

JEN J. DANNA
WITH ANN VANDERLAAN

A Flame in the



Wind of Death

ABBOTT AND LOWELL FORENSIC MYSTERIES

CHAPTER ONE: FIRE POINT

Fire Point: the temperature at which a fuel produces enough vapor so it continues to burn after ignition.

Sunday, 1:24 p.m.

Harborview Restaurant

Boston, Massachusetts

Sunlight sparkled in lightning-quick flashes on the open ocean as a lone black-backed gull soared on outstretched wings, motionless on the breeze. In the harbor, sailboats unfurled yards of canvas to the cool fall winds, while high above the water, the historic Customs House Tower stood watch over the busy port below.

Inside the restaurant, wide panels of sunlight fell across linen-draped tables set with china and silver. The air was fragrant with garlic and peppercorn as a low buzz of conversation filled the room, punctuated by bursts of laughter and the clatter of dishes.

“And then he jammed his gun in his pants to make a run for it. But while he was wedging it under his belt, it went off and he shot himself in the foot.” Leigh Abbott paused to sip her mimosa. “After that, the foot chase was pretty much a technicality, what with all the limping and whimpering.”

Matt Lowell chuckled as he set his knife and fork on the edge of his empty plate. “I shouldn’t be laughing, should I?”

“Because he’s a murder suspect?” One corner of her mouth

tipped up in an almost reluctant smile. “Welcome to cop humor; it’s how we survive the job. This guy was a mistake waiting to happen from the second it occurred to him he could have the family business all to himself after his father died. He just needed to kill his brother to get it. He left a trail of clues a blindfolded rookie could follow.”

Matt’s smile slowly melted away, his face growing serious. “You deserve an easy case. After the last few weeks . . .”

His voice trailed off, but Leigh understood, even without words.

A Trooper First Class with the Massachusetts State Police, Leigh was a member of the Essex County Detective Unit, headquartered in Salem. When a single human bone was found in a coastal salt marsh the previous month, she’d approached Dr. Matthew Lowell in his capacity as a forensic anthropologist at Boston University to help identify the victim. What began with a single set of remains rapidly spiraled into ten murder victims, all dead at the hands of a man determined to see how far he could twist the human mind. Their teamwork solved the puzzle, but the case nearly cost them their lives. Mere weeks later, they’d joined forces again for their second case together, a chilling tale of trust gone horribly wrong.

“This case couldn’t have been more different,” Leigh stated. “You’re right—it was a welcome change of pace after Bradford. Still, I’m sorry I had to cancel dinner last week. Between court and this case—” She broke off as Matt covered her hand with his.

“Don’t worry about it. I understand the job takes priority sometimes. Besides, we traded dinner for Sunday brunch, so it all worked out.”

With a quick flick of his head, he shook his untrimmed dark hair out of his eyes, briefly exposing the thick ridge of scar tissue running into his hair from his temple.

At a sudden shriek, Leigh jerked her hand free, reaching for the weapon that normally rode her hip. But even as her fingers touched soft wool instead of hard metal, her body relaxed as she quickly assessed the harmless scene across the room where a young woman had knocked over a glass of red wine.

Leigh's gaze drifted back to Matt to find his eyes fixed on her. "What?"

He sat with his elbows braced on the table, watching her over his steepled hands. "You can't turn it off, can you? You can't just go out socially and let it all go. Even when a case is closed."

Embarrassed heat flushed her cheeks at his continued examination. "It's not like it's a switch you throw when the clock hits five. Cops are always on duty." Stubbornness stiffened her spine and she met his gaze head on. "Apparently you can't turn it off either. You're studying me like I'm one of your bones."

"Just trying to figure you out, that's all." Reaching out, Matt tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. As his hand pulled away, he ran his fingertips along the curve of her jaw in a subtle caress. "You're an intriguing puzzle."

Her eyes locked with his and her stomach gave a slow, sexy roll of anticipation at the heat in his expression. "No one's ever called me 'intriguing' before."

"I like to think of you as a gift that needs to be unwrapped one layer at a—" Matt frowned as a muffled ring came from the suit jacket draped over the back of his chair. "Sorry, I need to see who's calling."

Leigh's senses instantly went on alert when he froze, his gaze fixed on the name of the caller displayed on-screen. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I think I have to take this."

The edge in his voice made the back of her neck prickle in alarm. "Is it one of your students?"

"No, it's the Massachusetts State Police."

“Calling you?” The words burst out, cutting through the buzz of conversation around them. Leigh purposely lowered her voice when several heads turned in their direction. “Why are they calling you?”

“I’m as baffled as you are.” He answered the call. “Lowell.”

Leigh leaned forward, trying to catch any trace of the other end of the conversation.

Maddeningly, Matt relaxed back in his chair even as he cocked an eyebrow at her. “Sergeant Kepler, what a surprise,” he said into the phone.

Only her white-knuckled stranglehold on the edge of the table kept Leigh from leaping to her feet to listen in on why her superior officer was calling Matt. If it was something to do with the Bradford case, he’d have surely gone through her instead.

Matt was silent for a long time as he listened, his hazel eyes fixed on her. “This request comes straight from Dr. Rowe?”

Rowe? Someone had to be dead for the medical examiner to be involved, but the remains must be in bad shape if Rowe was personally requesting Matt’s expertise.

“Whose case is it?” Matt’s eyes suddenly went arctic-cold as his casual air of relaxation dropped away. “No.” The single word was whiplash sharp. “That’s exactly what I mean. I’m not working with him. If you and Rowe want me on this case, you need to transfer it to Trooper Abbott.”

Leigh recognized that stubborn tone; she’d run headlong into it several times—Matt was digging in his heels and wasn’t about to budge.

“Actually my request is quite logical,” he continued. “Trooper Abbott and I had a rough start, but we learned how to work together. She’s familiar now with how my lab operates, and she knows my students and how we process evidence. It would waste my time to have to train a new officer.” There was a pause, and Matt’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Those are my terms,

Sergeant. If you want my help on the case, have Trooper Abbott call me with the details.” He abruptly ended the call, his expression grim.

“What was that about?” Leigh demanded.

“Kepler wants me to consult on another case. There’s been a fire in Salem in one of the historical shopping districts. You probably know it—Wharf Street? The body recovered is so badly burned that Rowe needs a forensic anthropologist. He asked for me specifically.”

“That’s no surprise—you work well together. But why do you need me?”

“It’s Morrison’s case,” Matt said shortly. His open palm slapped down on the table hard enough to rattle silver and crystal. “I’ve got the right guy, don’t I? Isn’t he the Neanderthal who gives you a hard time at the detective unit?”

Leigh let out a resigned sigh. “Yes. That’s him.” She met his eyes to be sure he understood without question. “Don’t interfere, Matt. I can handle him on my own.”

“I’m sure you can. But I’m not working with him. And that’s my call to make.”

“Look, you don’t have to—”

Her phone rang.

Matt crossed his arms over his chest, his eyebrows raised in challenge. “Better get that.”

Leigh pointed an accusing finger at him. “You stay quiet. Kepler doesn’t know we’re seeing each other. He wouldn’t approve of me—”

“Fraternizing with your consultant? Too damned bad.” When her glare threatened frostbite to delicate parts of his anatomy, he mimed locking his lips and tossing the imaginary key over his shoulder.

She rolled her eyes and answered the call. “Abbott. Yes, sir.” She slipped a hand into the breast pocket of her jacket, pulled

out a notepad and pen, and scribbled quickly. “Yes, I know where that is. I’ll let him know and meet him there.” She clicked off and gestured to the waitress for the check. “Kepler’s pissed.”

“He’s used to giving orders, but he’s not used to someone refusing them.” Matt pulled his jacket off the chair and shrugged into it. “Look, I understand they need help, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to work shoulder-to-shoulder with Morrison. You and I, we’ve developed a rhythm. On top of that, you value my students. If I’m going to bring them into another case, I need to know they’ll be treated well. And I know you’ll work as hard as me to keep them safe.”

“You’re still thinking about the salt marsh.”

He bristled, his shoulders pulling tight and his mouth flattening into a thin line. “I took them into the field and they were shot at. They could have been killed.”

She lightly brushed her fingertips over the back of his hand. “We’ll keep them safe. Are you bringing them in now? Or do you want to see the site on your own first?”

“I’ll bring them in now. My students are familiar with the concepts of burned remains from class, but this will take them from theory to practice. To do that properly, they need to see the remains *in situ*. And the extra eyes will help.” He met her gaze. “Have you ever dealt with remains like this before?”

“No.”

“Then you need to be prepared. They can be horrific, both by sight and smell.”

She grimaced. “Thanks for the warning. Are your students going to be able to handle it?”

“They’ll be fine. They held up before, didn’t they?”

“They were great.” Leigh looked out over the harbor. Suddenly the day seemed so much darker than ten minutes ago. “I was really looking forward to getting out on the Charles this afternoon,” she said. “It’s the perfect fall day for it—not too

cool and not so breezy that the water would be rough and I'd tip us."

"If I can't keep the boat upright, then I need to put in a lot more time at the oars. I promise I'll take you out in the scull first chance we get." The waitress approached but before Leigh could reach for the bill, Matt slid the young woman his credit card. When Leigh objected, he simply held up a silencing finger. "My treat. You're not going to insist on splitting everything down the middle, are you?"

"No. But you shouldn't have to pick up the check every time we go out. You paid the last time."

"We've only been out a few times, so your representative sample is too small to be statistically significant. I chose this place and it's not cheap, so I should pick up the tab. Also, I suspect a professor's salary beats a cop's, so it's not fair to stick you with the check when I picked the expensive restaurant."

She glared at him, but remained silent.

"As I thought. You get the next one, okay?" He tucked his card back into his wallet and stood. "Rowe must be using this as another demonstration. Will he still be there when we arrive?"

Leigh rose from her chair. "I'm not sure, but I'll find out. He may not be able to stick around that long."

"It's a good thing we came in two cars. You head back now; I'll go pick up my students. We'll be there by two-fifteen or two-thirty at the latest. They'll hold the scene until then?"

"Yes. When remains are found in a fire, it's officially designated a crime scene and nothing gets moved until the crime scene techs and the ME get there. The techs are probably on their way right now."

"Then let's go." He circled the table to lay his hand at the small of her back as they headed for the exit. "We've got a scene to process."

CHAPTER TWO: OVERHAUL

Overhaul: the process of putting a structure in the safest possible condition after a fire. During the *cleaning-up* phase, fire-fighters verify that the fire has not extended into unknown areas and that hidden *hot spots* are extinguished.

Sunday, 2:21 p.m.

Wharf Street

Salem, Massachusetts

Matt nodded to the Salem officer who waved them through the barricade. He led his group around the silver and blue police car blocking the street, bar lights flashing in bright bursts of color. Resettling the equipment bag on his shoulder, he glanced back at his three graduate students—two young men and a woman, their faces set in determined lines as they headed toward another horrific scene. Matt slowed his steps until they caught up to him.

Around them, smiling ghosts peeped playfully around the corner of a toy shop while gaudily decorated Witch hats filled the window of a ladies clothing store. Despite the Halloween window dressing, the shops lining both sides of the street were eerily silent and deserted, their doors locked tight even though it was mid-afternoon.

“What’s that stench?” Paul, tall and gangly in baggy jeans and a faded sweatshirt, grimaced, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “That’s not just burned wood. Something really reeks.”

“From what I understand, it’s the plastics and synthetics that really stink in a fire like this.” Kiko glanced sideways at Paul, her pretty Japanese face serious. “This is a commercial area, so who knows what was in the stores that burned. And then there’s the victim.”

Paul’s face flushed with color. “I didn’t mean it that way,” he stuttered. “I—”

Kiko put him out of his misery with a fluid shrug. “I know,” she said easily.

Paul hunched his shoulders, but gave her a grateful half smile.

Juka trailed a step behind them, his dark eyes fixed on the surrounding stores. “These buildings are over a century old. A fire could easily spread due to the old-fashioned construction.”

“That’s what it sounded like to me from what I’ve heard so far,” Matt said. “But we’ll find out more when we get there.” He glanced over, seeing feet start to drag and recognizing the hesitation in the young faces—they were dreading what was to come, but delaying wouldn’t make it any easier. “Come on, guys. Leigh’s probably waiting for us by now. It looks like all the action is around that corner.” He indicated the bottom curve of the U-shaped street. “Over there.”

The group picked up their pace, falling silent as they approached their destination.

The street curved out of sight, but over the roofs of the untouched shops, steady streams of thick, dark smoke drifted sluggishly skyward. A red fire truck was parked just before the curve in the middle of the street, its massive white ladder extended high over a building around the bend. Perched atop the ladder was a firefighter wearing a black helmet and a heavy beige coat with SALEM on the back in white block letters.

“What’s he doing up there?” Kiko asked.

“Looks like he’s got a camera,” Juka said, shading his eyes with his hand as he squinted up into the cloudless sky. “He’s

probably documenting the scene.”

The cool fall wind suddenly gusted, skittering in chill wisps under Matt’s jacket. He pulled the collar a little tighter against his skin. But even the wind couldn’t drive away the reek of smoke and devastation.

They rounded the curve into organized chaos: Firefighters shouted to each other as they jogged in and out of the burned building. Smoke rolled out of broken windows, and the sound of falling debris came from deep within the structure. Two engines were pulled up to the curb across the street from the fire, their running motors adding to the din. A thick hose connected the engines, and smaller hoses ran from the closest one toward the building, crisscrossing the sidewalk in fat lines. A firefighter stood beside the second engine, draining water from hose lines and meticulously folding them into compact piles to be stored in the back of the vehicle. Other firefighters carrying axes and long, hooked pike poles disappeared through a door near the end of the line of shops.

A burned-out shell was all that remained of the building. Daylight spilled through gaping doorways over charred contents and fallen rafters. Glass from storefront windows sparkled like diamonds strewn across the sidewalk, the tiny shards catching and reflecting sunlight where they lay in pools of water. The roof was burned away and only a few feet of charred rafters and shingles outlined the perimeter, allowing sunlight to flood the carnage within.

“Whoa . . .,” Paul breathed. “Not much left.”

Matt’s gaze roamed over the scene, cataloging every detail. “Yeah, it looks bad. But you knew it would be.”

“Because they need us?” Kiko asked.

“Exactly. If the fire wasn’t that bad, Rowe would have handled the remains on his own.”

A yell punctuated by a loud crash came from the nearest

doorway. Two firefighters tossed sodden debris from the store onto a growing pile atop a large canvas tarp spread across the sidewalk.

A flash of yellow caught Matt's eye. Across the street, a soot-smudged golden retriever jumped into the back of an SUV with the Massachusetts state crest emblazoned on the door. A man wearing navy pants and a white uniform shirt with an emblem on the sleeve slammed the hatch shut behind the dog.

Matt smiled in greeting as Leigh came around the opposite bend of the street, striding past an antique lamppost, the base obscured by a shock of scorched corn stalks. "Looks like our timing's just right. Here comes Leigh." He waved and she smiled in return as she started toward them.

Leigh's smile vanished as a stocky man stepped into her path, his tan sport coat pulled tightly across his stiffly set shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing, Abbott?" His raised voice sliced through the haze like a jagged knife, making Leigh jerk to a stop. "This is *my* case. Now Kepler's telling me to stand down."

"Kepler assigned the case to me." Leigh said as Matt strained to hear her words over the continual noise. "Now, if you don't mind getting out of the way, I need to meet with my team."

"What's going on over there?" Paul asked. "Who's the guy hassling Leigh?"

"I bet that's Morrison." Matt swung the bag off his shoulder and shoved it unceremoniously into Paul's arms. "Be right back." He strode across the asphalt toward the two officers.

"Your *team*," Morrison practically spat at Leigh. "Is that how you weaseled onto this case? Telling Kepler no one could work with these people but you, the golden girl?"

"She didn't kick you off the case. I did." Matt purposely stepped between them, going chest-to-chest with Morrison and physically forcing him back a step. "I wanted Trooper Abbott."

Leigh's hand wrapped around Matt's upper arm, giving him

a rough jerk, but he didn't budge. "I've got this," she hissed from behind his shoulder.

Matt threw her a sidelong glance. "The decision to bring you onboard was mine." He turned back to Morrison, drawing himself up to his full height. At over six feet, he topped Morrison by a full three inches, while Morrison easily had him by fifty pounds. But Matt knew all the hours spent rowing gave him a physical advantage. Morrison's bulk wasn't all muscle and his face was an unhealthy shade of crimson that hinted at high blood pressure. "If you want to blame someone, she's not your mark. I am."

Over Morrison's shoulder, Matt saw Paul and Juka drop their gear and jog across the street toward them.

"Fine, then I'll hassle you. This is my case. You don't get the department pet to sit up and bark at your command. You get the officer on call." He stabbed at his own chest with a meaty index finger. "That's me."

"I get who I want," Matt shot back. "And since Dr. Rowe asked for me specifically, the department is willing to oblige me."

Morrison's face pinched into a mask of pure spite as he took a menacing step forward, using his bulk to crowd Matt backward into Leigh. "Look, I don't care who you are. You don't just waltz in here and—"

"Hey! Not at my scene!" A sharp voice rang out, and all heads turned to see a tall, lean woman headed their way, her cold gaze fixed on them. She was dressed in full firefighting gear and a white helmet. "Which one of you is the responding officer?"

"I am," Leigh said. "Trooper Morrison has been relieved."

"Then Trooper Morrison can go." The woman jerked her thumb over her shoulder in dismissal. "Only people working the case are allowed back here. No gawkers."

Morrison glared at Leigh and mumbled something that sounded like *'I'll be talking to my rep,'* as he stalked away.

Kiko hurried over, weighed down with all four backpacks. "What happened?" she asked breathlessly as Paul and Juka helped her lower everything to the ground.

"That's what I'd like to know." The woman pulled off her helmet, revealing short-cut blond hair. Tucking the helmet under her left arm, she held out her right hand to Leigh. "Trooper Brianna Gilson from the State Fire Marshal's Office, Fire Investigation Unit. This is my investigation."

"Trooper? You're not a firefighter?" Paul blurted.

Trooper Gilson froze, her hand still extended, but her gaze drilled into the young man. Paul stared at his hightops and shuffled awkwardly, clearly wishing the ground would swallow him whole.

"Members of the state fire investigation unit are all members of the state police," Gilson said crisply. "City fire departments can investigate property fires, but when a death occurs or arson is suspected, the case comes to us. But don't worry; you've lucked into both cop and firefighter with me."

Leigh clasped Trooper Gilson's hand, pulling attention away from Paul. "Trooper Leigh Abbott. My apologies for the earlier commotion. Trooper Morrison was originally called to this scene, but there's been a change of officers."

Matt stepped forward. "Trooper Gilson, I'm Dr. Matt Lowell. Dr. Rowe asked that I consult on this case as the forensic anthropologist. Since Trooper Abbott and I have worked together before, I specifically requested her." When he held out his hand, Gilson shook it firmly. "That should be it for the dramatics."

"Good. And just 'Bree' will be fine. I hate formality when it's not needed." At Matt's raised eyebrow, she elaborated. "I like things straight up and have a low tolerance for BS." She fixed

him with a steely stare. “And dramatics.”

“Just like scientists. I think we’ll get along fine.” Turning, Leigh held out an arm toward the group. “Meet the rest of my scientific team. These are Matt’s students—Kiko Niigata, Paul Layne and Juka Petrović.”

Bree’s gaze swept over the young people, lingering for several extra beats on Paul. “Do they all need access? We try to keep the number of people entering the scene to a minimum.”

Matt opened his mouth to respond, but Leigh spoke first. “They’re all contributing team members, so they all need to be here.” When Bree looked skeptical, Leigh said, “I had the same concerns when I first worked with them. Trust me—you won’t regret having them around.”

Bree stared at the young people for a moment, then nodded. “Then let’s suit up and get in there.” She scanned the group quickly. “I’m going to find you some alternate gear. If you go in like that, you’ll never wear those clothes again.”

Matt nudged the bags at his feet. “We brought disposable Tyvek coveralls. We always suit up at forensic scenes so we don’t contaminate any potential evidence.”

“Great. But you’ll still need boots. Everything’s down in there, so you need better protection than what you’re wearing.” Bree turned to Leigh. “What about you?”

Leigh shrugged. “This is all I have.” She looked down at the old jeans and T-shirt she wore under her jacket. “It’s old. It’s not a big deal if it gets dirty.”

“Dirty is an understatement,” Bree said. “You don’t need full turnout gear like this—” She tugged on the edge of her heavy white coat, pulling it back far enough to reveal red suspenders over a smudged white uniform shirt. “—but you’ll at least need a pair of bunkers.”

“Bunkers?”

“The pants.” She patted the thick beige pants she wore,

rimmed at the cuffs with reflective tape. “I’ll scam some boots and a pair of bunkers from the truck or one of the guys. And helmets.” Putting on her own helmet, she jogged toward the engine at the far end of the scene.

Leigh turned back to the students. “Good to see you guys again. Well . . . not given the circumstances, but you know what I mean.”

“Sure,” Paul said, his gaze shifting back to the wreckage. “Where’s the body?”

Leigh scanned the burned-out husk before pointing to a doorway. “In the middle store—the antique shop.”

“Let’s suit up over there, out of the way.” Matt pointed at the far side of the street, away from the chaos and cacophony of the fire scene. An open green space hugged the shore, a forest of tall sailboat masts clustered behind it. In the distance, sunlight glinted off the open water of Salem Harbor.

The students grabbed their bags and started carefully picking their way over fire hoses and around equipment. Matt moved to follow them but Leigh grabbed his arm. He turned to meet green eyes glinting with anger.

“I don’t need you to fight my battles for me.” Thankfully, she pitched her voice low enough that his retreating students couldn’t hear. “I have to deal with Morrison on a daily basis. You standing in front of me doesn’t help one bit. All it does is destroy my credibility.”

Matt’s temper flared, but he tamped it down in favor of reason. “I know you, Leigh. You’re more than capable of handling that bastard. But, in this case, it wasn’t your fault; it was mine. And I’m not going to stand by and watch you get harassed by someone who likes to throw his weight around when I caused the problem. If Morrison’s got issues about who’s assigned to this case, he can take it up with me. Or Kepler. But not you, because you’re just following orders.” He forced himself

to stop and really look at her: she held herself stiffly, her jaw locked and her hands balled at her sides as if expecting an attack from him as well. “Look, I’m sorry if I overstepped. But at the time, I didn’t think I did. What the hell has he got against you anyway?”

“I’m sure he could recite you a laundry list,” Leigh said flatly, her defensive stance deflating. “He’s never liked the fact that I’m the daughter of the unit’s past sergeant. He thinks I get special treatment.” Defiance flashed in her eyes. “Which I don’t.”

Matt held up both hands, palm out. “I’m not saying you do. But that at least explains the ‘department pet’ comment, which irritated the hell out of me.” He stepped closer. “Truce?”

“Are you going to leave Morrison alone next time?”

“I can’t promise you that. If he’s going after you—”

“You’ll leave him to me.”

Matt swallowed the curse that sprang to his lips and tried to meet her halfway. “I’ll do my best. But no promises if I think he’s way out of line.”

Leigh sighed. “Fine.” She glanced over toward the students. All three had their bags open and were pulling out disposable white jumpsuits. “Come on, you need to get ready.”

They started toward the harbor’s edge. “I’m confused,” Matt said. “What exactly is Bree? She’s a firefighter *and* a cop?”

“Sort of. I’ve never worked with her before, but I’ve heard about her from one of the guys in the Unit who went through the academy with her and later worked a murder case with her. She was a firefighter, right here in Salem. She worked up the ranks to lieutenant and was the city fire marshal for a few years. But I guess she wanted the meatier cases because she quit the fire department and went to the police academy with the express purpose of getting into the fire marshal’s office. She’s been there a few years now and has a good rep.”

“Having been a firefighter, I’ll bet she has instincts cops don’t have. Sounds like a good person to have on the case.”

A few minutes later Bree and a second firefighter returned, their arms full of equipment they unceremoniously spilled onto the grass.

Leigh pulled on the bulky bunkers and boots Bree offered her, awkwardly readjusting the waistband around the Sig Sauer service weapon at her hip before pulling the suspenders over her shoulders. Holding out both arms and turning in a slow circle, Leigh glanced over her shoulder at Kiko. “Tell me the truth. Does my ass look big in these pants?”

Kiko laughed. “Nah. Just ask the guys. I bet they think the lady firefighter look is sexy.”

“Oh yeah,” Paul agreed, zipping up his jumpsuit and tugging on a pair of latex gloves. “It’s . . . uh . . . hot.” He glanced at Bree. “No pun intended.”

This time Bree’s eyes held a glint of humor. “Like I haven’t heard that one before.” She turned to Leigh. “Do you know what happened here this morning?”

Leigh shook her head. “Just that a victim was found after the fire was extinguished.”

“Let me give you a quick rundown. Someone called nine-one-one at four-thirty-two this morning.”

“Who spotted the fire at that hour of the morning?” Matt asked.

Bree turned to the boats bobbing in the dark-blue water of the marina. “Someone heading back to his boat after an evening with the boys at an after-hours club. We agreed not to ask too many questions about that in return for his statement.”

“That’s some evening,” Paul muttered.

“Headquarters responded and the first trucks arrived at four thirty-eight—two engines, a ladder truck, and Deputy Chief Baldwin as the incident commander. When a working fire was

confirmed, they sent two more engines and a second ladder truck so they had five attack lines going at once. The building was fully involved by the time those trucks arrived, but they managed to keep the fire contained to this one building, saving the surrounding structures. With simultaneous attacks to both the front and back of the building, the fire was extinguished by six a.m.”

“When was the victim discovered?” Leigh looked up from her notepad, her pen poised over the paper.

“Just after ten. When the guys started overhauling, they began with the outside stores and worked their way in because the seat of the fire was the center store. They needed to let that area cool down, preferably without dousing it again.”

“Sorry,” Leigh interrupted. “Overhauling?”

“Once the fire is out, they check for extensions—places where the fire spreads into walls or attics where they can’t readily see it—and hot spots, to make sure the fire is really out. For safety, they also took the time to shore up the walls of the middle section with two-by-fours. The roof collapsed into the structure during the fire, so they had to clear a lot of debris for the investigation. That’s when they found the victim and called the state police, the medical examiner’s office and the fire investigation unit.”

“You’ve worked with Dr. Rowe before?” Leigh asked.

Bree nodded. “Yes. Good man, Rowe. Never had him at a scene though. Usually I’m on his turf, not him on mine.”

“He’s trying to get additional funding for on-scene body processing by showing that having an ME at murder scenes improves conviction rates, so he’s running some cases himself on his own time. He’s not still here, is he?”

“No, he left about an hour ago. He said something about enough hands coming that he wouldn’t be needed. I’m sure he’ll be in touch—” She looked back and forth between Matt

and Leigh. “With one of you. But he called for techs to transport the remains. They should be here shortly.” She glanced around the group. “You guys look ready to go. The Crime Scene Services guys were here earlier with Rowe, but they went for coffee and will be back in a few minutes. Grab whatever gear you need.”

Matt and the students put on their backpacks, and then Bree led the group across the street to where the dark maw of the fire scene beckoned.

CHAPTER THREE: BLEVE

BLEVE: pronounced “blev-ee,” an acronym for Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion. This type of explosion occurs when the contents of a closed container boil and vaporize when the container is heated, even if the container was not pressurized prior to the fire.

Sunday, 2:43 p.m.

Wharf Street,

Salem, Massachusetts

A charred beam slanted down from the roof, partially blocking the gap that once marked the store’s front entrance. They had to duck as they moved from blazing sunlight into a steamy haze of rancid smoke and stifling humidity. Paul misjudged the distance and scraped his helmet against the rough wood, causing a shower of charcoal shards to rain down on him.

“Step carefully in here,” Bree directed. “We’ve cleared a path but the floor is uneven and the water makes it slick. And watch the wiring overhead—it came down when the ceiling collapsed. The power’s off, but you can still get caught in the wires.”

Matt, Leigh and the students paused as they took in the devastation.

Debris was piled high all around while open blue sky soared above their heads. Water puddled around their boots on the scorched antique tongue-and-groove floor, and more steadily dripped from the remnants of the roof. Wisps of smoke rose

from scorched piles of charred timber, shattered china and twisted metal, and the acrid air reeked of burned wood and plastic.

Leigh's face was pinched and she blinked rapidly. Matt's own eyes stung and watered from the bitter smoke. He let her precede him around what looked like the remains of a glass-topped jewelry display, tipped over in the rubble, its treasures lost in the surrounding chaos. "Try to breathe through your mouth," he murmured, drawing her gaze. "It's like being around decomp. You learn how to make it easier on yourself."

"Thanks." She took a cautious shallow breath through her mouth. "Better. My lungs still burn, but at least it's easier on my nose." She glanced at Bree who stood a few feet away, hands on hips, surveying the damage and totally oblivious to the stench. "How does she do it?"

"I'll bet she's so used to it, she doesn't really notice anymore." Matt turned to study the space around them.

The shop was about twenty-five feet wide. The front of the store was mostly intact, the walls which framed the bottom of the doorway revealing the original cream-colored paint. But from several feet above the floor, the paint was darkly stained with soot and smoke. Heavy soot outlined pale rectangles on the wall, marking where antique paintings and photos hung until fire and blasts of pressurized water displaced them. The front window was shattered, the glass blown outwards to scatter over the sidewalk leaving a rim of vicious teeth biting from the sill.

Juka picked up a twisted piece of metal balanced on scraps of wood and shingles. It was scorched and bent but the original cylindrical shape was still discernible. "I wonder what this was."

Kiko lifted it from his hands and examined it. "A lantern? Maybe one of those old-fashioned punched tin ones that hold a candle? How hot did it get in here that metal melted?"

“It was plenty hot,” Bree said. “Somewhere between fourteen hundred and sixteen hundred degrees. But the temperature would have varied around the room. It would have been hottest at the seat of the fire.”

“How can you tell where it started?” Matt asked.

“I look for the area of deepest penetration of the fire and the most widespread thermal damage. The longer materials are exposed to heat, the greater the damage. A lantern made of a soft metal like tin would begin to melt at less than five hundred degrees.” She pointed at a blackened wall sconce that hung beside the door. “But that lamp on the outside wall didn’t melt. It looks like brass, which melts at about sixteen hundred degrees. And the hurricane glass on it would have melted at fourteen hundred degrees. It’s only crazed.”

“Crazed?” Leigh asked.

“You see the pattern of micro fractures in the glass?”

Matt leaned in to examine the crisscrossing spiderwebs of tiny fractures spanning the glass shade. “That’s from heat?”

“It’s actually from the sudden change in temperature between the heat of the fire and cold water from the hoses. Depending on the temperature change, the glass might craze or it may simply shatter.” She indicated the front window. “Like that.”

“That’s why the glass is all outside?” Juka asked. “From the water streams inside the store?”

“Yes. We had two attack lines coming into this store—one from the front and one from the back. And then additional lines overhead from the ladders. It wasn’t actually the force of the water that shattered the window, although two hundred psi packs a hell of a punch. It’s the sudden drop in temperature that weakens the structure. Knowledge about how heat affects materials also helps me determine the point of origin.”

“Where’s the body?” Matt asked. “I thought I might be able to smell it, but there’s just too much sensory overload.”

“That’s typical. There’s a lot of wood in here, but the real stench comes from the polyurethane foam in cushions, and from plastics and other chemicals.”

Matt looked over sharply. “Chemicals?”

“They refinished antiques, and the chemicals used were all highly flammable. When we get to the back, you’ll see the damage they did. The body is there too.” Bree picked her way toward the back of the store. “It was while the guys were clearing debris in here that they found the victim. That’s when we called Bailey in.”

“Bailey?”

Bree grinned. “Bailey is always my spot of sunshine in a scene like this. She’s part of our K-9 unit—an accelerant detection dog. We always use the K-9 team when there’s a fatality or if we suspect arson. Unfortunately, there was so much background from all the refinishing chemicals in the store, she alerted multiple times but never in the place I’ve identified as the point of origin.”

As they moved toward the back, light flooded in from the rear of the building. Blackened studs outlining a doorway marked the separating wall to a back room. Inside, the crumpled remains of a garage-style door lay in strips on the floor, the freshly cut edges razor sharp. The rear wall of the store was almost completely destroyed.

“As you can see, the fire had a really strong foothold back here,” Bree said. “Unfortunately, as we often see in historic buildings, there was no centralized sprinkler or fire detection system in place. Since it’s not required by law, many owners skip retrofitting because of the cost. Add to that a single common attic stretching the length of the building, and the fire spread unchecked in all directions.”

The smell hit Matt in that instant—the sickly sweet scent of roasted flesh that made saliva pool in his mouth even as his

stomach rolled. It had been years since he'd run experiments at the University of Tennessee's Body Farm using burned cadavers, but he never forgot the smell. He'd gone off Canadian bacon for years afterwards as a result. As he scanned the surrounding debris, his gaze finally came to rest on blackened flesh camouflaged by scorched wood.

The burned bulk of a large wooden box—perhaps a cabinet or a wardrobe—lay on the floor, but there was no mistaking the body partially pinned underneath. The victim lay on its side, the upper body charred deep black. One forearm was curled up and pulled into the chest, but it ended abruptly at the wrist. Instead of a hand, the exposed flesh had split over the ends of the long bones in the arm, curling away to reveal glimpses of white. The torso was a mass of striated muscle and charred intestine disappearing underneath the wardrobe.

Leigh gave a choked gasp from behind him and he turned to see her eyes fixed unblinkingly on the victim, her sheet-white face tinged with green. He reached out to touch her arm, stopping at the last second as he realized his gloved fingers were black with soot and grit from maneuvering through the debris. Instead, he rubbed the back of his hand against her upper arm. “You okay?”

It took her a moment to answer, and she swallowed audibly first. “Yeah.” The word came out as a half croak. She sucked in a breath, her eyes going wide as the putrid smoke filled her lungs. She coughed raggedly several times. “You warned me it was going to be rough.”

“First burn victim?” Bree asked.

“Yes.” Leigh's voice wobbled but she doggedly stepped forward to take a closer look.

“Rowe did an initial examination but said right away that he'd need a forensic anthropologist,” Bree said.

Matt stepped into the debris, skirting the rubble along the

very narrow area around the body. He squatted down beside the torso. “This is CGS-3. Definitely outside his expertise.”

Bree crouched down across from him. “That was my estimate too.”

“CGS-3?” Leigh asked.

“It’s the Crow-Glassman standardized scale for burned bodies. One is the least severe and five is the worst—essentially a cremation. Three means there is significant loss of tissue, including disarticulation of some body parts, and a visual ID isn’t immediately possible from the remains.” Matt looked up at Kiko. “We’re going to need to do a skull reconstruction.”

“I agree,” Kiko said, “but it’s going to be a challenge. Even if we can find all the pieces, the bone is going to be calcined.”

Leigh slid in beside Matt, bracing her hand on his shoulder to lean over the body. “What happened to the head? Blunt force trauma?”

The forehead and top of the cranium were missing above the startlingly white bone rimming the eye sockets, exposing the mass of charred brain tissue. Below the eye sockets, the fleshy cheeks were burned a deep, leathery black. “Could be, but I doubt it. That’s typical fire damage.”

“The infamous exploding skull,” Bree said.

Leigh glanced from Bree to Matt. “Exploding skull?”

“People think the skull fractures like that because pressure builds up as the brain boils, causing the head to explode,” Bree explained. “Somehow they seem to forget that the skull has several natural openings that allow the steam to vent.”

“There’s actually a very simple explanation,” Matt said. “Skin burns first, then the muscle and fat underneath. In areas like the forehead, there is very little fat and muscle below the skin, so the organic components in the bone start to burn quickly. When the organic components are gone, what’s left is calcined bone—the mineral scaffold which is extremely brittle and shat-

ters easily under any pressure.”

“Like from a water stream or the roof collapsing,” Bree supplied.

Leigh leaned closer to the body. Matt reached up to steady her as her eyes locked on the torso where it disappeared under the wardrobe. “See something?” he asked.

“There’s something buried in the chest.”

Matt stretched upward, trying to peer over the side of the corpse. “I can’t see from this angle. What is it?”

“There’s a lot of damage and the upper body is curled in on itself, but it looks like a knife.” She paused. “It’s just . . .”

“What?”

Leigh remained silent for a moment, then she straightened. “Let’s wait until the body is out from under all this. We’ll see better then.”

“Rowe told us to leave the wardrobe in place because he didn’t want to risk scattering body parts until you got here,” Bree said. “But when you’re ready, I’ll pull in some guys to move it. Even mostly burned, I’ll bet that thing still weighs a few hundred pounds.”

“We’re going to see fractures from it,” Paul said. “That thing could crush a living person, forget about fire-damaged bone.”

“I didn’t think about that.” Leigh eyed its bulk critically. “It looks solid. Are you going to be able to tell trauma injuries from fire injuries?”

“Absolutely. It’s all about fracture speed. It’s also how I’ll be able to tell when the head injury occurred, but we’re going to need to find all the pieces of the skull to do that.” Matt straightened and Leigh stepped back into the main pathway to give him room. He started to follow and then stopped, his eyes fixed on the corpse, his brows drawn together in confusion. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Leigh asked.

Bracing his hands on his knees, he leaned over. “There’s something under the body.”

“Debris?” Bree asked.

“No, it’s . . . fleshy. Charred flesh, but definitely muscle tissue.”

“Disarticulation?” Kiko asked. She moved to the other side of the body for a better view. “You mean partially tucked under the wardrobe?”

“Yeah.”

Kiko squinted at it. “I see it. I don’t think that’s from our vic.” She glanced up at Matt, the corners of her eyes creased in concern. “You’re thinking a second body.”

“Too small for an adult. It could be a child, or, worse, a baby.”

Kiko winced and lost a bit more color.

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough. When the morgue techs get here, the first thing we’ll do is move the wardrobe and transfer the victim to a body bag. That will give us a clear view of what’s underneath. And then the real work begins.”

“Oh yeah,” Paul said. “And that’s going to take hours.”

“Why will it take hours *after* the body is secured?” Leigh asked.

“Because that’s only part of the remains.” Matt sidled out of the debris. “I can already see we’re missing both hands, one forearm, and some of the skull. We won’t know if the feet are intact until we move the wardrobe. Those missing bones didn’t burn away, they’re simply scattered around the body where they fell when the tissue was incinerated. But before we release the site, we need to find every piece of bone and tissue we can. And that means searching and sifting.” Matt turned to Bree. “We’re going to need artificial lighting brought in. Otherwise, once we lose the sun, we’ll be working blind.”

“We have portable lights and generators. I’ll make sure you

have what you need.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll have to do an examination to establish cause of death. Do you have any idea how the fire started?” Leigh asked Bree.

“Not yet.” Bree turned to face a large pile of debris. “But this is definitely the point of origin.”

Leigh scanned the debris and what was left of the walls around it but didn’t see anything in the charred materials that set this area apart from the rest of the store. “You’re sure? The back of the building is in even worse shape. You said that the longer the fire burns, the hotter it gets and the more damage is done.”

“True, but you’re not accounting for the fire load—the amount of flammable material in an area. The showroom was full of wood, fabric, foam cushions, and carpet. But the workroom was full of stain, lacquer, varnish, and paint thinner.” Stepping a few feet to her right, she plucked a can from the rubble. The lid was gone and the upper edges of the can blossomed outwards in razor-sharp petals.

Paul whistled sharply. “That can essentially became a bomb. What’s it made out of—stainless steel?”

“That would be my guess. The heat of the fire caused the contents to reach their flashpoint—the temperature where a flammable liquid will ignite. But trapped inside the can, the chemicals essentially became explosive from the pressure buildup. Projectiles like this ripped away at the walls in the back area, further weakening the structure. And then there’s the dumpster.”

Matt peered over Bree’s shoulder. Outside, behind what was left of the wall, a large metal dumpster smoldered. “What was in that?”

“Pretty much everything that shouldn’t be,” Bree said in disgust. “Discarded cans, dirty rags, scraps of wood. When it

went up, it just added to the fire load on that back wall.”

“So add all that together,” Matt said, “and you’ve got an accelerated fire, but not necessarily the point of origin.”

“That’s exactly my thinking. You have to realize how flames move in a fire—up and out, just like the smoke and gases that are produced. So a fire on the floor may have a very small ignition point, but from there, the smoke and heat will rise up and out, creating a V pattern.”

“And you can see that pattern in this room?” Leigh stood with her hands on her hips, scanning the area around them. “I’m totally missing it.”

“That’s because the key here is that part of the pattern is missing. When these buildings were built in the nineteenth century, typical construction involved lath and plaster for the inside walls. Look right there—” Bree pointed to a section on the wall, where the plaster had crumbled away to reveal scorched studs and strips of lath. “—and you can see part of the V.” She held up her hands, the heels pressed together, palms spread in a V shape and examined the wall through them. She pointed to the outside edge of the shape. “As we move out from the rough centerline of the V, more and more lath remains.”

“There’s a void on one side,” Matt said, studying the area critically. “Could there have been something else there? Something else that deflected the flames, or burned and has now collapsed?” He critically studied the piles of debris in front of that section of wall. “Hold on. The wardrobe. It was standing against that wall.”

“That’s my guess, and I’ll confirm it with the owner, if this isn’t him or her. If so, then part of the V pattern is on one side of the wardrobe, but, as it burned, it became unsteady and toppled over, either during the fire, or when we extinguished it.”

“Is it definitely arson?” Juka asked.

A Flame in the Wind of Death

“It’s too soon to be definitive. But I can tell you this from past experience—when a fire starts accidentally, if someone is in the room with it, they either try to put it out or run like hell. They don’t usually stand there and let themselves burn to death.”

“But when someone is already dead or unconscious and a fire is set to hide the evidence and the identity of the victim, you’d want that victim as close to the fire as possible,” Leigh said.

“Right. Once the body’s removed, I’ll be doing my own investigation of the site looking specifically for an incendiary device. Are you ready for me to send in the crime scene guys? They did initial pictures with Rowe, but they’ll want to shoot more while you remove the body and do your search.”

Matt glanced at his students—they were ready. “Let’s get started.”

Sunday, 7:17 p.m.

Wharf Street

Salem, Massachusetts

Matt slammed the door on the coroner’s van and gave it two sharp raps with his fist. The van pulled away into the darkening evening and disappeared around the corner as it left the wharf and headed back to Boston.

He made quick work of shedding his Tyvek jumpsuit, rolling it up inside out and jamming it in a nearby trash can. He tugged at the neck of his T-shirt, trying to separate the material from his sweaty skin. The fall breeze felt refreshingly cool against his overheated body after hours inside the steamy fire scene.

He walked over to where his students stood on the green space by the wharf, stripping out of their suits and chugging the water bottles Bree had provided. “Good work today, guys. We’ll pick this up again tomorrow at nine. I’ll call Rowe tonight when

I get home, and we'll decide where to go from here."

"What about starting with an autopsy?" Paul suggested, grinning at Juka.

"Funny," Matt said dryly. "Yes, a standard autopsy will be done, but I have something else in mind first. I'd like to do a 3D-autopsy using the MRI facility at Mass Gen. We can reconstruct the body from the inside out before Rowe even picks up a scalpel. It will show bone damage as well as soft tissue damage in layered 3D. It might even show us the cause of death if the fire itself wasn't responsible."

Kiko whistled. "Sounds cool."

"I've never done it myself, but I've seen papers on it. This would be the perfect time to try it out."

"What about the dog?" Juka asked.

Matt thought of the tiny charred body they'd unearthed beneath the victim. He needed to actually examine the bones to confirm, but he was ninety-five percent certain it was a small dog. "Too pricey and time consuming to use on the dog. We'll necropsy it the old-fashioned way. I don't know if it's a clue or collateral damage, but either way, it's evidence."

"Too bad there wasn't a tag," Paul commented. "That might have given us victim ID."

"We're never that lucky," Matt said dryly. "Now, everybody got a ride home?" There were nods all around in response. "Great. I'll see you tomorrow."

He swung his bag onto his shoulder and started down the street, past the last engine still on site and around the corner. Leigh's midnight-blue Crown Victoria sat at the curb halfway down the street. Her car was draped in long shadows between the streetlights, so he didn't see the top half of Leigh's body hidden inside the car until he was almost beside her. He lowered his bag silently to the concrete as she backed out of the passenger side and slammed the door.

She let out a gasp of surprise when his hands landed firmly on her hips, spinning her to press her back against her vehicle. He stepped into her, trapping her between cool metal and warm skin.

“Matt!” Her hands slapped against his chest. “What are you doing?”

“Huddling over charred remains wasn’t exactly how I envisioned our date ending. I’m trying to recoup some of our day.” He moved closer.

She pushed back against him, and he allowed her an inch of space. “I’m filthy. I’m covered with soot and God knows what else. And I’m sweaty.”

He grinned at her, thinking that the dark smear along her cheek was an endearing testament to hours of hot, miserable work. “So what? I am too. It was a hundred degrees inside that scene and a steam bath to boot. Relax. You’re not going to make me dirtier than I already am. And my olfactory sense got blown out in there. If we smell sweaty, my nose won’t notice for at least another twelve hours.”

Ignoring her halfhearted, spluttered protests, he leaned in, using his body to hold her still while he cupped her jaw in his hands, his fingers slipping gently under her hair. He brushed his lips over hers, feeling her still instantly. Her body remained frozen, her hands pressing against his chest for only a moment, then she relaxed into him, one hand sliding over the damp cotton of his T-shirt into the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer as her lips opened under his.

His fingers gripped her hips reflexively, holding her tighter, simultaneously reveling in the length of her pressed fully against him and cursing their lack of privacy on a public street—

“Matt, I forgot to ask. Did you want to meet at the lab or at the ME’s office . . .” Suddenly spotlighted in the warm glow of a streetlight, Kiko stammered to a halt as she came close enough

to the couple tucked into the shadows to realize she was interrupting a private moment. “Wow. Sorry. Never mind, then. I’ll just touch base with you tomorrow morning. As you were.” With a wide grin, she spun and jogged off down the sidewalk.

Matt tipped his head down to rest his forehead against Leigh’s. A puff of air feathered over his lips as she let out a frustrated laugh. “Foiled again. We’re never going to get a moment alone at this rate.”

He tipped up her chin with a finger and pressed a soft kiss to her lips before he reluctantly released her and stepped back. “Not that this is the time or the place, but I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Typical man,” Leigh scoffed, but her eyes were smiling as she lightly ran her fingers down his forearm. “When are we going to try to make up that date?”

“When we’re on a case? Your guess is as good as mine. But I’ll make you a deal. The first evening we both have free, even if it’s just to steal a few hours at the end of the day, let’s do something, just the two of us.”

“Deal. You need a lift to your SUV?”

“Nah, it’s just a block away and I’m enjoying the cool air after all that heat and humidity. Give me a call tomorrow morning and I’ll let you know what Rowe and I decided. Have a good night.”

He gave her a gentle push toward the driver’s side door and then stood by as she started the car and waved through the windshield. He watched until her taillights disappeared from view around the corner.

After picking up his bag, he made his way into the deeper shadows of the night.