

Flashover: A transition phase in the development of a contained fire in which surfaces exposed to thermal radiation reach ignition temperature more or less simultaneously and fire spreads rapidly throughout the space.

From the Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations by the National Fire Protection Association

Prologue:

Everyone called him Bear, even his four-year-old. Six-foot-four, 240 pounds, he towered over the other men in Ladder One-twenty-one. “You’re gonna be tall yourself one day,” Bear promised the child.

“And a firefighter, like you,” the four-year-old vowed. When Bear talked about fighting fires, the child pictured cartoon flames shriveling like day-old balloons with just one swipe of his callused paws.

For all his size, Bear was a quiet man. His hands did the talking. He built things—a wooden racecar for the four-year-old, a jewelry box for Mommy, a crib for the baby growing inside her tummy. He’d come home from work, a lollipop tucked into the right front pocket of his uniform shirt. The child loved to climb all over him, patting his chest for the telltale crinkle, breathing in the smell like burned pork chops that radiated from his hair and skin. Bear always smelled like that when he came home from the firehouse. Even after he showered and put on clean clothes. Mommy said fighting fires did that to you—got under your skin. In ways you couldn’t imagine.

The youngster didn’t mind. On Bear, burned pork chops smelled good, especially when you rode his broad shoulders and buried your face in his thick hair, the color of fresh wood shavings.

Up there, the world was a safe place. Monsters didn’t dare crawl out from under your bed and bad guys didn’t jump out at you from inside your closet or the stairs to the basement. Nothing was brave enough to mess with Bear.

The summer air was as thick and sticky as cotton candy when Bear came home from work early one morning. It was barely light out yet. He always bounded into the kitchen, but this time, his footsteps trudged straight to the basement. “Don’t touch me,” he yelled at Mommy as she came down the stairs in her robe. He’d never yelled like that before.

He ordered Mommy to get him a garbage bag and hot soapy water and bring it down to the basement. Maybe Bear had found a puppy. He was always promising they’d get a puppy. Maybe they were going to give it a bath. The four-year-old stumbled out of bed and toddled toward the shaft of bright light coming from the open basement door. A puppy was worth getting up early for.

Bear was coughing—a hoarse walrus bark that resonated throughout the row house. Mommy was talking in a high, excited voice. Then there was a sort of slippery sound, like the time the four-year-old ate all those jellybeans and threw up on the living-room rug.

The child took one step down. Then two. Something was pooling on the basement's beige linoleum tiles. Something black, but reddish, too. Lumpy. Gooey. Like bits of rotten strawberries in Hershey's chocolate syrup. The four-year-old shivered in bare feet, fighting a sudden urge to pee.

The youngster took one more step and froze. At the bottom of the stairs, Bear, naked and trembling, was doubled over. His soot-stained body was covered with oozing red sores like the ones cousin Johnny had when he got chicken pox. Only this wasn't chicken pox. Mommy wouldn't be crying about chicken pox. And Bear—big, strong Bear—wouldn't be on his hands and knees, retching up this foul, dark liquid that even then, the youngster knew, was something to be feared.

Chapter 1

At first, she was aware of nothing. Not the feathery darkness that stole across her closed bedroom window. Not the bitter smell that blanketed the lilac potpourri on her dresser. Not the odd way shadows seemed to flicker up her heavy floral drapes and across the dentil moldings on the ten-foot ceiling. Hers was the perfect blackness and stillness of deep sleep. The sleep without dreams. The sleep of death.

But gradually, something hot permeated that cocoon Dr. Louise Rosen found herself in. She felt the heat pressing down on her with physical force, tunneling into her unconscious. It curled the downy fluff on her arms until each hair felt as coarse as a steel scouring pad. She coughed violently, as if someone were trying to shove a towel down her throat. Her nostrils stung. Her airways began to spasm. She forced her eyes open. She saw what instinct had already told her: her bedroom was on fire.

Get out. Get to the door. Actions came slowly. Words, not at all. The smoke blackened, eclipsing everything in the room, sealing off the Manhattan streetlights below. She couldn't see the bedroom door, couldn't even recall closing it. She didn't have the energy to crawl to it, much less open it. Wisps of flame darted across the ceiling. There were jagged fingers of orange climbing up her drapes, devouring a padded chair in the corner. She tumbled off the bed, hoping to hide from the heat. Even here, on the floor, it bore down hard on her tender skin, blistering it. Her hair became as coarse and brittle as straw. She felt as if nails straight from a blast furnace were being driven through her flesh.

Got...to...got to—what? She couldn't remember the sequence of steps needed to get to the bedroom door. Fifty-six years of living, a Columbia University medical degree, and it had all fizzled in the space of a heartbeat. She wasn't even sure, if pressed right now, that she could remember her name. The pain was excruciating, tearing into her flesh like a pack of wild dogs. A dress she had tossed near the windowsill burst into flame, as if an invisible hand had just taken a blowtorch to it. She wanted to scream, but her throat had swollen up too much to make a sound. Skin hung from her fingers like wet tissue paper.

Hide. Got...to...hide. She rolled under the bed and lay on her stomach, her hands protecting her face. She was playing a deadly game of limbo now, trying to make her body as flat as possible to escape the descending curtain of heat. It banked lower and lower, like a murderer working his way down a flight of stairs. First the paint on the ceiling blistered. Then the pictures on the walls began to melt. Next came the lampshades. Then one by one, the bottles of perfume

on her dresser began to shatter as if they were being picked off in a shooting gallery. The heat was on top of her now, sizzling like hot butter across the surface of the mattress. Soon, there would be nothing in the room that wasn't burning up. Nothing.

And then she heard it—a popping like gunfire, then cracks like footsteps on a frozen lake. Her bedroom window had shattered. The smoke, so black before, began to thin. The heat seemed to hiccup for a moment. But it lasted for less than half a minute before a new and louder roar took its place. A fiery cyclone. She couldn't see it, but she knew by the sounds of breaking glass that nearly everything in the room was igniting. The bed frame collapsed and the box spring ticking pressed down into her seared flesh.

She became vaguely aware of another noise beneath the roar. Someone was kicking down her bedroom door. She heard a whoosh like a huge wave. It hit the ceiling then fell like rain upon the floor. Then the wave subsided. The heat should've washed away as well, but it had crawled so deep inside of her, she felt branded on the soul. Before that moment, she believed the pain could get no worse. But she was wrong.

Someone doused the mattress and box spring with water, then lifted them off the floor. There was a tearing sound, like a Band-Aid being ripped off hairy skin. The ticking had melted to the flesh on Louise Rosen's back. The movement of the box spring ripped it off her, right down to the nerve endings. Pain tore through the synapses of her brain, wiping out all other sensations. She knew no past, no future. She felt no joy or sadness, no hope, no will to survive. There was only a silent, unbearable agony. She couldn't even scream. Her throat had swollen up too much to make a sound.

"Hey, Cap, you better get on the radio. We got somebody," said an excited voice.

There was a murmur of other voices, a shuffle of heavy boots and then a long, slow, exhale before another, older voice spoke.

"Not for long."

Chapter 2

Just a few misplaced embers from a smoldering cigarette. Fireflies on a hot August night. That's all a mattress fire was. A belch of black smoke. A long, slow burn. And pretty soon, someone was dead. Or in this case, damn close to it.

Georgia Skeeahan gazed up at the apartment building from her fire department Chevy Caprice. Four stories above the hunter green entrance canopy, two upturned braids of soot streaked the white marble façade. It wasn't often she and her partner, Randy Carter, got called to a Park Avenue address.

On the sidewalk, a doorman in epaulettes watched a firefighter hose something down. Georgia didn't have to see what it was to know: the victim's mattress. It was a common sidewalk site in poor neighborhoods. Here, beside the prewar buildings of Manhattan's elite, it attracted ghoulish curiosity from spectators.

"Lady can afford Park Avenue," said Georgia. "She should be smart enough not to smoke in bed."

Carter ran a long, bony thumb and finger down the sides of his graying mustache and gazed at the crowd behind the police barricade. The pulsating red lights of rescue vehicles washed out the color of his dark, lined skin like overexposed film.

“Lady can afford Park Avenue,” he shrugged. “She should be smart enough to get out of the city on a ninety-five-degree weekend.”

“What does that say about us?” Georgia jabbed her finger at the air-conditioning button on their dark blue Caprice. Lukewarm, moldy-smelling air continued to pour from the vents. Even the silver chain she always wore was sticking to her skin. “Record-breaking heat wave and we get stuck with a November vacation slot and a toaster oven of a car.”

“You think this is bad?” said Carter. “Wait ‘til you step outside.”

Georgia opened the door of the sedan. It was four-thirty in the morning and still, the mid-August temperatures hovered near eighty degrees and the city’s nicotine breath coated her skin like Vaseline. Static-filled voices from one of the fire engine’s radios cut through the dark, humid night as sharply as a welder’s torch. When she turned her head, Georgia caught the moldy cheese smell of ripe garbage from a can on the corner of Seventy-fourth Street. The contents of her stomach rolled about like marbles in a tin can. She hoped it was just the heat making her nauseous. Her period, which you could set a detonator by, was a week overdue. *Don’t even think about it*, she told herself. She hadn’t seen Mac Marenko in three days. She wouldn’t begin to know how to tell him.

She and Carter made their way through the crowd just as two fire department EMTs emerged from the building wheeling a woman on a stretcher. The woman was badly burned and writhing in pain. She lifted an arm. It was black and flaky in some places, bright pink like chewed bubble gum in others. If the rest of her looked like that, she’d be dead within hours.

“Can she talk?” Georgia asked, hustling over to the EMTs as they loaded the victim into an ambulance.

“Honey,” said one of the EMTs, a heavysset black woman. “She’s lucky she can *breathe*.” The EMT adjusted an oxygen mask around the victim’s face. Her partner, a slight, Latino-looking man, injected a clear liquid into the victim’s veins. Her burned skin balled up on his powder blue latex gloves like a label on a wet shampoo bottle. The smell of it—an odor like burned sugar and copper—hung in the air.

“You probably wouldn’t have gotten much out of her anyway,” said the man. “There were a lot of empty liquor bottles in her kitchen. A and E was looking at them.”

“Dang,” said Carter. He slapped his thigh in disgust at the mention of the Arson and Explosion Squad, a rival unit in the New York City Police Department. “Maybe we could actually *do* our jobs if the PD didn’t always get there first.” Although only fire marshals were allowed to examine physical evidence and make a determination of arson, nine-one-one dispatchers typically notified the NYPD of an emergency first. In higher-profile cases, the resulting scramble over jurisdiction could turn into a political slugfest.

An urgent beep pierced the close air inside the ambulance. The Latino EMT furiously began chest compressions on the victim.

“Gotta go, guys,” he said. “She’s falling fast.”

Georgia and Carter stepped back as the doors closed and the ambulance took off, cutting across a wide, nearly empty stretch of Park Avenue, lights and sirens at fever pitch.

The waterlogged queen-size mattress lay behind them on the sidewalk, next to a pile of what looked like charred red blankets. An unburned area, resembling the shape of a body, marked the center. On each side of the unburned area, great wads of foam padding erupted like volcanic

lava. Georgia pushed a foot on the mattress's edge, expecting the springs to have annealed—collapsed because of extended exposure to high heat. But the springs rebounded perfectly.

“Couldn't have been a very hot mattress fire,” Georgia noted to Carter.

Carter shrugged. “If it was a mattress fire at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at the burns,” he said. “They're even on both sides of the body outline.”

Georgia could see Carter was right. If the victim had been smoking in bed, the burns should have been deeper on the side of the mattress where the cigarette fell. The victim's body would have acted as a fire stop and kept the other side of the mattress from burning so badly. Georgia could think of dozens of explanations for the unusually even burn, but they were all conjecture at this point. If her twenty months as a fire marshal had taught her anything, it was not to get too caught up in the “what ifs” so early in a case.

She walked ahead of Carter into the lobby, past firefighters carrying out tools. The fluorescent yellow stripes on the men's bulky black turnout coats reflected the gleam of the chandelier, silently mocking its elegance like a pair of fuzzy dice in the window of a Mercedes. Georgia overheard snatches of conversation above the piecemeal crackle of radios. The rumor mill was going strong this week. The police commissioner had resigned to take a job in San Francisco, and word was that William Lynch, the fire commissioner, might take his place.

“They could hold his freakin' farewell party in a phone booth,” she heard one of the firefighters say. Lynch, a lawyer, was not a popular man with the FDNY's rank and file. Georgia always knew he'd move on. It was one of the reasons she'd kept her distance from him since her last big investigation in April. She knew she'd have to work with the people he'd alienated long after he was gone.

Georgia and Carter got the name of the victim from the doorman. It wasn't until they looked at the mailboxes in the lobby, however, that they realized she was a doctor. *Louise Rosen, M.D.*, read her mailbox.

“She was burned so badly, it was hard to tell even how old she was,” said Georgia.

“Mid to late sixties,” mumbled Carter as they walked across a Persian rug and past two cream-colored damask couches. Carter pushed the elevator button.

“You know her age just by looking at her?”

He shrugged. “She's a doctor with bread, Skeehan. She's not twenty-two.”

The elevator doors opened and Georgia found herself staring at two vaguely familiar, rough-hewn faces in silk-blend suits. Detectives from Arson and Explosion. The older detective, Phil Arzuti, was a lean, dark-haired man, a little on the haggard side, with a crooked, world-weary smile and bags under his eyes. He was reputed to be a first-rate poker player, and the few times Georgia had worked with him, she could see why. He exuded an air of nonchalance that made it impossible to tell what he was thinking. Georgia racked her brains to remember the name of his younger partner. Chris something. *White? Williams?* She saw Carter stiffen as the younger detective stepped out of the elevator and rocked on the balls of his feet.

“Well, whatta ya know. It's the runner-up cast to Mall Cops,” said Chris loudly. He was probably only in his mid thirties, but he already wore the waistband of his pants at a downturned angle to accommodate the overhang of his gut. His blond hair had begun to recede at the

temples. It contrasted oddly with his thick red mustache. “Hey, Pops,” he said to Carter, “I thought they’d have put you out to pasture by now.”

Carter’s dark, basset-hound eyes seemed to crawl deeper into their sockets and the lines on his face tightened as if attached to a winch.

“Somebody’s got to get their hands dirty, Willard,” Carter drawled as if he’d just come up from North Carolina last month instead of thirty-three years ago. “Can’t all of us be worrying ‘bout mussing up our hair for a collar—” he made a point of looking at the top of Chris Willard’s head “—or what’s left of it, anyway.”

“Collar? The Bureau of Fire Investigation’s got no collar here, old man,” said Willard. “Chick got tanked on Jack Daniel’s, then roasted herself smoking in bed, pure and simple. Casework on this baby wouldn’t fill a pencil box.”

Georgia flinched. Cops and firefighters talked this way all the time—but not within earshot of civilians, some of whom were being allowed back into the lobby now. Willard either didn’t have the smarts to understand this, or he didn’t care. Either way, she disliked him. She stepped into the elevator and Carter followed, but he made a point of giving a backward glance at Willard’s shoes. The detective followed his gaze, though his gut was probably beginning to get in the way of it.

“What?” asked Willard, self-consciously lifting a sole. Probably thought he’d stepped in dog shit. Georgia stifled a giggle.

“Gucci, Willard?” asked Carter.

“My shoes?” The detective frowned as the door started to close.

“I need to know so that when the lab tells us some horse’s ass walked all over our crime scene in expensive Italian shoes, I can tell them which horse’s ass to look for.”

The doors closed, and Georgia bit back a grin as they rode to the fourth floor.

“What’s up with you and that jerk, Willard?”

Carter pulled at the cuffs of his gray pinstriped suit. “Nothing that five minutes in a dark alley couldn’t cure.”

There was no door on Louise Rosen’s apartment anymore, just a steel frame that was compressed in two places like a crushed tin can. The fire was out and the smoke had cleared, but the taste of ash settled at the back of Georgia’s throat. Her tongue felt as if it were coated with road tar. A layer of oily residue covered the teak furniture in the living room. Soot shaded the white plaster walls and a set of heavy, floor-length red drapes drawn across a window. The hallway mirror was opaque enough from the fumes to write on. Yet, in the living room at least, there was no burning. Lamps hadn’t shattered. Even Sunday’s *New York Times*, scattered in a corner, lay intact, opened to the crossword puzzle.

A row of photographs on a huge, well-stocked bookshelf sported an oily layer of soot but hadn’t gotten hot enough to melt. One woman was in enough of the shots for Georgia to assume it was Louise Rosen. She was a slim woman in her sixties with a short helmet of white-blond hair and a penchant for ice pink lipstick. A closet drunk, Georgia supposed, as she glanced into the kitchen where two empty fifths of Jack Daniels and six crushed Michelob cans sat on a solid granite counter.

Georgia and Carter followed the tamped-down carpet, blotted black like the brushstrokes in a Chinese watercolor. It grew darker with soot as they neared the bedroom. Here, the fire told a

different story. There were scorch marks along the walls. The bedroom door, now open, was burned heavily on the inside, especially along the upper half. There were sharp demarcation lines between the burned and unburned areas, suggesting it had been closed at the time of the fire.

Inside, the walls were black and powdery like coal dust. The floor was soggy from hose runoff and littered with plaster and debris. A chair in one corner had burned so thoroughly, it no longer had any legs. The finish on the dresser had blackened, and everything on top had charred or cracked. The window glass had either shattered or been broken and the wall next to it was so badly burned, Georgia could see the original wood studs beneath, now puckered and lined like logs left overnight in a fireplace. The mattress was in the street but the box spring was still in the center of the room, surface burned. The air had a close, heavy smell of ash, sweat, and the sickly sweet stench of fried skin.

Carter ran a gloved hand over the burns on the door. His eyes tracked the blistering on the ceiling.

“Looks to me like this place was cooking,” he said. “The hot gases were collecting on the ceiling and radiating back down fiercely, judging from the damage.”

“Then how come the mattress springs weren’t annealed?” Georgia noted. “A fire that causes this much damage to a room should’ve done a little more damage to the mattress.”

“Maybe the captain can tell us,” said Carter. He nodded to a far wall where four firefighters from a ladder, or “truck,” company were punching holes in the plaster ceiling, looking for pockets of fire that could smolder and reignite, a task called “overhauling.” Georgia saw Carter cringe. Overhauling was hell on a crime scene.

The truck captain slogged through the muck to greet them. Hagarty was his name. He was a doughy man with washed-out brown hair and pale skin. Carter and Georgia nodded to him, and Georgia pulled out her notebook.

“What’ve you got?” she asked the captain. She had to shout over the noise of the falling plaster.

Hagarty tipped back the brim of his black helmet and wiped a sleeve of his turnout coat across his sweaty brow. The air-conditioning was off in the apartment, and the temperature hovered around ninety degrees.

“Routine smoking in bed, as far as I can see,” said Hagarty. “Looks like she got drunk and fell asleep. Her bedroom door was shut. When we arrived, there were already flames rolling across the ceiling. A couple of minutes longer, and everything in the room would’ve ignited, for sure.”

“A flashover,” Carter mumbled, his eyes scanning the scorch marks that traveled three-quarters of the way down the walls.

“You vented the window?” Georgia asked Hagarty.

“Didn’t have to break it,” said the captain. “It broke before we got into the room.” Hagarty shrugged. “Not that it’s my call, but those A and E detectives did a walk through and came up empty. It’s a mattress fire—in an upscale neighborhood maybe, but still in all, a mattress fire.”

Georgia turned to Carter. “What do you think?” she asked him.

Carter shrugged and said nothing. He’d never done that before. They’d been partners for over a year and a half now—ever since Georgia left the firefighting arm of the FDNY to become a fire marshal. Although they always took turns running investigations, and this one was Georgia’s, Carter—with sixteen years as a marshal—was usually the guiding force.

But since that serial arson investigation in SoHo last April, Georgia had noticed Carter hanging back more. On the one hand, she welcomed it as a sign of his increased regard for her abilities. But there was a bittersweet side as well. Carter was getting old. He had more than thirty years in the FDNY. One of these days soon, he'd probably put in his retirement papers. In his own quiet way, he was forcing her to become less dependent on him.

Georgia put away her notebook and scanned the room. There was something wrong with this smoking-in-bed scenario. Carter was right—the mattress burn was too even. And the springs hadn't annealed. But there was something else as well. She pulled out her flashlight and shined it across the blistered ceiling, bringing the beam to rest on the blackest part in the far corner, directly above what was left of the chair. She walked across the room and moved the chair frame aside. The floor was badly burned underneath.

"If Rosen was smoking in bed," Georgia wondered aloud now, "how come the lowest, deepest burns are in this corner?"

Beneath Randy Carter's mustache, Georgia thought she saw the hint of a smile. They both knew that because fire typically travels in a v pattern, upward from the base, the lowest burn is often a fire's point of origin.

She walked past Carter and Hagarty to a floor lamp five feet from the burned-out chair. The metal had oxidized—rusted—because of the heat. The lampshade had burned away. The light bulb underneath had melted and elongated as if made of Silly Putty, a process known as "pulling." Carter had taught her that when light bulbs melt, they have the odd habit of pointing in the direction of the heat.

"The bulb is pointing to the chair in the far corner by the window, not to the box spring," Georgia noted.

She turned to Carter, waiting for a reaction. She thought she'd done a thorough initial sizing up of the fire. But instead of looking pleased, he was frowning in the direction of the living room.

"The front door," Carter asked Hagarty. "It was locked when y'all arrived, right? That's why you took the rabbit to it." The rabbit was a twenty-five pound hydraulic wedge so named because it looks like a rabbit's foot.

The captain rubbed the back of his grimy neck and shifted feet. His eyes flicked to the firefighters at the wall behind them. They were nearly finished. "We're not sure," he admitted.

Georgia started. *The firefighters broke down the door without first trying the knob.* It happened all the time in the adrenaline rush of the moment. Only in this case, an unlocked door could be significant because it signaled the possibility of an intruder. She couldn't believe she had missed it. *What else am I missing?* Georgia wondered. She scanned the charred top of the dresser, noting the shattered perfume bottles and a three-candle, wrought iron candelabra with two melted orange blobs still in their holders. She kicked at the debris surrounding the box spring with the tip of her crepe-soled black work boot and then it hit her. She scanned the floor of the room.

"Where are the ashtrays?" she mumbled.

Carter gave her a puzzled look.

"Maybe we wouldn't find cigarettes or matches in a fire this hot," said Georgia. "But I don't see anything that would pass for an ashtray—not even an empty glass or bottle or beer can."

Carter straightened. He started to speak and then swallowed the thought. He walked the perimeter of the box spring, nudging soggy bits of wood and plaster. When he met her gaze, his deep, soulful eyes held a mixture of pride and something else she couldn't quite read. A sadness, perhaps. He wasn't quite ready for this shift in their relationship.

"So she ditched her ashtray and neatened up before she passed out," said Hagarty. "She's a regular eighty-proof Martha Stewart—so?"

"Maybe," said Carter. "Then again, she'd be the first one I ever saw who was."

Chapter 3

Nobody really knows what's under the concrete and asphalt of New York City. Way, way down, there are graveyards of slaves from the seventeen hundreds and scattered remnants of timber foundations of houses that haven't stood since sailing ships called New York home.

There are elegant subway stations with fresco murals and mosaic tiles, miles of tunnel and track that were begun with great optimism, then simply abandoned when the money ran out or the politician in charge couldn't get his kickback.

There are water tunnels blasted out of the granite bedrock big enough to drive a semi through that connect reservoirs upstate to water-processing plants in the city. And there are pneumatic tubes that once delivered mail between New York office buildings at nearly the speed of the Internet.

People live in the bowels of the city, too. "Mole people" they call themselves—mostly drug addicts and crazies, but some children as well. Robin Hood knew why they came. Down here, it was peaceful. Damp, glistening bricks. Puddles of water that pooled like quicksilver in the light. Down here, the oppressive August heat was but a memory, the city noise, a rumble like distant thunder. Only the splash of water on boots and the jingle of Hood's tool belt passed for noise. It was the city of a hundred years ago—fashioned not by silicon chips, but by bricks and mortar and the sweat of men. A good place, thought Hood, for hiding just about anything.

Hood rubbed two grimy gloved hands down a pair of baggy blue jeans. It was done now. One way or another, there would be justice—not the formal, antiseptic variety, perhaps. Hood had seen men die waiting for the formal, antiseptic variety. This was something better—something befitting a Robin Hood.

At a juncture where a wall of bricks had turned white with lime and decay, Hood felt for the familiar rusted rungs of a ladder and slipped through the porthole that separated earth from sky. Dawn would come within the next ten minutes; the eastern horizon was already the color of faded denim.

Hood removed a hard hat and slipped off the tool belt. An oily stench hung low in the air. In the distance, cars rolled over the steel plates of a bridge and a police siren wailed until it was out of earshot. Hood surveyed the landscape, amazed that in a city of eight and a half million, most people still went about their daily routines giving very little thought to what lay beneath the paper-thin façade of glitz and power that passed for civilization here. New York City could be like a teenager in that regard: vain, full of hubris, clinging to a faith in its immortality, yet defiantly naïve when you came right down to it.

That surface toughness and razzle-dazzle soothed the bankers down on Wall Street, the press with their minicams, the tourists ogling the Broadway marquees. But it remained an act, a sleight

of hand from the men who really kept the city together with tape, glue and prayer. Hood knew it. And so did they.

And what's more, thought Hood, stretching with satisfaction, those men would pay a lot of money to keep others from figuring that out.

Chapter 4

The task before Georgia and Carter was dirty and brutal—equal parts muscle and precision. They were alone in the apartment now. Just the two of them, a couple of shovels and a large stainless-steel toolbox known as a PET kit—PET being short for Physical Examination Tools. The box was filled with pliers, screwdrivers and claw tools—everything necessary to pull apart the wreckage to figure out how and where the fire had started. Called a Cause and Origin determination, or C&O, it was the first step to any arson investigation.

Georgia slipped on a pair of navy blue coveralls and opened the heavy red drapes across the living-room window. The air-conditioning was off in the apartment. Sweat ran in rivulets down Georgia's body as she and Carter shoveled plaster dust off the box spring. Dawn was breaking outside and the heat of the day was coming on strong. Carter's breathing became ragged.

"Take a break," she urged him. "I can do this."

"You're gonna start treating me like Chris Willard now?" he choked out. "I ain't ready for a nursing home yet, you know." He leaned on his shovel for a moment and wiped the sweat that coated his face like butter. Georgia could see he was hurting, no matter how much he pretended otherwise.

"I think you're right, by the way," said Carter between gulps of air. "About Rosen not smoking, I mean. There are no ashtrays or matches or lighters in this place. No cigarettes in her garbage, either."

"None of that proves she wasn't drinking, though," said Georgia.

"She's got two bottles of good Chardonnay—not the cheap stuff—in her refrigerator. One of 'em's open."

Georgia stopped shoveling and wiped her brow on the sleeve of her coveralls. "So?"

He took a deep breath. "You ever seen an alcoholic who could open a bottle of *anything* and not drink it all?"

"You've got a point there." Georgia turned her attention to the chair in the corner. It sat legless on the scorched floor like a beggar.

"Randy? Do you remember that seminar we went to at the crime lab last May?"

"The one given by that Indian chemist with the towel on his head?"

"*Turban*, Randy." Georgia rolled her eyes. "They call it a *turban*. Anyway, I seem to recall him saying that once a room passes through the flashover stage and becomes fully involved, it can be very difficult to determine whether a fire was accidental or incendiary."

"But this fire didn't reach flashover," Carter reminded her. He bent down by the box spring and picked up a nickel-sized piece of half-melted red plastic. A bottle cap of some sort. "Every burn is still in a condition to tell us something."

"Exactly," said Georgia. "So what do you make of this?" She squatted behind the charred chair frame and ran a gloved hand over a heavily blackened section of the wall a foot or so off the floor. The wall, once plaster, was burned right through to the wooden studs. "You've got a

low burn here—lowest burn in the room,” said Georgia. “In a corner where there are no electrical outlets or other obvious sources of combustion. If the fire had gone on a minute longer, the whole room would’ve looked like this. We might never know about this low burn.”

Carter dropped the red plastic cap into an evidence can. Then he squatted beside her and scraped a gloved finger across the blackened floor beside the chair. A waxy orange residue came off on his glove. He nodded to the wrought-iron candelabra on her dresser.

“She burnt one of those candles over here by the window,” he muttered.

“But it’s too far from the chair to be the source of ignition,” Georgia pointed out.

Carter straightened up with effort and frowned at the room.

“Rosen’s a common Jewish name, right?” Carter mumbled. “Got to be hundreds in New York—a lot of ‘em doctors.”

Georgia shrugged. “I guess—why?”

“Just wondering.” He sealed the evidence can. Georgia studied him from behind. His breathing remained uneven, and he looked shaky from the heat. His hand slipped as he wrote the case number, time, date and his name on the top and sides of the can. When he reached for his shovel, Georgia thrust an arm across the metal grip.

“Not now, Randy. I need you to talk to witnesses.”

His dark eyes narrowed. He saw what she was doing. “Ain’t nothing wrong with me, girl,” he protested. “I was prying doors off their hinges by *hand*—none of these rabbit doohickeys—when you were still in diapers.”

“I know,” she said gently. “But *somebody’s* got to charm those old society matrons. And I’m not the charm half of this duo.”

He made a face. “Seems to me, you’re doing a pretty good job of it right now.”

A ghostly quiet descended on the apartment after Carter left. It seemed to settle in the air and thicken it with a morbid replay of the terror and mayhem only hinted at in the carbonized ruins. Even with the windows open, the ash and plaster dust were like a fine gauze blanket to the lungs. Georgia fought back a cough the way she used to as a kid when she’d swallowed too much powdered sugar on a doughnut.

She sifted through the debris on her hands and knees, searching for evidence of shorted wires, blown fuses and unexplained burn patterns. She took samples of the floors and walls, the mattress on the street and the box spring in the room. She snapped her own black-and-whites after putting in a call to Herb Moskowitz, the department’s sole forensic photographer, and discovering he’d been pressed into taking pictures of Mayor Ortaglia’s breakfast with members of the Hispanic Coalition. No one needed to tell Georgia that in city politics, photo ops took precedence over crime scenes.

She was struggling to maneuver the box spring to one side of the room when she heard a set of footsteps in the living room.

“Randy, can you give me a hand?” she called out.

The footsteps clomped toward her in the bedroom.

“Hey, Scout, you’re looking radiant today.”

Georgia turned. Supervising Fire Marshal Mac Marenko slouched in the bedroom doorway, his tie loosened, his white shirtsleeves rolled up and his strong, sinewy arms folded across his

chest. When they were alone, Marenko always called her “Scout,” a nickname he’d coined after once complaining that she was as naïve as a Girl Scout. The name stuck; in part because it was a lot better than other things he’d called her when she first joined the bureau. In front of the other marshals, however, he always called her by her last name. Marenko was terrified of anybody finding out they were dating.

Marenko pulled a set of latex gloves out of the back pocket of his dark blue trousers. “You want some help?” he asked. At six foot two, he towered over Georgia.

She brushed her gloved hands down the front of her baggy coveralls. “I can handle it.”

“My ass, you can.” Marenko grinned, yanking the box spring and tossing it halfway across the room. “Anything else you want me to move?”

“Yeah. You.” She pulled a black twin-handled gadget from a leather pouch on her duty holster—the belt around her waist that held her Glock nine millimeter—and extracted a small screwdriver from the gadget’s attachments. Then she crouched down and began to pull apart some wiring on a burned lamp.

“You’re carrying a Leatherman now, huh?” asked Marenko, referring to the small tool—part pliers, part Swiss Army knife—that a lot of fire marshals carry. “I thought you were partial to your screwdriver penknife.”

“I broke down and got a Leatherman instead,” said Georgia. “The pliers come in handy.” Georgia gestured to the bags and cans she had stacked on the dresser. “I’m nearly finished with the evidence collection. Did you see Randy in the lobby?”

He nodded. “Carter asked me to come up and have a look at this place, see what I think.” Marenko, a supervising fire marshal, was one rank higher than Georgia and Carter. He oversaw arson investigations rather than conducting them himself.

“So” –Georgia straightened up— “what do you think?”

Marenko let his blue eyes, the color of an oven pilot light, travel the length of her body. “I think my mechanic dresses better.” He reached out and wiped a smudge of soot from her face. “Then again, I wouldn’t ask my mechanic what he was doing for dinner tonight.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I promised Connie I’d help quiz her for her sergeant’s exam.” Connie Ruiz was a detective with the NYPD, assigned to the Arson and Explosion Squad. She was also Georgia’s best friend. “You can come help, if you want.”

Georgia caught the change in Marenko’s expression, the momentary embarrassment in his boyish features, then realized why. Randy Carter was ducking under the crime-scene tape in the living room.

Though Carter had figured out about her relationship with Marenko, he never let on, always the gentleman. He simply nodded to Marenko as he entered the bedroom. But Georgia also caught a shade of wariness in their exchange of glances. The two men had different, if at times competing, roles in Georgia’s life, and they seemed to dance around each other now, like two similarly charged force fields that repelled each other if they got too close.

“You were right, Skee-han,” said Carter, flipping through his notes. “Dr. Rosen doesn’t smoke. Seems she asked the super to unclog her sink a couple of months ago, then complained when she came home and smelled smoke from his cigarette in her kitchen.”

“That doesn’t mean jack.” Marenko dismissed Carter a little callously with a wave of his hand. “The chick could’ve quit, then gone back to it. I’ve done that myself maybe twenty times.”

“You stack your empties neatly on the kitchen counter before you get tanked, too?” asked Carter.

Marenko’s jawline hardened. “I don’t *get* tanked,” he said stiffly. “But I *do* call the shots ‘round here, and it looks to me like a routine accidental fire you’re wasting too much time on.” He pulled off his gloves and checked his watch. “Wrap this up in the next hour and send me the report by Thursday.” Marenko started for the door.

“You’re wrong, Mac,” said Carter.

Marenko turned. His eyes became slits. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t mean about whether the fire’s accidental or not. I mean about whether it’s *routine*.” Carter softened his tone. “Mac, listen to me for a moment. You’re thirty-eight, right?”

“Thirty-nine,” Marenko said defensively.

“And Skeeahan’s thirty. You haven’t seen too many of your friends on this job come before the One-B Board.” The One-B Board: the fire department medical board, the all-powerful panel of doctors who decide whether or not a firefighter gets “three-quarters,” the coveted line-of-duty pension, if he becomes disabled because of a job-related injury. A “three-quarters” is just that: three-quarters of a firefighter’s last year of salary, tax-free, every year, for the rest of his life. Firefighters whose injuries are not considered job-related get smaller, taxable pensions depending upon their length of service.

“What the hell’s the One-B Board got to do with this?” asked Marenko.

“Louise Rosen, man,” said Carter. “In the nineteen eighties and nineties, she made a career out of turning down injured firefighters for line-of-duty pensions. Some of those guys...they never forgave her.”

Georgia frowned at Carter. “That’s why you asked me about the name Rosen earlier, huh?”

Carter gave her a sheepish look. “I didn’t say anything before ‘cause I didn’t want it to color your findings,” he explained. “I’m not even sure it matters. Rosen’s been retired for maybe five or six years.”

They were all silent for a moment. Then Marenko ran a hand through his thick mane of blue-black hair and cursed. “Did you tell Arson and Explosion any of this stuff yet?”

“I figured I’d leave that to you,” said Carter. “I know you have to tell them, but I was hoping you could hold back a day, maybe buy us a little time.” He nodded to the living room. “Dr. Rosen kept two big boxes of patient files in the basement. I got the super to give them to me. They’re out there, by the door. I figured Skeeahan and I could look through them later—see if any names pop out.”

“Jesus.” Marenko ran a hand down his face. “I don’t want this. And I know Brennan won’t.” Arthur Brennan was chief fire marshal of the city of New York and every member of the Bureau of Fire Investigation’s ultimate boss.

“All right.” Marenko sighed. “I’ll hold this back as long as I can. Look through the boxes. Visit Rosen at the burn unit. But don’t get carried away. I’d like to step *around* this shit if possible, not in it.”

Chapter 5

The temperature was almost chilly inside New York Hospital on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Even so, Georgia felt a trickle of sweat creep down the silver chain tucked inside her

shirt as she pushed the elevator button. She didn't want to be here, at the Cornell Burn Unit, one of the most advanced burn-treatment centers in the world. But then again, neither did Louise Rosen.

"What odds of survival are the doctors giving her?" Georgia asked Carter as they stepped off the elevator and walked down the windowless seventh-floor corridor, polished to a blinding sheen.

"Not good," he said. "She's got burns over sixty percent of her body. And you know the rule..."

"Age plus burn equals the likely percent of fatality," Georgia said grimly.

"Fifty-four plus sixty," said Carter, shaking his head. "I don't think she'll last long."

"Seems horrible for someone to suffer all this only to have no hope of survival."

"Gives her family a chance to say good-bye, at least," said Carter. Georgia caught the wistful note in his voice. His own estranged daughter had died four months ago in a monstrous blaze. There had been no prolonged suffering, as far as Georgia could tell. But there had been no opportunity for a farewell, either.

"You wouldn't have wanted this for Cassie," Georgia offered softly.

Carter shrugged but said nothing. Georgia could talk to him about almost any subject—except Cassie's death. At times like these, his grief danced around them, a black hole that Georgia could sense, yet not see.

She was concentrating on her partner's reactions so intently, she didn't notice the two familiar figures in silk-blend suits walking toward them until they were practically on top of her. Chris Willard's too tight Italian shoes squeaked on the shiny white linoleum. He walked a little ahead of his partner, his gut jiggling over his downturned waistband. He spoke first. Georgia got the impression he always spoke first.

"Hey, Pops," said Willard, stroking his red mustache. "You're wasting your breath if you think the nurses will let you talk to this chick. Those bats won't let you get within half a mile of intensive care."

Carter gave Willard a long, stony stare—long enough for Willard to feel the heat of his gaze. Then he shifted his eyes to Phil Arzuti. "I thought y'all had no interest in Louise Rosen," said Carter.

Arzuti offered up his trademark poker player's smile. "A formality," Arzuti assured him. "It's been a slow tour."

A good feint, but Georgia wasn't buying it. "Your CO sent you back out, huh?"

The bags under Arzuti's eyes tightened slightly in surprise. He opened his palms. "Marshal" – he sighed, like a man just following orders— "we have a very thorough commanding officer."

Damn, thought Georgia. *The cops know about Rosen's connection to the FDNY.* She noted the sudden military erectness in Carter's posture—a vestige of his days as an army drill sergeant. Clearly, he was thinking the same thing.

"Did you find out anything?" Carter kept his eyes on Arzuti. Willard answered.

"The chick can't talk," said Willard sourly, waving his hand about as if swatting a fly. "You won't get past Nurse Ratchett there at the main desk."

"Watch me." Carter turned toward the entrance of the burn-care unit. Georgia began to follow. That's when Chris Willard looked at her for the first time. He had eyes the color of soggy

cardboard—flat and muddy. But there was a glimmer of something else, too—something sharp and unseen, like a knife in the silt of a riverbed.

“You like seeing crispy critters, marshal?” Willard asked her now. “The ones still walking and talking with their faces hanging off?”

“I’ve seen plenty of burned people,” Georgia reminded him. She tried to sound firm and in command, but the raggedness of her voice betrayed her. In nearly eight years in the fire department, she’d encountered more than her share of burned bodies—some fatally. As a fire marshal, she’d taken many statements from severely burned victims. But she never got used to it. There was nothing as horrific as a burn. She hated Willard for uncovering this chink in her armor.

He smiled wickedly at his victory. “You’ll see her in your dreams,” he promised softly.

Georgia didn’t answer. She turned to catch up with Carter.

“Are you okay?” asked Carter. “That moron didn’t get to you, did he?”

“No,” she lied. “I’m just...not very good with burn victims.”

Carter exhaled. “Okay, look—you’ll be fine,” he assured her. “A couple of rules. Go in and suit up without being asked—cap, gown, booties—the works. It’s a sterile environment, and the nurses won’t even talk to you if you don’t respect that. That’s why Arzuti and Willard got thrown out.”

“I understand,” said Georgia.

“Remember that Louise Rosen doesn’t know she’s checking out of the picture, so don’t say anything to her to suggest that. She’s not a perp. And we’re not doctors. We don’t tell people whether they’re gonna live or die.”

Kathleen O’Meara, the head nurse in the burn unit, looked to be in her late forties, with the sinewy arms and hollowed cheeks of a long-distance runner. Her moss green eyes held a mixture of kindness and determination. She hugged Carter as soon as she saw him.

“I haven’t seen you in ages,” Kathleen scolded. “Not since that fire department fund-raiser for the burn center.”

“I’ve been sort of...preoccupied,” Carter said thickly, and Georgia thought again about his daughter, Cassie. Carter introduced Georgia and asked Kathleen if they could talk to Rosen. “We’ll be quick and compassionate, I promise,” he added.

Kathleen looked over their clothes. They both had donned white smocks and masks from a sterile bin. Georgia had tucked her curly, reddish brown hair under something that looked like a shower cap. She and Carter had slipped clear plastic booties over their black-soled work shoes.

“I’d like to, Randy. Really, I would,” Kathleen explained. “But it’s like I told the detectives—she can’t talk. She’s got inhalation burns and she’s on a ventilator...”

“—Can she blink?” asked Georgia.

“Yes...of course,” Kathleen stammered.

“Perhaps we could ask her yes/no questions and she could blink her answers,” Georgia suggested. “One blink for yes, two for no.”

“No,” Kathleen said sharply. “Look, Marshal, you won’t get answers to those kinds of questions with a blink.”

Georgia and Carter exchanged puzzled looks.

“Kathy,” said Carter gently. “What you think we’re gonna ask?”

“The same as the detectives, of course.” Kathleen played with a small gold post in her ear. Her face went pale. She leaned closer. “You know—the bomb,” she whispered.

“The *bomb*?” asked Georgia. Carter’s eyes were as wide as hers. “You mean a bomb in Rosen’s apartment?” They had done a thorough physical examination of Louise Rosen’s apartment. If there had been a bomb there—or evidence of a bomb—they should have found it.

“No...I don’t think so,” stammered Kathleen. “Somewhere else, I guess. I...I thought you knew.”

“It’s all right, Kathy,” Carter said soothingly. “We know those detectives. We’ll probably get briefed about it later.” It was a lie, Georgia knew. Whatever made Arzuti and Willard do a one-eighty on this case, they weren’t sharing it with the FDNY. Only civilians believed that all the good guys were on the same side.

“We’d really be grateful if you could give us a heads-up on this bomb thing,” Georgia coaxed Kathleen. “It could take hours for the information to come through official channels. By then, the trail could be cold.”

“No one has to know where it came from, Kathy,” Carter assured her.

“But I don’t know anything else,” said Kathleen. “Really—that’s the truth. The detectives asked me if Dr. Rosen had mentioned a bomb. I don’t think the bomb was supposed to be in her apartment. I got the feeling it was somewhere else. But as I told you, Dr. Rosen can’t talk. She never mentioned a bomb. She never said anything.”

“Kathy—” Carter put a hand on hers— “please let us visit with her and see if there’s anything we can find out. We won’t cause any trouble.”

She hesitated a moment, then sighed. “Come on, then.”

They followed Kathleen O’Meara through a set of double doors. The temperature on the inside of the hallway was at least fifteen degrees hotter than it was in the waiting area. Georgia had forgotten that burn victims have no skin to help them maintain their body heat. She swallowed back a sudden, metallic taste in her mouth and searched for a comfortable way to hold her hands. To her relief, she noticed that even Carter got quiet. Maybe no one really became accustomed to seeing people horrifically burned.

In a large room to their left, Georgia could hear screaming and moaning above the white noise of a pounding shower. An ear-piercing shriek echoed above the thrumming of water, followed by whimpers that didn’t sound human at all—more like cats in heat. Kathleen must have seen the discomfort in Georgia’s face.

“The tank,” she said evenly, answering Georgia’s unspoken question.

“The tank?”

“Nurses have to scrub off a burn patient’s dead skin so that infection doesn’t set in and the doctors can do skin grafts,” Kathleen explained. “The scrubbing’s done under a high-pressure shower. It makes removing the skin a little easier, but it’s hard on the nerve endings.” She smiled sadly. “The patients’—and the nurses’,” she added.

Georgia heard the unmistakable cries now of a young child and winced. “Can’t they give him morphine to make the pain go away?”

“Oh, we do,” said Kathleen. “Those cries? That’s *with* morphine. If the nurses give that child any more, they’ll kill him.”

A male nurse doing the morning rounds nodded to Kathleen, then tousled the nappy hair of a black boy of about three, wearing a diaper, his legs encased in gauze bandages. The boy clutched a metal walker to help him get around, like an old man in a nursing home. His large, soulful eyes looked far too old for his years.

“How are you doing E.J.?” said Kathleen, giving the child a big smile. The boy did not smile back. They were at the other end of the hall before Kathleen spoke.

“E.J.’s mother got mad because he wet his bed. So she gave him a bath—in one-hundred-and-forty-degree water.”

“Is he going to recover?” Georgia asked.

“Physically? Yes,” said Kathleen. “Emotionally? How do you ever get over something like that? We get a lot of children through these doors. Some are just unlucky, but a lot of them are either burned intentionally or left alone for hours, even days. They get into matches or try to cook something to eat and next thing you know, they’re here. Or dead.”

Kathleen pointed to a glass door at the end of the hallway. The three-bed intensive-care unit. She opened the door and led Georgia and Carter to the nurses’ station. There was a printout on the desk, and Kathleen picked it up and read it.

“This is interesting,” she said. “The hospital did a toxicology screen on Dr. Rosen when she was admitted. The lab results just came back. They found no alcohol or drugs in her system. Even her carbon monoxide readings aren’t exceptionally high.”

Georgia raised an eyebrow in Carter’s direction. He’d been right about Rosen not being a drunk. But that only made her injuries more perplexing. *If she hadn’t been drugged or drunk or near death from CO poisoning*, thought Georgia, *what had kept her in that bedroom for so long?*

Kathleen led them past the nurses’ station now and into intensive care. Along one entire wall, machines encased in black plastic and stainless steel beeped and whirred and whooshed like a NASA space station. In the center of all this gadgetry, a bloated figure lay motionless, swathed in gauze bandages. The sickly sweet odor of burned hair and flesh permeated the room.

Louise Rosen was unrecognizable by age, race or gender. She was hooked up to at least two dozen tubes and wires. Feeding tubes. Breathing tubes. Cardiac and blood pressure monitors. A morphine drip. Antibiotics. Electrolyte fluids. But her eyes were open. She was awake and alert.

“Can she tell we’re here?” asked Georgia.

“She sees you,” Kathleen explained. “But she’s been given drugs to paralyze her because she’s on a ventilator. She’s suffered tissue damage to her lungs, and the doctors don’t want her to move and make them worse. She’s on sedatives, too, so she won’t panic about being temporarily paralyzed.”

Georgia willed herself to step close to the bed. Her eyes settled on Louise Rosen and she swallowed hard. A burn—even a very severe one—often doesn’t look that bad when it first happens. The body may be all red or charred or even milky white. The person is often in shock and doesn’t feel much pain. Sometimes they’re walking and talking. But a few hours later, it’s an entirely different story. Like taking the peel off a banana and then watching it rot.

Louise Rosen looked as if she’d gained a hundred pounds from the pictures Georgia had seen of her in her apartment. Her eyes were nothing but two slits in a face as plump and red as a

tomato. Her nose was black, and blood seeped from her lips. Her right arm, which Georgia hadn't noticed before, lay un-bandaged. A deep gash ran the length of the blackened skin, exposing bloody, pulpy tissue and muscle. The gash wasn't a trauma—it was a surgical incision, an escharotomy, performed by surgeons on severely burned tissue to ensure that the swelling didn't cut off blood flow and invite gangrene.

Georgia cleared her throat and tried to appear relaxed though she felt as if she were about to pass out in the overly heated room. “Dr. Rosen? My name is Georgia Skeehan and this is my partner, Randy Carter. We're with the fire department, we're marshals and we'd really like to talk to you.” She spoke to Rosen the same way she interviewed children and older people—burying her title and authority in an effort to humanize the encounter. This was particularly necessary for a fire marshal because unlike police officers, fire marshals have the legal power to take sworn affidavits—admissible in court—on the spot. This upped the stakes on interviews because a well-prepared witness statement could make or break a case.

“May we sit down?” asked Carter, dropping his voice an octave, turning it softer and more southern. It was a rhetorical question; Louise Rosen could neither invite them to sit nor prevent them from doing so. But the politeness of it was all part of what made Randy Carter so effective. People *wanted* to tell him things—even criminals tended to confess in his presence.

Georgia pulled up two chairs by her bedside. The ventilator pumped out a rhythmic whoosh while other machines hummed and beeped their white noise. It was like listening to the engines in the bowels of a huge ship. A phone rang at the nurses' station, and Kathleen walked back to answer it. Georgia took a deep breath.

“Dr. Rosen?” she began. “We want to find out what happened to you. We know you can't talk, but if you can blink your eyes, we can help. Can you do that? Blink your eyes? Show me a blink, Dr. Rosen.”

Rosen's eyes looked tight and fearful. Georgia had a sense the woman knew she was going to die. She was a doctor, after all. Still, very deliberately, the woman shut her eyes tight, held them a moment, then opened them. Georgia smiled.

“That's great, Dr. Rosen. Now, I'm going to ask you some questions. Blink once for yes, twice for no—got it?”

Rosen blinked once again.

“You're doing real good, ma'am,” Carter offered.

“Were you smoking when this fire broke out?” asked Georgia.

Two blinks—no.

“Were you alone in your apartment?”

Kathleen O'Meara interrupted their session. “I'm sorry,” she said. “You're going to have to leave.”

“But why?” asked Georgia.

“I just got a call from my director,” said Kathleen. “Those two detectives lodged a complaint about not being able to interview Dr. Rosen. My director said we could be in legal trouble if we allow one law-enforcement branch to interview a patient, but not another. She said we have to let everyone in, or no one. I'm sorry. The interview is over.”

Georgia looked over at Louise Rosen. Rosen blinked twice. *No.*

No. Don't go.

“Two more questions—just two more questions,” Georgia pleaded.

“I’m sorry, Marshal. I could lose my job if I let you stay.”

Georgia looked over at Louise Rosen’s bloody, pulpy face and saw her blink twice again.

Georgia tried to manage an encouraging smile.

“You rest up, Dr. Rosen,” she said. “We’ll do this another time.” But the woman didn’t blink. She knew as well as Georgia: there would be no other time.

*****End of sample*****

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