

Chapter 1

May 1, 1954, Lionel

I'm aware of the clear dusk sky beyond the smoke. I'm aware of cherry blossoms hanging in the breeze weeks past their peak. I'm aware of our building's Spanish Colonial Revival facade, its tiers and molded ledges and balconies sweeping upward, its demonic grotesques perched on the cornice, looming in vain, having failed to ward off evil spirits.

Firefighters rush past me, wearing wide-brimmed helmets, gas masks with trunk-like noses, bulky coats marred with the residue of past fires, and tall boots like fishermen's waders. They grip fire extinguishers and haul limp extra hoses over their shoulders. The polished nozzles glint in the light from the building's lobby entrance. They call out commands and move with extraordinary purpose, giving some order to the chaos. A hook and ladder truck, its wheel up over the curb and crushing a fledgling redbud tree, buzzes with commotion. The long expandable ladder shifts and begins to angle up. The clean-faced firefighter at its helm is so intent on his job that he briefly (and bizarrely) charms me. Not far behind me, distraught neighbors and nosey, babbling pedestrians gather. Parting the sea, the ambulance crew appear, searching for direction.

When I first visited the building, Roger stopped near this spot on the sidewalk, slid his hand across my shoulder, a gesture both thrilling and unsettling in a public space, and pointed to windows along the ninth floor. "We'll live up there forever, darling," he said, leaning in, his voice soft,

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conspiratorial. “We’ll throw parties. We’ll sip martinis and watch DC blink to life in the evenings. Just you and me.” I cracked those windows at his request this morning to let in the mellow spring air. Now, a ribbon of black smoke seeps from those raised sashes, and I’m sure I spot a flame flicker behind the glass. A line of poetry surfaces: “His eyes darkened by too great a light.” It’s from Ovid, I think. A god riding a chariot too close to the sun, blinded by its rays. Perhaps that’s it—Roger and I have flown too close and got burned, *are* burning.

Philippa is standing beside me, her hand gently touching the back of my arm, an awkward but tender attempt to console me. Judy, not the consoling type, stands a few feet from me, her arms crossed, her chin up, her dark eyes like twin camera lenses, recording it all.

Maybe Judy or Philippa mentioned Ovid? They tend to go on about cultural tidbits: “Gloria Grahame is just glorious in *The Big Heat*.” Or “Did you see *South Pacific* at the National? Those songs stuck to me like glue.” Or “Hand over Kinsey’s new book! I can’t wait to read what he has to say about women.” Or maybe the poet’s words echo from my grade school days, something I was made to memorize but forgot, something buried deep, dislodged as I watch my life turn to ash.

I should be screaming; I should be crying.

Maybe it’s shock. How did this happen? Was it my fault? Did I forget to turn off the stove? Did Roger fail to unplug the toaster? He can be forgetful. What about the bathroom heater? The towels dangle too close to it. I’ve noted it before. Maybe it wasn’t our fault, but carelessness from another of the building’s residents—a janitor ashing his cigarette in an oily bucket or a housewife neglecting her curling iron? Or maybe it’s a defect in the fuse box, old mouse-eaten wiring, or a spark from colliding elevator cables?

It’s a chilly evening, but I’m sweating, drenched.

Roger isn’t inside, of course. Sure, he said he’d be home this afternoon, but he would’ve stopped the fire if he were inside. He would’ve used his strong runner’s legs, dashed into the hall,

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yanked the extinguisher from the wall, and choked the flames with sodium bicarbonate. His naval training during the war, and his ability to stay cool under pressure, would've served him well. No. He's not there. There's no way. Maybe he's out securing work. We need him to find a new job, a damn good job. Or maybe he ran to the store for dinner fixings.

Just in case, as a cosmic barter, I lean into the horror. "Take my things," I say to God, to the universe, "but just don't take Roger!" In my mind, I fly up nine stories and turn time back an hour. I'm standing in the middle of the room we created by knocking down the non-load-bearing wall between the dining and main living areas. It's spacious, contemporary, and furnished with low-slung Herman Miller pieces in rosewood, upholstered in fabrics with bold geometric patterns. Against the back wall stands my gift to Roger last Christmas—a record player cabinet filled with Sinatra, Miller, Cole, Gillespie, Davis, and Peggy Lee—and beside it, a brass bar cart stocked with gin, martini glasses with delicate stems, and a big glass shaker that weighs a goddamn ton. The wine-red oriental rug, a bequest from his grandmother's estate, stretches over the wood floor, its weave flecked with golds, pinks, and an unusual tangerine. An ornate Victorian settee, a family heirloom I tolerate, rests under the window, a place to sip coffee, stare out, and daydream.

We papered the far wall in a bold poppy print, modern and a tad garish—absolutely a statement. It's there, amid the poppies, that I imagine the first flame emerging, as if the bright red-orange petals, inspired by their color, transmute into fire. The thick paper bubbles and hisses and begins to peel off; strips float to the floor, igniting the thin layer of linseed oil polish and sending a ripple of bluish fire across the wood. The glass on the starburst clock, now circled with flame, cracks and pops out. The hands stop. 7:24.

In a blast of heat, the upright piano makes a strange sound, like ghostly fingers swiping its strings. The photos Roger displayed on its top waver and topple over. They are black-and-whites of his dead grandparents, his mild mother and hard-visaged father, his grim aunt and uncle, his myopic

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sister, Rose Ellen, him looking handsome in his lieutenant's uniform, and the two of us on a hike in Shenandoah National Park, pressing close, laughing, soon to be tugging at each other's clothes behind a boulder, giggling like damn idiots, aroused, and happy, so happy. When the photo of us crashes to the floor, my heart lurches. Having gathered immense and uncontrollable energy, my imaginary blaze suddenly roars at me, bringing me back.

Roger and I are good at imagining the worst—an occupational hazard.

I remember a scene in our third Ray Kane novel, *Seeing Red*: "McKey paused at the door, heat radiating out, inky smoke blooming from its keyhole, its doorknob a branding iron. What was inside was more than some maniac arson's delight, but a demonic force, sentient and vicious, poised to consume."

Had Roger written the passage, or had I? I couldn't remember.

Then I smell it. The actual fire. It's a greasy odor, like an old furnace, and then something sulfurous and nauseating: the scent of death, burning hair. How could I smell it so far away? Am I inventing it? Oh, God. The wall of numbness cracks, and pain floods in. It's a sharp physical pang that knocks the breath out of me. My knees wobble, and I lean into Philippa, who, at a svelte twenty-two, is fifty pounds lighter than me. She catches me, her grip assured as if she were bracing for this, my collapse, and steadies me. Judy steps close, gazing at me, her eyes concerned and quiet, even a little cold. As the tremor dissipates, tears well up, and I sob.

Somehow, I know that Roger is dead.