: a thick electrical cable that runs the length of the workspace.

The cable nestles up inside the angle where the table abuts the wall. What I see is that a section of the old cable is charred and burned through due to a heavy electrical overload. There is no doubt that such heat would have conducted up through the metal table and ignited any papers on top of it.

But I must wonder, what caused this cable to overload and burn in the first place?

Next door I find a smaller room containing multiple fuse boxes. I locate the box feeding into the blueprint room and see that the power cable continues on to the large workspace. By its thick gauge I deduce that it feeds power to the boat



lifts.

I approach the box and my foot awkwardly rolls on something. I count one, two, then three stout industrial electrical fuses grouped together. I record their images before examining one. From the sooty black band around the center it is obvious this fuse burned through from an excess load. It is the same with the other fuses.

The metal fuse box hangs open and I shine my flashlight close enough to read the rating. As I suspected, after burning through three correctly rated fuses, someone has overfused this circuit resulting in too much power running down the cable. Then the excess power heated the cable to ignition.

I am curious as to how long the spent fuses laid on the floor. Was the box overfused before or after this old warehouse was abandoned? These are not questions I am likely to answer quickly. But I will find out why power to the warehouse was turned on without a simple inspection that would have revealed this hazard.

Still, what troubles me is that even with the power turned on there would have been no fire. The fire resulted when the wire was overloaded with current. Someone was running some heavy electrical equipment in the boat-repair area. One of the displaced souls that was living here? Or someone connected with the truck?

I now know the cause of this fire, and I now know the origin, but I know little else. This could be arson or this could be accident. As an accident, it is explainable. Yet, as arson, it is hardly of any marked sophistication. Today's incendiary specialist has become quite sophisticated since the old days of sloshing kerosene around or constructing a simple time-delay fuse with a candle.

I bag the fuses, then continue my inspection, but find no other sites of ignition.

By now a fair slice of the afternoon is gone and I am tired and sweaty. I move into the open air and breathe deeply, happy to be out from under the charry stink inside.

My eyes are drawn over to my Jeep Cherokee and the figure leaning against the door. It is the Iron Maiden and I am not pleased to see him. He takes a last drag on a cigarette and casually flicks it up and over the yellow fire line tape into the evidence zone. He does this on purpose, for he knows as well as I do the old maxim: *A victim is only killed once, but a crime scene can be murdered a thousand times.*

I place my camera and recorder into the back of my Cherokee and shrug out of my turnout coat. I ignore the Iron Maiden, but he does not ignore me. His eyes lock onto my hair, naturally colored a rare and outrageous red, like my

father's. I have my father's eyes, too, pale gold, a striking contrast to my hair. They say I closely favor my father, a very handsome man. The man I tried to kill so long ago.

"Dye your hair another color, Anja," the Iron Maiden says, his eyes focused on my chest now. "So the drapes match the carpet."

The Iron Maiden is an equal opportunity sexual predator and makes no pretense otherwise. Whereas some cops shake down street punks for money, this man extorts sexual favors with no bias toward either gender.

He has hit on me several times, always lewdly. One would be surprised at his filth by simply looking at him. He is tall and immaculately groomed, dapper in his suits, slim of build and fluid in motion. It is surely not the sex with him, but some form of power over others that feeds whatever one might term his essence.

He is here to see if he has a job. For if this incident turns out to be arson, then my soot angel is a homicide, and that is the Iron Maiden's specialty.

"Indeterminate cause," I say in answer to his unasked question.

Without another word he turns and glides back to his city-owned vehicle. I feel in need of another shower.

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I return to my downtown office and check my voice mail, prioritizing calls by order of importance.

The last is from Creighton Calderwood, my immediate boss, though he works a few hundred miles away in the capitol. I speed dial his private line.

Creighton Calderwood, the official Commissioner of Insurance, as well as the State Fire Marshal, serves at the pleasure of the governor. Since he has served under five governors, I know him to be a savvy bureaucrat of great skill. But that in no way diminishes his efforts and contributions to the voters and the tax-payers. In the tricky arena of ever-rising insurance premiums, he has kept consumer costs in check for all but the most egregious risk-takers or ventures. He secured a multi-million dollar refund several years ago that almost bankrupted one insurance firm, although their coffers were probably emptied more by the expensive lobbyists they hired in several vicious attempts to circumvent Creighton's efforts and besmirch his reputation.

He also takes his duties as Fire Marshal very seriously. It is commonly known that homes with fire detectors suffer fewer casualties or loss of life than those houses that lack them. What isn't commonly known is that about half the homes with fire detectors don't even have batteries installed. Creighton Calderwood set up an excellent grass-roots effort whereby large commercial

merchant chains would donate batteries, followed by the local fire departments knocking door-to-door to install the batteries.

I am just about to hang up when Creighton answers and I wonder what wide and boisterously-colored tie he wears today, his amusing trademark. He cuts right to the point. "Shall I call in our friends from ATF?"

Creighton refers to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, who fly in specialized teams to investigate any arsons that impact commerce, which this warehouse fire might conceivably represent. I tell him not yet, but not to rule it out.

"Purple and orange, with bits of dark red and yellow squiggles, since you're dying to know, Dr. Toussaint," Creighton says.

"How many ties do you own?" I ask, it is the subject of much speculation among his colleagues.

"I stopped counting," he admits. "But the guest bedroom I use for my tie closet is almost full. I believe my lovely wife sneaks in from time to time and throws out dozens at a time. So remember me at Christmas," he jokes.

I always do, and in truth, he is the easiest person I know to shop for.

His voice takes on a more serious tone. "I have a special project for you, if you can find the time."

He is my boss; of course I will find the time.

"This particular project involves the ongoing fun and games at the *Flame Mignon*. I think you will find some sport there yourself."

He has piqued my interest. The *Flame Mignon* is the nickname for a condemned 14-floor apartment building the city is just starting to use for live fire training and other simulated drills.

But as I listen to Creighton outline the scheme he wants me to perpetrate, my enthusiasm flags. For what I have been commissioned to do will on the one hand provide excellent training for all involved, yet on the other hand will create no small amount of professional embarrassment and humiliation. This will then be followed by a great deal of antagonism and anger, which will be directed at me. But that is a position with which I am certainly familiar. And Creighton, of course, is well-practiced in shielding me in those situations.

But it will be fun, nonetheless, and an interesting challenge. I promise to drop by the *Flame Mignon* first thing in the morning to more closely examine my new playground.

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I am up at dawn and open my windows to a pleasant day. As part of my

teaching agreement with the University they supply me with a studio apartment on campus. It is small, but suits my needs during the week. All other days I try to spend at my small cottage on the coast.

I shower away the sleep and change into jeans and a pale-blue long-sleeve shirt. A cold glass of skim milk helps wash down a nut-filled power bar. Then I head out to assess Creighton's new assignment.

The *Flame Mignon* shows signs of dark smudging over windows from the practice fires. The city actively seeks donations of wooden pallets and other burnable material, as well as furniture and mattresses to simulate interiors.

Much is planned, including the ultimate coup d'grace, when the entire structure burns. Firefighters from hundreds of miles away keenly anticipate this grand conflagration. I once watched a young boy approach a firefighter and proclaim, "When I grow up I want to be a fireman." To which the old hand replied, "You can't do both, son."

Today the police SWAT Team practices forcible entry techniques: slamming doors off hinges and rushing in with orange practice pistols.

Numerous other training opportunities present themselves: search and rescue, canine training, endless fire-suppression evolutions.

A portion of the structure will be demolished for a collapse team drill. Instructors plan Firefighter 1 classes. Hazardous Material Teams prepare dispersal tests. High angle rescue teams will practice packaging victims. The list goes on.

But my own special project remains fundamentally different, for I must slaughter as many first responders as possible. In a simulated way.

I speak with the training liaison and she informs me no live burns are planned today. I can wander the building at will.

The first floor hustles with activity. Renovations proceed to create a fire command room. Two power company techs string wires. Someone from the water department strides by, pants wet to the knees.

The area seems a simple repetition of apartments. I wander inside one. It reeks of rotted food and urine. I carefully step over used needles and shards of glass.

Back in the hall I discover enclosed fire escapes placed at the end of each wing of the building. Push bars open the locked doors leading outside. I find the central stair tower and descend to the sub-grade level.

The basement contains the electrical area, three mechanical spaces, and tenant storage rooms bordering the front face of the structure.

The germ of an idea abruptly emerges on how to murder my firefighters.

Many will die if I am successful. It is not an original design, but simply the

plan of a previous monster. The press dubbed him The Incinerator, and it was my very great pleasure to help put him away for 200 years.

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The atrocious creature dubbed The Incinerator was a malignant freak with murder and mayhem in his heart. My doctorate is in Fire Science and I have scrutinized many case-studies of individuals who set fires. But I never read about someone like this.

He is under study by clinical psychologists and other specialists. He did not prove a willing subject at first. But after three months in solitary confinement and allowed only bread and water, his attitude altered. Interestingly, recordings played of swine suffering the slaughterhouse seemed to soothe him.

Much came to light in court about this sad, sick, twisted individual. He endured a terrible childhood. He lived with an uncle who victimized him from infancy. Locked at night inside a footlocker, severe whippings followed if he soiled himself.

The litany of physical and mental outrages he bore fills many pages of transcripts. I was not surprised at the ultimate effect on him. I understood who he was more than most.

His uncle died when he was twelve. A tragedy, because the boy lost the one target necessary for his salvation.

Juvenile records revealed that he exhibited classic patterns as a teen: inflicting pain on animals, setting small fires, bed-wetting, self-scarring and the like. He passed through a dozen youth homes. He built a rap-sheet.

He grew wiser.

His behavior became organized and thoughtful, deliberate actions rather than spur-of-the-moment. Unfortunately, with his uncle dead, he needed other outlets for his rage.

So he directed this fury at the system, at authority figures, at certain *heroes* who never rescued him. Not at the police, he knew what their job was. No, he pointed his anger at people whose job was to save others. Firefighters.

His arsons began in uncomplicated ways. He proved hardly more than an incompetent saboteur. He utilized crude and simple incendiary devices, but simple is reliable. He developed a signature – time-delay triggers made up of matches and a cigarette.

As more precise timing grew in importance, he experimented with wind-up alarm clocks. Easy to buy, untraceable, never suspicious to own. He targeted abandoned homes.

My suspicions first arose after I investigated a fire and discovered multiple points of origin, not uncommon with arsonists. But something seemed askew about the chain of progression.

It was a two-story house and the upstairs was fully involved when the first company arrived. Standard ops called for two firefighters to lay in a 2 ½-inch line and attack the seat of the fire. The upper windows had been vented and the smoke rapidly cleared, which was quite fortuitous because of what happened next.

As the crew approached the lower stairwell, a fire suddenly erupted in the room to their right. Almost simultaneously another fire ignited in a room to their left. They quickly exited the structure and commenced a surround and drown.

Had they already been upstairs when the subsequent fires burst forth they would've been trapped.

I carried my suspicions to Battalion Chief Smelser who nodded sagely, promised to take the matter under advisement and shined me on. He embodies the old firehouse maxim: One hundred years of tradition unimpeded by progress. I feared his attitude would lead to a line-of-duty death so shifted matters onto myself.

I started to patrol certain neighborhoods similar in profile. Each old house represented a potential target. I placed myself in the arsonist's mind.

Fortune sometimes favors the bold.

It was well past midnight when I pulled over. I gazed at the swayed old remains of a formerly beautiful Victorian home, three stories high and edged with delicate gingerbread woodwork. I very much admired the house, both in architecture and as a promising trap.

I stared for several minutes, then blinked to reset my focus. For I saw a pale red flickering glow inside the turret tower's third-level window. The dancing cherry glow developed in intensity. I called it in.

I knew without thinking exactly how events would unfold. Eight or so minutes for the responding crew to arrive. Next they'd hook hydrants and throw ladders. Then they'd attack.

Which left me some moments to reconnoiter.

I grabbed my heavy flashlight and dashed to the porch. I didn't bother with the door, but smashed a window and raked the flashlight around to remove the jagged glass. Then I bent over and stepped within.

In my mind I saw the firefighters first rushing upstairs to the blaze. That was the trap. But how would it snap shut?

I did not have time for a long search. Instead I raced to the kitchen, threw open a door to the pantry, then flung back a door to the basement. I shined my

light down and almost vomited.

A dozen jerry cans lay upended. The spilled contents formed a glinting lake of gasoline. I smelled the thick vapors saturating the space. Perched on a table above the gasoline sat a white wind-up alarm clock. The turn-key connected to a wooden match trigger.

I grabbed my cell phone, but realized any electrical charge was lethal. I rushed back and out through the window and called the police.

I shouted to bring the bomb squad. I yelled to keep the first responders away. I gulped more air and calmed my voice. "Call in multiple alarms," I ordered. When this huge bomb explodes fire and flame will overwhelm the neighborhood.

Then I drove off in the direction of the approaching sirens.

Several streets away I angled my Cherokee over to block the responding company. I stood out in front and waved my hands at the engine. The great horn bellowed. Brakes shrieked and tires swerved, but they pulled up short.

Behind them sped the Battalion Chief's car. More brakes squealed and I heard metal crash against metal.

Battalion Chief Brian Smelser charged through the truck's headlights at me. Flecks of spit flew as he screamed out expletives.

I tried to explain.

"Grab her," he bellowed to the gathering firefighters. One placed a hand on Chief Smelser's shoulder, but he threw it off.

"Move that damn car," he roared. Then he strode over and wrenched a fire axe off the truck.

Without warning the house exploded into a fireball visible five miles distant. Windows shattered for blocks around. A tsunami of flame engulfed nearby structures.

I climbed in my vehicle and moved it away.

All the responding companies set in for a heavy night's work. The toil lasted throughout the next day. There were no civilian casualties, but countless fires continued to spread around the neighborhood. Spectacular photos ran for a week in all the local media.

Thus was born the nickname The Incinerator.

Battalion Chief Smelser seized center stage in front of the cameras. The city launched a massive investigation. Detectives racked up overtime to fruitlessly search for the arsonist.

Several days later an unassuming cop called to ask my opinion. I faxed him some juvenile records I had recently pulled. I suggested he visit this person.

As I suspected the The Incinerator possessed a closet full of white wind-up

alarm clocks; and no good reason as to why.

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I have now devised just such an ugly scheme for the *Flame Mignon*. I perform a circuit of the exterior, piecing together my plans for the first responders. I visualize how they will make their attack. I see in my mind how they will die in the flames and chaos.

I push through the double doors and meet Battalion Chief Smelser. His face floods purple. "Get the hell out. This is restricted."

"Good day, Chief," I say pleasantly.

"You're not authorized," he shouts like I am a block away.

"Call Creighton," I say.

His jaw clamps. He detests that he doesn't control me. He detests that I call his boss by first name. He detests that I am a woman in his men-only club.

I smile agreeably and a vessel pumps hard on his temple.

"You are worse than a freelancer," he grates, using the pejorative term for a hot-dogging firefighter.

I step around him. The unpleasantness of this encounter reminds me that my day will grow worse.

Much worse, I think, for soon I must use my skills and abilities to send a good man to prison.

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It was three months back that I was called in to determine the cause of a structure fire that destroyed a house in North Side. I knew it as a neighborhood of ramshackle dwellings where only the poorest or most distressed lived.

I found the address and parked next to the yellow fire-line tape. All that remained within was a black-sooted chimney that poked up from a jumble of charred timbers.

But the home next door caught my eye. Vibrant orange roses blossomed from well-tended bushes. Red and yellow peonies cascaded along either side of a walkway. Hanging baskets of impatiens dripped lavender blooms snuggled among emerald green leaves. The hanky-sized yard was as tightly-groomed as a golfing green. A pleasant sight, but unexpected in this neighborhood.

I looked back at the burnt ruin and hoped some obvious cause would jump out. But it was not to be, for fire is the great destroyer and often eats all evidence. Then I heard a creaking sound and looked at the pretty house. Someone pushed through a screen door.



“You the police?” an old man asked. He shuffled to a scuffed plastic chair and carefully settled down. I judged him past seventy for his face was furrowed like old leather. Long silvered brows drooped past clouded eyes.

I flashed him the red, gold, and black badge the Insurance Commissioner had bestowed upon me. It was mostly a fashion accessory and accreted no authority, but it was sometimes useful in impressing the gullible. The old man gestured me over with knotted fingers.

I instantly preferred interviewing the next-door neighbor to shuffling through ash and charred wood. I paced up onto his porch and sat down on a chair like his. He smiled.

“Twenty years since my wife set there,” he said. “She passed.”

I thought of how hard those twenty years must have been. To have someone, to love someone, then to lose that one. I knew what he felt.

I gave him my name and he said his was Mr. Sammy.

He gestured in the direction of the blackened ruin. “Sin peddlers.”

“A crackhouse?” I asked.

Mr. Sammy shrugged. “I go to church three times a week. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink. Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Were they selling drugs next door?” I tried.

“They shriekin’ and yellin’ all night long. Cars driving up all hours. Nice cars,” he exclaimed. “Good kids gone bad. What they mamas think?”

I had no answer for that.

“Police don’t care. City don’t care. You the first ever come out.”

I nodded.

“Why you never come when I call?” he asked. “I call and call. Got a notebook with dates and times. I say come watch. Nice cars drivin’ up for they curb service.”

I asked what that means.

“Car drive up someone runs out the house. I see the money. I see the sin. Why you don’t care?”

I apologized on behalf of the police. But what he just revealed proved interesting. Manufacturing drugs requires hazardous and very flammable ingredients.

“Told me call the landlord,” Mr. Sammy said.

“How many people lived there?” I asked.

“Six, ten, many as wanted. Throw all they trash in the yard. I complained and they sic a dog on me.”

“Do you know when the fire started?” I asked.

“Four thirty in the morning. That’s when the traffic die down. Sinners headin’

home for they beauty rest.”

I asked if he knew where the fire started.

“Back porch. I woulda knock on the front and warn ‘em, but that dog bad. I yell from my winder.”

“Then what?”

He chuckled, light and wispy. “They jump in they cars, go someplace else.”

“This was around four thirty?”

“What I said.”

I pondered that. According to the first responders’ report, the alarm logged in at five fifteen.

“You didn’t call it in at first,” I said.

“Just a little fire on the back porch.”

I looked over at the ruins. The fire had certainly grown.

“Hadda make sure,” Mr. Sammy said. “Once the back porch goin’ good I toss more gas in through the winder.”

I laced my hands down on my lap. “Oh, Mr. Sammy,” I said with genuine sadness. “What you did is very bad.”

“How that be?”

He poses the same question at this afternoon’s trial. I do not have to testify.

Mr. Sammy relates the whole episode, word for word as he told it to me, with civic pride. He clutches his blue spiral notebook and defense counsel has Mr. Sammy read out loud every time he called the police, and every time they ignored his appeals. Mr. Sammy served in a war, he has no police record, he works the line in his church’s soup kitchen.

I have never heard a judge apologize, but this one does. She softly explains to Mr. Sammy about mandatory sentencing requirements. Then she hands the old man ten years. Mr. Sammy appears perplexed.

My stomach curdles like rotten milk. My wits stagger under another injustice. I must find my center and grow whole again.

I ask forgiveness of my little soot angel. I ask forgiveness of everyone I ever wronged. I swear their day will come.

But right now I need to leave the city and all its ways. I need to breathe in tart salt air. I need to hammer nails at my cottage.

But mostly I need the company of all my friends at the Wild Wind County Volunteer Fire Department. I need their sly humor. I need their tough cheer. I need their stout spirit.

And I need to plunge headfirst into whatever crude misdeeds and bold transgressions those ever-unrepentant truants are preparing to commit.

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