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The flames shot up into the black night sky. Emergency vehicles raced en route, sirens blared. The first blue and white arrived on the scene and the young officer driving yanked the Halon bottle from the rack. He sprayed down the burning car as best as he could.

The pump truck with the obnoxious wailer and flashing light bars came to an abrupt stop behind his patrol car. The firefighters in yellow protective gear sprang out of their vehicle. They finished dousing the flames then checked the area for smoldering that could re-ignite. One firefighter got close to the car and observed the crazing and charring. Another pulled the rookie cop back from the car. The officer listened while he was schooled from behind a helmet with a Plexiglas face guard. The supervising lieutenant got out of his fire department SUV. He made the call for an arson investigator.

After the flames were smothered and his scolding was over, the uniformed cop proceeded to look inside the CTS and saw the smoldering body. He scoured the immediate area for a suspect, or suspects, witnesses, the person that called in the fire. He didn't see any weapon to secure. It was his crime scene for now. From all of his training, he knew it was up to him to secure the area from evidentiary contamination. Officer Rodriguez knew he was the first one in the chain of custody, and the forty-eight-hour clock had started.

Besides other patrol units, the next to reach the scene was the watch commander. He set up for a long night. He made the call to his best investigators who were already working another crime scene on Indian School Road. The lead detective there shouted out to the forensics techs near the Crime Scene Response Team van. She needed some of them to head over to the Grand Avenue scene.

Detective Wynter Williams and her partner Vincent Farina arrived in their unmarked vehicle with a single blue light flashing. They spoke to the watch commander. He handed Wynter a case number and introduced both detectives to Rodriguez. They collected all of the information he had. Later, they would read and verify the officer's statement. Wynter looked at the victim's name, traced from the rental car's license plate—Donald O'Malley.

Thirty years old, single and attractive in a wholesome way, Wynter had been on the force since she was old enough to swear an oath. She was a cop-brat. Generations of cops in her family went all the way back to Tombstone.

She approached the crime scene from a different angle than the other investigators. Bending, poking, smelling and surveying, she catalogued the notes in her head, some on her digital recorder. She asked herself what, and what wasn't, there.

Her father, John Williams, was her guide and mentor. He had been a homicide detective ten years before she had been born. He was retired now, but he followed her to every crime scene. He couldn't let go of the life, she knew, so he became her personal consultant. Otherwise, she thought, he would end up in some humiliating rent-a-cop job, or worse, pressing his thirty-eight to his temple like some retired cops do. She wasn't ready to bury him. She didn't remember burying her mom. John Williams watched from outside the yellow crime scene tape.

She was exceptional at her job. She was all business, meticulous, and methodical as she went about her investigation of the crime scene. Her male counterparts were jaded and saw everything through a repetitive blur. She still had the heart for the job, the curiosity. She wasn't just there until her retirement papers let her walk away.

She cared a great deal, about the victims, the law, and justice. She kept her feelings to herself, which led her co-workers to see her as aloof, a cold Wynter. The first impression she made came with a firm, wrestling-strong handshake, and direct eye contact. When her peers criticized, corrected, or gave opinions, they thought she took things too personally. It wasn't that Wynter was too sensitive, not as a homicide detective, or because she was a woman, or younger. She had investigated as many violent crime scenes as the others. She just became irritated, frustrated, if the answers she sought didn't come fast enough.

At the scene, she was deliberate, adding one piece of the puzzle at a time. It was what made her good. When she thought it was necessary, she was able to go outside the box, disregard the lines, but it was rare. She also brought more energy to the table unlike many of the short-timers, like her partner Vince, who found it easier to do less after so many years on the job.

The males in the herd felt uneasy knowing that Wynter was *new school*. They were comfortable sitting at *old school* desks. The men were stuck in the 1950s mentality that said women weren't to leave the kitchen, weren't supposed to be independent thinkers. They still thought birth control meant a woman squeezed an aspirin between her legs. Women certainly didn't belong at a crime scene doing man's work.

The men saw the changes in attitudes and traditions in the society as the end of the American Empire. They believed there was a lack of religious values. If only the liberals understood the damage, they were doing and how tyrannical the government had become. They all stayed away from discussions of religion and politics that were louder than a whisper.

Wynter kept working, trying to stay oblivious to the rusty thoughts clanking inside their cranky old heads. She had heard them all complain, at some point in her career, near her desk in the precinct. Thank God, she thought, her dad didn't harbor such chauvinistic feelings. Maybe he had voiced such sentiments early in his career, in the department, but he had discarded them long ago. He had always encouraged her. He gave her the advantage of the wisdom of his years, information she needed to know, to become one of the best homicide investigators in the Valley. Knowledge was power. He made sure she was powerful.

It was just the two of them now. Her mother had passed when she was five. Without the help of the photos on the wall along the stairs to her room at the house, and the nights she listened while her father told the same stories until he would tear up, she could barely remember much about her mom.

At the crime scene, she told the precinct's photographer to include a shot with the Panoscan, which captured a three-hundred-sixty-degree photo that put everything where it was for easier recall later. The Panoscan was new technology and a great asset. The human mind could do trillions of things well, but remembering wasn't always one of them. Memory was often selective, or shaded with desire and not with logic. Time caused it to fade, helpful when experiences were traumatic.

She directed the forensics techs to not leave any stones unturned. That meant they

were in for a long night because Phoenix was overrun with rocks. She took a long look at the charred, rigid remains in the front seat of the torched Cadillac. The ME's people stood by waiting for permission to haul it away.

Wynter's head rose. She wanted to know if the RAMAN Spectroscopic Imaging could get any prints off the burned paint, or leather seats. The tech closest to her only gave it a 60/40 probability. She grimaced while looking back inside the interior of the car. She inhaled deeply trying to smell odorous clues other than the obvious.

Hey mister, how'd you end up here?

There were no signs of a struggle. Outside of the charred, curled remains, there were no visible signs of any injuries, and there were no valuables either.

It was a big step over the line just for a robbery. Personally, if I had gone through all the trouble...I'd have kept the car.

Fire. Everyone believed it eliminated all leads, but it usually gave as many as it destroyed.

Wynter told the techs how to do their jobs all over again. She wanted a DNA sample done on the victim to confirm identity. She wanted prints off the vehicle. She told them how to bag and catalogue the evidence. Their forensics facility was an accredited lab and adamant about contamination. The techs were meticulous about following Standard Operating Procedures.

"Maybe the *vic* couldn't take the old lady any more," Vince said.

Vince was a coarse, unhappy man. He walked hunched over with weary hound dog eyes beneath quarter-moon eyebrows. The other cops ragged him about his prominent Kirk Douglas cleft chin. He was three years from retirement but the job and his bad habits made him look a hundred years old. Wynter kept the defibrillators in view.

"If that was true, wouldn't *she* be the victim inside the car?"

"Good point," he said.

Then he did his trademark move of holding up his fist, and extending his index finger at her. John Williams, from a distance, made a note to speak to Vince about it.

They used Vince's crime kit because they had used hers at the last scene. Both put on latex gloves, grabbed more plastic bags, and used Maglites to aid where the streetlights didn't shine. Wynter extended her hand behind her.

"Hand me the—"

"Hey listen, Watson, it's a.m. thirty and one-hundred and eight degrees out here. Let's wrap this up quick and get back into the AC. The guy got lost, drove into the wrong neighborhood, and got whacked like the other morons who *accidentally* wandered into druggie land. And there isn't a gang member—not a Cripp, a Blood, or a Latin King, who will come forward and claim this guy."

"I don't recall the part in the criminal code that said you only do your job if you can stand the heat. What section is that in again?"

"It's in the Arizona Criminal Statute, Subtitle F, Section U, Subparagraph C, Subpart K, pages oo-ff: 'After twenty years, or more on the job, an investigator's partner may, upon so choosing, become more and more of a pain-in-the-partner's-behind.'"

Wynter didn't look at him.

"I've got it, Sherlock, why not head back to the refrigerator. In fact, you can be present for the autopsy. It's cold in the morgue."

"Is it any wonder you don't have a boyfriend?" Vince said.

“Is it any wonder you’ve had three ex-wives?”

The truth be told, they worked well together. The banter wasn’t anger. Besides, her dad watched from the sidelines. His old partner was hers now, and he knew Vince would protect her at all costs. Vince wanted to show off *his* knowledge base. John had told him back in the day the same thing he told Wynter—knowledge was power. For Vince, it was a power that usually backfired.

“I bet you didn’t know that no autopsies were performed before the Renaissance. *They* thought it was an *affront* to our *humanity*. The Catholic Church first allowed one in 1533 so that conjoined twins could be examined to see if they had one soul. In Padua, 1593, they started allowing public autopsies after public hangings. Today, these MRI machine and brain scanners give us virtual autopsies with exact details. The hospitals hate them because they sell well in lawsuits.”

She didn’t acknowledge him. He waved his arms in protest. Postmortem changes were increasing and the medical examiner’s personnel were impatient. The arson investigator poked around the car. He knew that unlike suspects and witnesses, evidence told the truth for the most part. The trick was to get it to say what you wanted. He looked at the blown-out windows on the surrounding buildings in the deserted neighborhood. He studied the burn patterns. He had no doubt it was arson.

The ME’s people were relieved when the investigators concurred they could go to work. After Donald was bagged and tagged, Wynter took a closer look inside the CTS two-door coupe. The driver’s seat had a large indentation from the body. With her gloved left hand, she pushed the seat lever and it creaked forward. Lying across the back seat was a charred, souvenir Diamondback’s baseball bat.

Before she backed away, she popped the trunk latch. She rounded the rear bumper and leaned into the trunk. There appeared to be discolorations resembling blood splatters. See pointed them out to the techs. Besides the notes she made on her digital recorder, she also made a sketch.

“How’s the wife doing? Did she give us anything?” Wynter said.

Wynter hated talking to the family. She wasn’t good at holding hands and comforting.

“She’s still in shock,” Vince said.

“The hotel doctor sedated her so it will be a while before she’ll be coherent. She can do the identification of her husband later in the morning. She has to arrange to take the body back to Detroit, make funeral arrangements and family notifications. She’s got a long way to go, a lot of pain ahead.”

Wynter was surprised at how sympathetic Vince was.

“She did say that they had been high school sweethearts. They have been inseparable all those years. She was adamant that they never did drugs, wouldn’t even know what drugs looked like if they saw them.”

He dragged his hand across the burnt paint.

What a waste of a great car.

“We saved up for our entire lives for this vacation, and in a day, in a heartbeat, this happened. He just got shit-canned from his job after thirty-some years I think she told the guys. Management—heartless fucks!”

“Vacation, huh?”

Wynter wondered what it must be like being in love, how two people could stay

together for so long. All she knew was that she was married to the job, sort of like a nun to the church.

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Vince walked past the freezer lockers. He enjoyed the icy temperature in the morgue after working outside in the triple-digits. He was never fazed by the dead bodies beneath white sheets, with attached toe tags that rested on gurneys. He stood alongside the Chief Medical Examiner while she completed the autopsy of Donald O'Malley. The morgue still did not use virtual autopsy technology.

Dr. Sonya Lee was the feisty ruler of The Land of Morgue, and a consummate professional. She graduated with honors from the University of Arizona with a degree in Cellular and Molecular Biology, then with honors from Midwestern University's Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine. She continued her certification in legal investigation of death and forensic pathology. Her heritage insisted that she be exceptional in all things. Her reputation preceded her to expert witness testimonies across the nation. Her Asian features; the almond eyes, the high cheekbones, the perfect smile and black, silky hair were included in a petite package. She wore green surgical scrubs, a face protector and mask, and latex gloves.

Vince wore his rumpled suit and held a white mask over his mouth.

Dr. Lee dictated her findings into the overhead microphone. She had concluded that Donald had suffered traumatic shock, a massive hemorrhage, and multiple organ failures. The penetrating chest wound had a clear bullet track. There was trauma to the heart and evidence of pneumothorax.

There was soot in the windpipe and one lung so the victim was still alive when the fire started. She had sent out blood samples and requested a toxicology test be completed. She thought there might be traces of Butonadiol. Otherwise, Dr. Lee was ready to sign the death certificate and toss it inside the case file with the recovered personal items, photographs, and legal paperwork.

"May I?" Vince said.

"Don't make a mess like the last time you were here, detective."

He returned a half-hearted smile.

"Accidentally knock over one bottle of hydrogen peroxide and you're going to punish me for life?"

"But the domino effect cost my assistants a whole afternoon to clean up after you. We do not have time for that. I have too many of these cases to do and we are always short-handed," Dr. Lee said.

"Job security. I appreciate you putting this one ahead of the others. I know you did it for Wynter, but thanks just the same."

"Vince, I did it for you too. I know you'd rather be in here than outside."

Vince wasn't used to anyone being pleasant to him so he returned the best appreciative smile he could. He took a quick glance at his cellphone before he speed-dialed Wynter. He still wore a wristwatch, because it still had not run out of time. The giant wall clock with the sweep second hand on the morgue's wall clock also confirmed it was just past seven a.m.

He had a fascinating discovery to tell her. With his free hand, he picked up the tweezers and poked at something in a petri dish. He pinched the object and brought it up for his eyes to inspect more closely under the strong fluorescent lights overhead.

Wynter answered the call and heard a voice in the background.

“Don’t lose that!” Dr. Lee said.

Vince smiled at her and put the deformed bullet back into the petri dish.

“What’s up, Vince? What did you do to make Dr. Lee mad this time?” Wynter said.

“We have us a solid clue, one nine-millimeter hollow point. Mr. Vacation was shot in the chest *then* burned to a crisp. He died twice. Dr. Lee here found stippling around the wound. It was hard to see at the scene because the fire curled him so bad you couldn’t see the wound until they broke him apart.”

“Good and bad for him,” Wynter said.

“And, our favorite ME has no preliminary indication of drug use. Toxicology will have the final word on that, of course.”

Wynter said what she was thinking.

“So, Mr. Dead Man, what else can you tell us?”

“You don’t have to make this personal, Wyn, it happens when you get to my age...I take the pill when the old lady is horny.”

Her partner knew he would get a rise out of her.

“Not your dick—the other dead man.”

She paused, realizing he did it on purpose. A small smile pulled across her face. Her normal, all-business demeanor took a break. Her baby face had no lifelines yet, no creases from the hardening of the job.

“Vincent.”

She took a second, swung her head to check and see if anyone else saw her smile.

“I’m sorry,” Wynter said.

“Tell your old man my dick is fully-functional, promise.”

“Sure, he’ll be glad to hear it.”

She looked at the ground around her.

“I’ll catch up with you back at CID.”

“See ya,” Vince said.

She put her phone back into the holder. Her eyes stayed on the ground and the area around her.

Umm.

She realized there might be shoe prints they could mold, the killer’s shoe prints in the dirt. Some of the indentations had partial, but distinct patterns, possibly tennis shoes. She knew there were new developments in the science of forensics that could match up shoe prints just like fingerprints, because of all the unique patterns on the bottoms of shoes. Each shoe also apparently was just as unique as fingerprints, because the wear on them was unique to the individual wearer. She heard a familiar voice behind her and she looked up.

“Over there, that’s the only place where no one has trampled.”

Her dad stooped down and pointed.

Dressed in a blue dress shirt and charcoal pinstriped pants, not a uniform, or jeans, her Glock holstered with her gold shield next to it on her belt, Wynter stooped down next to him. Her coppery red hair fluttered in the breeze. She followed his finger and with the right angle of sunlight and shadow, she saw some undisturbed impressions.

“Think they’re too far away from the scene?”

“Not for someone interested in leaving in that direction,” John said.

He stood up and looked out through some warehouse buildings to the left and right. She rose. He stood next to her, but didn't say another word wanting her to make the conclusions on her own. Wynter shouted.

"Hey!"

The other officers' heads came up to see who was calling.

"I need some impressions here."

"Verbal, or teeth?" one shouted back.

Even at a crime scene, humor ran rampant. It helped lower the stench level.

Her dad turned and walked back to behind the crime scene yellow tape stopping only to reach into his pants pocket to take out a dog biscuit. It was a habit. He carried them while on the job because every bad guy, and most civilians had a junkyard dog. He held one out through the fence for the Doberman who had survived the blast.

The dog sniffed the gift and took it. The dog knew he was lucky. His partner was on his side and rotting from the heat.

Wynter watched some crime scene techs arrive with some casting materials. They started in on the shoe prints. They found a long line of them leading from the scene.

She wanted to tell her dad thanks but, as always, she would wait until she got home. She respected him. She was grateful she had been born to such a man. If only the rest were like him, just a tenth. She wanted to be like him in every way and she was determined she would be. She knew it would take years to do what he did by second nature. She could not have had a better mentor. She was so proud of him. She loved him.

He knew she did.