

Joe Klingler

BURN UP

The Secrets of Mylin - Book II

**A Qigiq and Dreeson
Thriller**

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For Lee T. Andrews

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BURN UP

“The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains
is the Zen you bring up there.”
—Robert M. Persig

CHAPTER 1

THE TOUCH OF A HEATED SWORD GLIDED through my left lung. I gritted my teeth. The best Chinese doctor in California had treated the bullet wound. But an unexpected blow to my arm had torn flesh loose deep inside.

Someone would pay!

The fat steering wheel of my father's piglike SUV jumped in the clammy palm of my right hand. I needed to get away. Away from the strangest gathering of fools I had ever seen: people painted rainbow colors, naked women carousing in darkness, giant tubes flopping from a motorhome like a silly hairdo.

Americans sickened me. What, indeed, was *Burning Man*?!

The vehicle pounded against rutted sand as my consciousness waned.

I spoke aloud: "I am named Shen, the third energy treasure, the second son. Heir to the empire!" I tested myself. "What day is it? Friday. No, no. Wednesday. Close to midnight." Father's prophecy returned like a dream.

American self-indulgence will make us rich.

My lips twitched toward a smile. I pointed the hood at the bizarre humans gathered to watch my brother Jing race away on a motorbike. They shouted obscenities. Pounded the fenders. Hating my vehicle. Hating me. I ignored them. They had no idea my frantic father had run off in pursuit of a mere woman.

What had those detectives seen? *What could they prove?* It was my good fortune detective Kandy—what a ridiculous, suggestive name for a woman—had chased the motorcycle. And her partner with the unpronounceable name had followed Father.

A gap appeared in the crowd. I pressed the accelerator. Dust rose behind me on the makeshift road leading out of Black Rock City.

To manifest the future I desired, I visualized it. Father would apprehend the disobedient daughter. Jing was an expert rider; he would escape. We would rendezvous at the safe house. But I was injured. Traveling on foot was impossible. Yet the risk of being stopped rose with each hour that I drove this vehicle—many people had seen it, including the detectives.

Two-lanes of sun-faded, cracked blacktop arrived beneath my tires. I increased my speed to ninety kilometers per hour. The cell phone in my weakening left hand showed no messages, and no signal.

Would Father contact me directly?

I possessed the dead mark's money in a nylon bag stuffed onto the floor behind the driver's seat. Father knew. Jing might guess. If necessary, I could hide for a hundred moon phases on half-a-million American dollars. *Moon phases?* Occupational hazard of managing whores.

The twin beams of white xenon racing across the ground in front of me tilted. Then blurred. I gripped the wheel with both hands and steered for the center of the road.

I must rest.

My thoughts arrived as mirages of calligraphy painted above the centerline of the road ahead.

*hide...the police will look for this black monstrosity
think...of a way to recover strength before you're found
become...a warrior who disappears into darkness.*

A white silhouette on a green background flashed past. I silently thanked the Ancestors for showing me the way. The police will expect this: Fugitive apprehended while attempting to flee the country.

I smiled and accelerated, unable to contain my enthusiasm for this new plan.

I exited at Plum Drive, circled toward the Reno airport, and turned left into outdoor parking. It was half full. I cruised the rows and pulled in beside another dark SUV. With conscious effort I slowed my breathing and fought the internal fires.

I must make no mistakes.

The vehicle had no license plates; father preferred paperwork on the windshield. I tore it off and stuffed it into the pocket of my sport coat.

The glove box.

I closed my hand on the backup detonator. Two powerful bricks hid beneath the spare tire. Risk being caught with illegal material, or leave it to be found by the police?

I slid from the smooth leather, leaned a shoulder against the vehicle, took three breaths, then opened the back door and dragged the money to the ground. Barely ten pounds, yet it held such power over humans.

I pulled the bag toward the rear.

The bricks: crisis or opportunity?

I had no gun; it might be required. But it doubled my load. I opened the rear doors, struggled with the spare tire, yanked one brick out and balanced it on the bumper to the glow of the courtesy light. As I reached for the second, a small white SUV turned the corner at the end of the row, heading in my direction. I worked quickly. The bricks stood on the bumper like a pair of blue children's blocks as I replaced the floor.

It stopped directly behind me.

I turned slowly so pain wouldn't show in my face. Airport security. I tugged my sport coat closed to cover the blood seeping through my shirt and positioned my body in front of the blocks.

The passenger window rolled down. From behind the wheel, a tall African-American man in a dark blue uniform pointed a flashlight at me, then into the rear of my truck, his eyes more bored than alert.

He said, "Flying out late."

It wasn't a question exactly. I forced a smile. "Cheaper that way. Almost forgot my jacket." I lifted a lapel.

"Lock up. The airport isn't responsible for theft."

"Yes, certainly. Thank you."

The passenger window glided upward as he pulled away.

I shifted to hide the blocks from his mirrors and my side cramped. I doubled over and begged the dragon gods to allow me to remain conscious. After my vision stabilized, I moved the blocks to the backpack and hefted it over my right shoulder.

I locked the SUV and forced myself to stroll through the lot. LEDs on stop signs flashed as I crossed multiple lanes of traffic. I debated going into the terminal to buy a hat and cheap sunglasses so a cab driver wouldn't remember my face. A city bus passed close behind me, its brakes hissing as it rolled to a stop near baggage claim.

Better.

I shuffled toward it, struggling not to limp. When I arrived, half a dozen people were standing in line to board. Without enthusiasm, the driver tossed luggage into a deep compartment between the front and rear wheels. I drifted to the back of the line, inched forward, stepped up steep rubber stairs lifting only my right foot, and made my way to a seat near the rear door.

The driver slammed a door shut over the luggage and went inside the terminal.

I closed my eyes as tension joined my pain. If he brought security, I was trapped and had no strength to run.

I stared through the window at sliding glass doors, wondering if I could bluff my way out by brandishing explosives. Claim to be a suicide bomber.

Time passed in slow motion.

The driver emerged carrying a paper cup. He took forever to settle himself behind the wheel. The doors clacked closed.

The airport exit was composed of concrete and green grass

that seemed out of place in a desert. Once on the street, I watched a mile-long strip mall pass by my window: a video rental store still sitting empty, white tile gas station, fast food joint, and a shabby casino with windows covered by faded posters of sad people winning money from silly machines.

All that America loved on one road— instant gratification.

In a few more minutes the bus stopped downtown midst high-rise gambling establishments. I snuck off the bus near three tall men who towered above me.

Where to hide? I began walking, trying to choose a casino, but the pavement softened like rubber. I tilted against a cool gray wall. My eyes closed, sleep would feel...

I slapped my face with a flat palm: once, twice.

I hustled to the nearest door; rode an escalator up one floor. My left leg shook as it carried me past an arcade with a jumble of bells and screaming children to a registration desk.

A young Caucasian girl in a gray dress that matched her eyeshadow said, "Reservation?"

"Sorry, no. My wife just told me she forgot to call ahead. Would you have something available? Most anything will do."

She typed. "I have a room until Saturday, but nothing for the long Labor Day weekend. Wait, the television is broken in that room. It's scheduled to be replaced tomorrow."

The clock on the wall behind her displayed WED and not yet midnight—three nights to rest. I gave thanks to the power of dragons.

"Departing Saturday will be fine. I can do without a TV."

Her fingers flew across the keyboard.

I removed an envelope from my jacket, shuffled through my emergency documents, found an ID and credit card for Jonathan Lee, and placed them in her outstretched hand.

The girl, whose name tag read CINDY—Fremont CA, pushed a folder with a room key across the counter, placed a brochure on top of it, then returned to her computer.

“Room 1614. The elevators are to your left. Would you like help with luggage?”

“No, thank you.”

She handed the forged Idaho driver’s license to me and looked to the next person in line. My credit card stood in a slot at the front of her keyboard. I put the paperwork in my back pocket, but didn’t leave, hoping she would notice.

I pointed. Her bright blue eyes followed.

“Oh, sorry, uh, Mr. Lee.” She studied my face as she handed me the MasterCard. “Are you sure you don’t want help? You look kind of tired.”

I feigned a weary smile, hoping this dimwitted bimbo wouldn’t remember me.

“Just jet lag.”

I stumbled where the floor changed from hard tile to soft carpet and entered a hallway with four elevators. My breathing was slow and shallow. The corner of my eye caught movement. I stepped to a polished wood bar, ordered a Sapporo from a short woman with water-ballon breasts, and sat on a backless stool. The television was silent, but jerky closed-captioning displayed:

“...spectator crossed barrier at Burning Man. Elderly male struck during motorcycle stunt. Unresponsive to EMT personnel at scene. Rider injured. This is not the first...”

The woman brought the beer. The TV played a dark jittery video showing a dust-covered bike flying into the air, illuminated by rings of fire. The vertical twin engine of a Triumph motorcycle was obvious.

Who was riding it?

I leaned forward. As if reading my mind the station replayed the segment in blurry slow motion. I watched every second, then turned to the mirror behind the bar. My eyes were ringed in darkness.

Incredible!

A motorcycle struck Father. A bike from the Ton Up: my very

own club. Jing trying a stupid stunt. Father called him Prime—the number one brother.

Never letting me forget.

She caused this. Running away. Mylin will pay.

I must regain strength. I stood slowly, took one last sip of beer, and headed toward the elevators. My hotel room was long and deep, with a step down into a sitting area where a wall of glass overlooked the city. An arch over the road in the distance proclaimed *The Biggest Little City in the World*. A dark leather headboard complemented the muted beige walls.

A fine place to hide.

My vision blurred again. Alcohol without food was unwise. I removed my jacket and shirt and touched my side. Such carelessness—approaching a mark, unaware he was armed. The bandage was moist. Room service? A hotel employee would see me. I went to the mini-fridge: orange juice, nuts, Twix bar. I closed the curtains against the electric skyline of Reno and sat on the couch to eat.

And think.

The bar video replayed in my mind. Were these events at Burning Man a preposterous perfect storm of synchronicity? They seemed far too difficult to plan.

And yet...

Jing was an expert rider, second only to myself. How had he not seen a man on the sand and maneuvered to miss him? He had been standing upright—bold, motionless—when the machine crashed into our father.

The sugar from the juice reached my brain, adding clarity to a world awash in confusion. I ran fingertips along my side, wondering if I would die before being given my rightful chance to preside over the family business. Not a large business, but a supremely important one. In the past, Father always decided the best course of action. With him gone, and Jing injured...

My being filled with frustration. Jing will recover and take

over; yet he doesn't believe in our mission or possess my superior leadership skills. If I am lucky, the police will arrest him. What would Uncle Gan then wish for me to do to protect what we have built in America? I took a deep breath without thinking and grimaced at the pain. Dr. Fan had admonished me to rest before my lung collapsed.

This day had not allowed such luxury.

I chewed on chocolaty goo Americans consider food, then tossed the wrapper toward a corner wastebasket—and missed. As I went to retrieve it, my gaze landed on a bright red platform shoe with the spiked heel piercing a juicy olive. The picture filled the cover of Reno Magazine above the words: *The Taste Issue*.

I absently flipped pages hoping for more sensual pictures while contemplating ways to outmaneuver my elder brother. The face of an aged American Indian stopped my hand. How much alike we were, used and tossed aside by the white-man's culture. I swiftly read beneath the title *Ghost Dance*. The old man, whose name was the unlikely Jack Wilson, invented a dance after having a vision of peace between all Indians and the white invaders.

I laughed aloud. *Peace* was the word oppressors used to confound their enemies.

His dance spread from the Paiute to other tribes and became such a powerful unifying force that the United States government violently suppressed it, leading to tragedy at a place called Wounded Knee.

Peace wasn't worth the smoke rising from Jack's pipe.

A black and white picture showed a pale headstone surrounded by a low fence in need of repair. Of course his Indian name hadn't been Jack Wilson.

"Mr. Wovoka, you attacked with your dance, what should I do?"

I blinked awake as an unfamiliar voice in my head spoke clearly.

"Become a ghost."

CHAPTER 2

QIGIQ SAT ON A CANVAS folding stool in a dimly lit first-aid hut at his first Burning Man. Going on midnight. Labor Day, marking the end of summer fun and the beginning of his third month on leave from Fairbanks homicide, was a few days away. The Asian man lying beside him hovered on the edge of consciousness. A volunteer EMT withdrew a needle from the man's right arm. A blue foam splint immobilized his left side. His name was Jing, but everyone called him Prime. He had been injured attempting a motorcycle jump that ended badly an hour before. His sister Mylin, wearing a dress fashioned from strips of shiny black tape that only stuck to itself, sat holding his hand. She said to Qigiq: "Hello, Kandy."

"I must go help the other girls."

Qigiq rubbed body paint from his forearm; no one had anticipated a green detective. "Do you need a ride?"

She shook her head. "We have a truck."

He'd prefer she didn't disappear; her father had been dead for only a few hours. But she had been hiding inside a motorhome the entire evening and hadn't been anywhere near the scene of the accident.

"You've been under a lot of stress. How about I take you to a hospital for observation?"

She pushed her hair back as she lifted her face, dark eyes wide. "No hospital. No police. Bad for everyone."

"We could put you in protective custody."

She flung her head back and forth making the straight black and purple hair leap outward. A dark circle on her left temple

flashed, but he couldn't discern what it was.

She whispered harshly, "No. Police."

He sighed.

She half-smiled. "I promise to call when we arrive in San Francisco."

"You still have my number?"

Her smile remained as she leaned forward and gave him a slight kiss on his cheek.

He exited the hut into the nighttime cold. A billion stars shone down on the gray bleakness of the Great Basin Desert. His partner Kandy Dreeson was speaking to two uniformed officers with Reno Nev. on their shoulder patches. He joined them.

She said, "Jing Wu, aka Prime, last name is likely an alias. Possession and trafficking."

They nodded.

"You'll drive him down yourself?" she asked.

They glanced at each other and back to Kandy. The taller one shrugged.

"Thanks. Please be vigilant. He's tricky and has nasty friends."

They shook hands all around. Kandy led Qiqiq toward a motorcycle covered with translucent plastic tubes that no longer glowed.

She said, "Green's not your color."

He pulled a tube off the bike, leaving a round blotch of clear adhesive the size of a soda can. "I'll shower before morning."

"Wanna stay here, or head back to the city?"

"Not up for a long cold night ride, but I'd sure like to deliver that nine millimeter round to Ferdinand personally." He gently twisted off three more tubes.

"What then?"

He straddled the bike; scratched his ear. "Senior Wu is dead. Prime's flat on his back. I want to know where that rider shot at Devil's Slide is now."

Kandy pulled her smartphone from the front pocket of tight jeans raggedly cut off just below the pockets. “Remember the flash that saved us back at camp? This picture arrived via Ferd’s satellite connection. Note the subject’s chest.”

Qiqiq studied a close-up of the man who had tried to shoot him from the passenger seat of a Cadillac SUV. “Blood-stains under that jacket. We’ll need the bullet to prove it.”

She stuffed the phone into her shorts, hopped to nudge it all the way down. “He arrived with Wu. We find him, we find answers.”

He held the starter button until the bike’s soft burble filled the night. Hundreds of costumed people wandered and danced across miles of playa, totally ignoring the green guy on a motorcycle.

“How?”

“We could put out an amber alert for that SUV, but he’ll ditch it fast. That leaves us watching Prime, his sister, his father’s funeral, and dozens of girls in the GO orchestra.”

“I love the way you simplify things. All we have to do is watch forty people day and night.”

“And the grandmother, Mrs. Chong.”

Qiqiq frowned. “You think he’ll go after her?”

Kandy scraped sand into a pile with the inside of her boot. “I doubt she knows much. I think she was bait.” She paused and tapped the top of the pile flat. “How many of the musicians do you think are in on the blackmail scam?”

He revved the bike to hear its exhaust note. “We can only prove one, and Pé was killed when the boat exploded.” He hesitated. “The first *accident*. Maybe it’s limited to her and Mylin: the two sisters. But we’ve got nothing on Mylin. And that guy she left the party with is a business tycoon. He won’t be anxious to offer assistance.”

“And risk a social media storm about his personal life? No way. Which leaves us...” She crushed the pile of sand with her heel.

“Freezing in Black Rock City with no crime we can demonstrate, no evidence, and three clear suspects.”

She laughed. “Sort of backwards, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER 3

I AWOKE SHIVERING. Droplets so large I could feel their weight covered my forehead. Dampness coated my back from neck to waist. My breathing was rapid: the pant of a hunted dog. Light penetrating the crack between floor-to-ceiling curtains cast a curved golden stripe across my body.

I had heard a knock.

I waited, hoping it had been a dream.

Silence.

A jet rumbled overhead; the airport had begun operating for the day.

If the cops successfully tracked Jonathan Lee, I had few defenses. The two bricks were powerful but crude weapons. Using them to escape would be risky. I must find a way to safely visit Mong Xing, the wise one, for help. Soon.

The old Indian spoke to me again: *Be a ghost.*

How Wovoka, my new friend? How?

No second knock came. My breathing slowed.

I pressed my side; the pain was less than yesterday. My stomach growled for food—a good omen.

Unexpectedly, I remembered white glaring in my eyes before the pistol was wrenched from my grip. A flash camera would do that. Would they search Reno? Would the registration clerk remember me? Would she give them a name? And what about that large-breasted bartender.

The grainy news report of Jing's jump replayed in my mind. I consciously slowed my breathing further to bring myself into harmony with the quiet of the room.

Father, what would you have me do?

His answer was instantaneous.

“Do not get caught. Let no one speak of the family business, the orchestra, or the special fans. I have achieved profound goals. But there is much more work to be done.”

I rose slowly, ordered breakfast from a menu propped against the pillow beside me, and instructed the empty-headed girl who took my call to leave it in the hallway. I even explained to her that I wasn't feeling well, so hotel staff should stay out of my room to avoid infection.

Then I turned my attention to problem number one: physical assets.

The art studio and its contents had been legally purchased. So long as I paid the taxes, the authorities shouldn't be able to touch it. The Cadillac stashed at the airport was leased, as was the BMW sedan. The police might trace them back to the leasing company...and names that led nowhere. The house in Marin was rented through the end of September. I must verify its status, this was no time to attract attention with a late payment. Only Jing, number one male heir, had access to the treasury records. I paced to the dark curtain and back to the black pack. I had cash, but Prime had the books.

Multiple sets of books.

Where would he hide them?

Problem number two wasn't one problem; it was forty-two girls smuggled into the U.S. and sitting in a house in Sausalito. They had to be fed and rehearsed and transported like a herd of cows.

Was there a problem number three?

Yes, my ID. Like others Father had commissioned, it was built on a stolen identity and wouldn't hold up to close scrutiny. Perhaps Uncle Gan could provide a better one.

The handset of the beige phone beckoned from the bedside. A simple device able to reach around the world—and leave a fat

wake of bytes for authorities to snoop. I hated the Patriot-Act-Snowden-leak NSA, and the enraged terrorists making it difficult for an honest man to do business. But I must contact Uncle Gan; he should not hear the news of his brother's death from anyone else.

I searched the room. In my stupor last night, where had I...ah, the drawer of the silver nightstand. The present circumstances made me grateful Father had demanded Silent Circle security technology for our smartphones. At the time I had told him to his face he was being foolishly paranoid.

He had laughed in mine.

The case was stained with my blood; its meter showed 70% charge. The police would have Father's phone by now. It was quite secure, but anything could be cracked. YouTube videos showed people breaking into all kinds of phones. The FBI had even cracked an iPhone from a mass shooting in Southern California—with no help from Apple. They never revealed how, but rumors claimed it had cost a million dollars.

Therefore, police would eventually get my cell number.

Therefore, I should not place a call that could be traced to Uncle.

I activated the Silent Circle software for protection from bit-sniffing enemies, then connected to the hotel Wi-Fi. A clock on the table showed 6:20 AM. The blue numerals reminded me of the ocean. The ocean brought back memories of the months and months preparing for this mission. My quick mind calculated across time zones. I typed; glad the words would be encrypted; pleased Uncle wasn't behind a censoring firewall, yet paranoid the authorities might somehow create a back door into my world.

Dear Revered Uncle. Humbly request your counsel. Much has changed.—S.

I propped a pillow against the leather headboard and began to relax before realizing I had made a decision based on a television in a casino. In the American world of fake news, it might have

important details wrong. I searched with the secure browser on my phone, located three articles, and read one only minutes old:

Mr. Zang Wu was pronounced dead at the scene. The freak accident late Wednesday evening added to the string of deaths that have occurred in the open desert during Burning Man.

They found father's ID. Good. I scanned the article. No mention of the rider...or my sister.

...pending an investigation of the incident.

Muscle tension awakened the fire in my side. Father's U.S. persona would soon come under intense scrutiny. My phone emitted a breathless sigh. The message read:

Where is Jing?

My jaw clenched. I fought the urge to throw the phone through the glass separating me from Reno. Uncle's insufferable protocol. If Father didn't contact him, then the next in line must, not the lowly second son who bore the insult of being called Tuson. Had they forgotten that Shen is one of the three energy treasures? *The powerful energy of the intellect.* I took a deep breath; my lung burned; I pressed my eyes shut as tears formed; the moment dragged; I savored my hatred for Jing. I typed:

Father has gone to meet the ancestors. Jing is badly injured. I decided to guess; Uncle couldn't possibly know more than I did. And in police custody.

A sharp knock rocketed my heart rate skyward. I eased my feet to the floor, protecting my side with my left arm. Listened.

I said, "One moment."

I slipped my jacket over the bandages, found cash, and made my way to the door. Leaving the chain hooked, I inched it open.

A young kid in a blue uniform said, "Breakfast for Mr. Lee."

I pushed bills through the slot to cover the cost and tip.

"Would you like me to set it up for you?"

"No, leave it." I pushed the door closed. My phone sighed.

This is a shock.

Yes, Uncle, an absolute crisis! Which means *opportunity*.

Was he expecting more from me? I checked the date on the phone's calendar: an odd number. I could take risks. I replied:

Motor vehicle accident. 42 assets under management, (I wracked my brain. How many clients? I guessed.) 17 active contracts. Require your wise guidance, honored Uncle.

I slid the chain away, made sure the hall was empty, and rolled the cart into the room. The aroma of coffee and a muffin seasoned with cinnamon teased my senses. Dr. Fan would be pleased with my appetite. He had told me one more centimeter and the bullet would have destroyed my heart. Good fortune had been with me that night. Sun Tzu's words came to me:

Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak.

I ate slowly and meditated on the chi energy the food would provide my body. I sipped black coffee, absorbing its warmth. Another sigh.

Honor my dear brother as the Buddha was honored. Quickly.

I had expected this from Uncle Gan, ever the follower of the sages of antiquity.

And another: *The first-born son must honor your father in a silent ceremony.*

I choked on the muffin. Contacting Jing would put me in danger. I removed the paper lid from a damp glass of orange juice. How could I enforce seventeen contracts and keep more than forty assets working? Before, there had been three of us.

Now I was alone.

And injured.

What of Mylin? Why had she run? Would she obey me?

First, fulfill Uncle Gan's wish.

I pushed the table away and shuffled to the bathroom. The dark spot seeping through the bandages had grown. I stared into the mirror. The silly badge that had admitted me to the heathen festival still clung to my jacket. The memory of a blinding flash in the black desert night returned.

A flash meant a camera. That meant a picture.
My face. I must disguise my face.

CHAPTER 4

LATE THURSDAY MORNING QIGIQ dragged a curved plastic blade across the fuel tank of his motorcycle. Translucent curls of adhesive peeled from its black paint. The Green People of The Porcupine Band had graciously let him and Kandy bunk inside their motorhome. He had spent an hour making notes for his report, then tossed and turned in confusion. Now, in daylight, the playa around him stretched into a gray, vast ocean. The giant art installations, so vibrant at night, slept in the sunshine.

Kandy exited the motorhome at a dead run. “Fire. Let’s go.”

Qigiq grabbed his shirt from the bike seat. Kandy stopped beside him; checked her pistol. He tapped his boot to confirm the presence of a knife that he knew was there. She spun and started running again. He caught up to her as they passed a rainbow village of tents covered in white dust.

“What’s burning?”

“First-aid center.”

He accelerated to stay with her. “How did we find out?”

“KD heard it on the shortwave radio she monitors to find out where the next art burn is going to be. Expect a crowd.”

They ran for ten full minutes across soft sand, then hard sand, then trampled sand. Qigiq sweated; Kandy’s body didn’t seem to know it was moving. They reached a white tent the size of a lakeside cottage with a hundred people gathered around it, worked their way through the crowd, and found the EMT. Susan was either back on duty, or still on duty.

“Hi,” she said. “Pretty weird, huh?”

Qigiq replied, “Lots of things burn here.”

“Yeah, but we plan those. This one just sort of happened.”

Fire had engulfed the side of the tent including hand-painted signs that read:

Dehydrated? Injured? Overdose? This is the place!

“How did it start?” Kandy asked.

“The body.”

Kandy looked at Qigiq, but spoke to Susan. “The one from the motorcycle accident?”

Susan nodded. “Yeah. Old guy. Dropped off after midnight. We put him on ice way in the back.” She pointed with a white fingernail with a red cross painted on it. “The Coroner's office in Reno can't get here until this afternoon. I've never seen ice burn before.”

“Ice doesn't burn without help,” Kandy said.

“Methane usually, seeping up through air spaces,” Qigiq added.

“You've seen burning ice?” Susan asked, eyebrows lifted.

He nodded. “Entire fields in Alaska.”

“I'd love to experience that.” Susan's face sagged. “I feel so sorry for the family. There's nothing left to bury.”

Qigiq studied the faces illuminated by the roaring flames: four guys in silver suits looking like alien boy singers, a couple in patches of bear fur that didn't cover much, a monk in orange with a low hood like the grim reaper, an overweight guy with a two-foot tall top hat wearing a painted-on leprechaun outfit, and six girls dressed in glow sticks dangling from shoe strings around their necks. The sticks had almost ceased glowing.

Every one of them looked crazy enough to start a fire. Odds were long though, the perp probably drifted away while the crowd gathered. Maybe the locals would find someone who had seen something unusual. But here? Everything was unusual.

Kandy touched his arm. “Let's take a closer look.”

They moved to the rear of the crowd, then walked the perimeter until they were opposite the spot Susan had indicated.

The stench of burning tent engulfed them. Kandy led on. Stopped. Susan hadn't exaggerated. She said:

"Nothing to be had from this guy."

"But your expression tells me you have an idea."

Her head moved slowly. "Yeah. I'm thinking there's only one reason to kill a guy who's already dead."

Qigiq scanned the ground, wondering if the ashes could be separated from the desert sand, or if they would become one through the millennia.

"Evidence."

She let out a long sigh. "No fingerprints, blood work, dental impressions."

"We have a name," he said.

"No doubt false."

"We have Mylin, claiming to be his daughter."

"Who refuses to cooperate."

"We know the cause of death," he said.

"Unofficially. The coroner can't write a report without a body."

Intense heat wafted against his cheeks. He looked across at the crowd; studied the dozens of eyes fascinated with the metamorphosis of combustion.

"Accident?"

Kandy laughed, turning to go. "For sure. A lightning strike in the middle of a cloudless desert."

He followed her. "Want to question these folks?"

"Let's hear what Susan knows first. I bet she was inside the tent."

They found her sitting crossed-legged on the ground bandaging a girl's elbow. When she saw them, she said: "Bicycle. They're popular out here, and this sand is more abrasive than asphalt."

The freckle-faced girl smiled over a wince as Susan wrapped.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Kandy asked. "Or we can

wait until you're finished."

"Not much to tell. This morning we had the body outside the tent in the shade, away from the treatment area. Iced down head to toe. Covered with a blanket. We didn't think anyone would even notice it. The big guys decided not to spend money on air support, since there wasn't much anyone could do for him."

"Weird accident last night," Qigiq said.

"One in a million. I mean," she picked up scissors to cut the gauze, "it's got to be really hard to land a motorcycle on a running man. Beyond weird, even for Burning Man." She looked up with a grin. "If you know what I mean."

"The fire," Kandy said.

Her head bobbed. "Oh yeah. Mark and I were watching four patients, all badly dehydrated, one close to hypothermia. People out here don't get that the coldest part of the day is just before dawn. You know, they want to stay up all night and watch the Sun god rise from the east and all that. But it's super cold here in summer, into the low forties. And half of them are naked."

She taped the bandage and the young girl gave her a hug before picking up her bike and riding away. Susan collected scissors, gauze, tape, and kept talking. "We were monitoring vitals, and I was thinking about going for more water when the back of the tent lit up."

"Lit?" Qigiq said. "No noise?"

Susan shook her head. "No. Bright light. I ignored it, thinking it was a laser show or an art car swinging past. But it didn't stop; in fact, it got brighter." She twisted and stood to her full five-foot-two in boots. "We watched for a few seconds, then Mark said, 'I'll check it out.' But before he got to the flap doorway the wall melted." She waved her hands, one still holding scissors. "It was like a movie effect where they pretend the film is burning and then show you something else in the hole. Like that. The entire wall sort of disintegrated, and suddenly I was staring out at empty desert and stars. And..."

She stopped, her gaze distant.

They waited.

“It was *so* strange...black desert night, a thousand stars, huge flames,” she lifted her arms, “long shadows dancing on sand, that body turning to glowing embers like my fireplace. Mark freaked out and started yelling about invading zombies. That freaked out our patients, who weren’t all there anyway between dehydration and whatever drugs they had taken. I remember screaming at Mark to take the girl closest to the door, because she was so big I could barely hold her up. I ran toward the hole in the wall.” She paused. “I still can’t believe I did that. But there was a patient back there; I had to help her. We got all four out,” she gestured to people sitting on a cloth on the ground. “And then we sat here and watched it burn.” She shrugged. “We didn’t know what else to do.”

Kandy touched her arm gently. “No explosion, ever? Just burning.”

Susan nodded, her face tense, about to cry.

“You okay?” Kandy said softly.

“It’s creepy. A dead body catches fire. And burns down our whole tent. People are saying it was spontaneous human combustion, like that drummer joke in the *Spinal Tap* movie. But many think the spirit of Burning Man has been angered by this death during the festival.”

The scissors wavered in the girl’s hand.

Qiqiq said, “We’ll get a forensic team out here, see what they can find.”

She nodded slowly, clearly uncertain science was going to help. Then said, “Did you ever read Charles Dickens?”

Kandy looked Qiqiq’s way but didn’t speak.

“Some,” he said.

“We’re studying *Bleak House* in college. Mr. Krook dies of spontaneous combustion too.”

Qiqiq considered the word *too*. “Mr. Wu was already dead. I

suspect we'll find residue from the chemical that set him on fire."

Susan relaxed, almost smiled. "I sure hope so. Zombie crazies so close to the tent, out here under the stars, open desert...it's scary-different from downtown Reno."

Kandy dug in her pocket. "Tell you what. Here's my card. Give me a call after you get back home. I'll let you know what we find out."

Susan stared at the rectangle of paper. "Thanks. I hope you find something." She looked out and scanned the crowd. "I have to move to another tent, bye." And she was gone like a zombie was chasing her.

Qigiq watched the station smolder, ashes forming an outline on the ground where walls had been. The body had been out back, away from the entrance. Anyone could have walked up to it.

"Zombies for sure," Kandy said.

He grinned. "Yeah, carrying something that burns like a flare. Are these tents fireproof?"

"To a point, but enough heat and wind." She shrugged. "They'll melt just the way Susan described."

"Why destroy the body?"

"Whose body?" she asked.

"Point taken." Qigiq moved his gaze to where the body had been. "I bet that dead man had tales to tell."

"The zombie arsonist doesn't want us to hear them." She sighed and dug into her pocket again, came up with a wrapped mint.

Qigiq said, "I know what you're thinking. We're a homicide team, and we still don't have a body."

CHAPTER 5

FERDINAND WAS ON HIS WAY to analyze soil samples from whatever was left of Wu's body. Qigiq cleaned his bike, anxious for the results, hoping it would answer the important questions: Why and Who? Kandy sat cross-legged on the ground nearby, facing pistol parts spread across a spotless towel. They had been silent for nearly five minutes when she said:

"Where do think Prime is?"

"Was supposed to go to Reno. But every time he woke up he demanded transport to the Chinese hospital in San Francisco. So he's either asleep in Reno, en route to San Francisco, or having surgery in one or the other."

"Why do I feel like I should be doing something besides sitting here waiting?"

"Same reason I'm polishing a bike I have to ride across the desert to get out of here. Our detective instincts say something beyond blackmail is going on in Wu's world. But we don't have evidence. Mylin won't talk about the family business. Prime needs surgery. Wu is twice dead. The passenger in the SUV drove off in it. So, partner, what's our next step?"

"Chat with Prime when he wakes up."

"Agreed."

"Figure out why Mylin is so scared."

"Remember those scars on her sister's feet? I vote someone is threatening her."

"Then we find that someone," Kandy said, inserting bullets one at a time.

He flipped his rag over to the slightly cleaner side. “Ideas?”

“Wu owned that art gallery.”

“Electra. Up in Sausalito.” He paused. “Where *Solicitor* exploded.”

“Think we can get a warrant?”

Qigiq blew across the tank to remove lint. “Captain Jasik might okay it, especially since we no longer have the body. But the gallery isn’t a crime scene. How do we convince a judge?”

“We don’t. We go look around,” she said, closing the gun with a snick.

“Drive back this afternoon. Go in tonight, or tomorrow?”

“The sooner the action the better,” she said. “And I prefer darkness.”

The door slammed on the motorhome and the girl calling herself KD ran out barefoot. She stopped next to Kandy. “When are you leaving?”

“Now. Gotta get back to work.”

KD pouted as her forehead creased. “Will you read my senior project?”

Kandy smiled. “Only if it’s short.”

KD shook her pink and blonde hair. “Teachers hate reading long reports. They get bored and start lowering grades.”

“Then, sure,” Kandy said. “Does The Porcupine Band have a way to bring Qigiq’s bike to San Francisco?”

KD’s eyes snapped toward the bike and back to Kandy. She called out “let me check,” as she danced back to the motorhome. The door slammed behind her.

“Faster,” Kandy said.

“Keep my bike clean too,” Qigiq added.

—

Three hours later (including a stop for sandwiches and no-wonder-cops-stop-here red-velvet donuts at the Solano Bakery on Pitt School Road) Kandy pulled into a narrow public parking lot near a marina. Qigiq looked out over the bay, re-seeing a yacht

explode as it rushed out to sea while he towed Kandy toward shore.

He said, "How do you want to go in?"

"Casual art shoppers. I'll take the rear." She pointed at the glove box.

He flipped the door down and slipped the handgun into his jacket. He tapped the left side of his boot with his fingertips. He knew the knife was there, but touching it was an ingrained habit. "You expecting trouble?"

She glanced at him, registered a faint smile. "I'm a woman. I always expect trouble."

Kandy departed. Qigiq counted to thirty then walked to a restaurant called A Taste of Rome across from the gallery. The three sidewalk tables were empty. He took the one farthest from the entrance. A slender waitress wearing a single red cube earring brought him decaf and an almond croissant. In the past, he would light a cigarette and settle into the focused relaxation required for surveillance work. But that was a crutch. He needed to avoid crutches and pay attention. Since coming to San Francisco he had survived repeated attempts on his life. He wanted to survive the next one too.

He bit into the croissant.

Mid-afternoon. The ceiling lights inside the gallery were lit, but no one was visible.

He craved another red-velvet donut. He sipped coffee. On the opposite side of the street, Kandy walked across a parking lot, opened the side door of the gallery without knocking, disappeared behind it, then appeared inside near a row of paintings of empty beaches. She moved past the artwork, stopping by a white sculpture of breaking surf.

An Asian girl with striking blonde hair entered the room from the left and stood behind the counter. Kandy waved to her. The girl's straight hair hanging past her shoulders framed her return smile. Kandy strolled through the gallery until she was opposite

the storefront window facing Qigiq.

She touched her chin with one finger.

Qigiq dropped cash on the table, took a last bite of the croissant, and strode toward the street corner. The cross signal was red. Kandy hadn't moved. The girl flipped her hair over her right shoulder and bent down behind the counter. She came up with a cell phone pressed to her ear.

He leaned his shoulder against a lamppost and held his hand near his ear to signal Kandy. Two cars passed heading south. The girl nodded and slipped the phone below the counter, stared at Kandy's back for five seconds, then turned right. In a few steps she disappeared through an open doorway.

He guessed storeroom.

Kandy moved toward a sculpture of curved black tubes. The girl reappeared carrying a white box and went out the side door. Qigiq returned to his table. His coffee and pastry were still there, but the money was gone. The blonde girl stood stock still just outside the door in low heels and a gray skirt to mid-knee. The plan had been for Kandy to distract her.

This was better.

He typed a message: *She's waiting outside near the side door.*

Kandy glanced at her phone. Spun and took fast strides toward the storeroom.

He placed his phone flat on the table and sipped cold decaf.

4:18 p.m. changed to 4:19. The girl shifted from one foot to the other, as if dancing to an unheard tune. Another minute ticked by. He ate the last of the croissant with his left hand, his right poised near the phone. A white, red, and blue FedEx truck turned into the parking lot of the gallery.

He typed: *Truck arriving*

The driver hopped out, took the blonde's package with two hands, walked directly to the rear, and disappeared inside the truck. The girl continued her dance. The driver returned with a flat computer. She reached for the pen.

Signing for package

The girl's eyes followed the truck as it disappeared behind the gray building with the driver waving goodbye. She scanned the parking lot, her gaze seeming to linger on the dark hills to the west tossing shadows in her direction. She turned his way. Qigiq bent low to his phone and used his arm to hide his face. She stared past him to the bay for a long moment, then turned, and headed for the side door.

He couldn't see Kandy.

He typed *she's coming in*, jumped from the black iron chair, and stuffed the phone into his pocket as he ran into the street. He stopped short at the centerline as a gold sedan swerved at him, the driver expressing displeasure with her left fist as she flew past. He ran to the front door and yanked it open.

An electronic jangle announced his entrance.

The girl stepped into the shop and turned toward the sound. Her slightly buck-toothed smile said she was pleased to have a customer.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before saying, "Hello." He turned to the black sculpture standing in the window. "Do you have anything in this material, only smaller?"

"That's one of a kind," she said in English more British than American. "I do have several unopened boxes in back, let me check just to be sure."

His jaw clenched. "How about anything at all in black, pottery perhaps? I need to hurry." He gestured toward the restaurant. "I'm shopping for my wife while friends keep her busy talking. I'm supposed to be visiting the restroom."

The girl's face glowed. "A surprise? How wonderful." She lifted a hinged counter panel and stepped through. "I have a bud vase in black marble. I'm afraid it's quite small."

"That's good. I have to hide it until Sunday."

She led him to the corner of the shop nearest the street and picked up a vase about four inches tall. "It's hand carved from a

single block. See how the base flows seamlessly upward to the tips of the flute, almost like a tiny ocean wave.” She smiled again, her teeth shining brightly against her golden skin.

He studied it and tried to see behind the counter with his peripheral vision. No Kandy.

She proffered it toward him, so he took it. It was beautifully done, and the sticker on the bottom said he could buy it if he had to. He traced a tiny gray vein with one finger.

“Where was it made?”

“In China, but not the way you think.”

She was wearing a translucent tag with red letters etched in the material: *Jiao*.

He smiled. “Not like I think?”

Her head bounced twice. “Americans think ‘Made in China’ means the item was produced in an ugly mega-factory with thousands of workers wearing uniforms. All day long they make the same thing over and over.” She pointed. “But our gallery selects raw stone from the Mediterranean, and ships it to a lovely little village in rural China where artisans sculpt whatever they wish. We bring the finished works directly here and act as the artists’ agent.” She stepped back. For a moment he thought she might leave. “See these photographs. This woman here, Lin Li, made your vase.”

Jiao was skilled. It was now “his” vase, and she was helping him develop a personal relationship with the sculptor.

“Very nice,” he said, handing it back to her. “Anything else in black?”

“I have a stunning moonlight picture dominated by rich, dark grays. What size would you like?”

“Not over, say...” he held his hands apart, “twenty-four inches.”

She led him to the south wall. He couldn’t see the counter or back door behind them, which meant she couldn’t either.

“Barely a hint of color,” she said, pinching two fingers

together as she stopped in front of a picture. “But oh...the silvery moon shades.”

Qiqiq brought a fist to his mouth and coughed into it. The picture showed the dead Mr. Wu’s daughter Mylin staring into the sky with cigarette smoke floating around her head.

“Is this from your Chinese village?”

“No, it was taken in Michigan. That’s the...” She hesitated, as if considering whether or not to tell a secret. “Owner’s daughter.” She lifted an eyebrow. “She gets *very* special treatment.”

“She is quite beautiful,” he heard himself say while listening for a telltale that Kandy had snuck out of the building.

“She plays viola beautifully too. If you purchase a framed picture, we include two tickets to the performance of your choice from this concert season.”

“That’s quite generous.” His phone vibrated against his leg. He stepped closer and let his eyes rove over the painting, then glanced down: *all clear*.

“It’s my wife,” Qiqiq said. “I must get back. Would you be able to hold this print for me for twenty-four hours?”

She nodded. “Certainly. But we can always make more. We own the original and this is only print seventeen of a planned one hundred and fifty.”

“Thank you...” he leaned forward as if seeing her tag for the first time, “Jiao. You’ve been very helpful. Will you be working this weekend?”

“Saturday, but I’m off Sunday for a performance. I can ship that vase if you like. I recently shipped a much larger marble piece. Our FedEx people take very good care of them.”

“I’ll think about Ms. Li’s vase. You mentioned a performance?”

“I play cello with the GO Orchestra, *Girls of the Orient*. We have a concert on the bay. At a real fort.”

He held out his hand. She shook it and bowed. He bowed in

return.

“I’ll hold the painting and await your return tomorrow.” Her smile was so genuine it made him wish he were ten years younger and not a detective lying to her.

He abandoned the thought, exited through the front door, and walked to the restaurant on the off chance Jiao was watching him. Once inside, he found a table and pulled out his phone. Before he finished the message, Kandy walked through the door, stepped over the back of the chair opposite, and dropped into the seat.

“Thanks for sweet talking the sexy blonde cashier so I could get out of there.”

“Happy to oblige.”

“Get anything?”

“They supply material to artists in China who do custom work for them. They did a print run of a photograph of Mylin. My new friend Jiao mentioned that Mylin is the owner’s daughter. News of the accident doesn’t seem to have reached the gallery.”

“Happened at ten last night. If the Reno cops withhold his name from the press, it might take a few days.”

The willowy girl with the red earring reappeared. “Would you like something to drink?”

Qiqiq looked to Kandy and said, “It’s almost five. You want to eat?”

“Since we’re off duty, I’d like red wine with the body of nitromethane. Helps me think.”

“I’ll bring the list,” the girl said, and drifted away.

“Frustrated?” he asked.

Kandy stared into him, her brown eyes unmoving. He waited, knowing she would start talking when she figured out how to tell it.

The girl came with the wine list. They agreed on a pinot noir from Napa Valley, a place they could almost reach out and touch from where they sat in Marin. The bottle arrived. They toasted to Thursday, which was almost gone. Then again to finding a body

so they could be homicide detectives like in pulp fiction where the dead guy always shows up in the first chapter.

“Okay,” she said. “Jiao gets a phone call. She goes in the back, is gone a couple of minutes, then takes a package outside.”

“Holding it close to her chest,” Qiqiq said. “Like she’s afraid of losing it.”

“Right. I go to the storeroom before she returns, take photos of the alarm system. The company can help us track activity.”

“And you find?”

She held up two fingers. “A wall safe standing open, absolutely nothing in it.” She sipped her wine.

“And?”

“The absence of paper records. No file drawers with shipping orders or packing slips, but there is a combo printer-fax-copy machine. No ledger books. No thumb drives that could be backup for electronic records. I looked everywhere, Qu. There’s nothing except paintings and a shelf of pottery.”

“Someone beat us to it?”

“Again,” she said.

“Think we can get a fingerprint off that safe?”

“Let’s get Ferd in there.”

“Jiao works tomorrow.”

Kandy grinned. “You have a date?”

“She’s holding a picture for me.”

“Think she’ll let Ferd in? Or will the warrant scare her?”

He said, “Scare her witless. She’ll call management for permission.”

“So I skip shooting pool tonight, contact the alarm company, and sneak Ferd in. Or tomorrow at the latest. He’s probably still in the desert at Burning Man. Let’s hope his satphone is on.” She rotated her wine glass, swirling the red liquid. “I really want to know what he found in Wu’s ashes.”