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Dead Past

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Diane Fallon jerked to consciousness. She lay for a moment, caught between waking and sleep, frightened, not knowing where she was or what she had heard. She tried to focus her eyes. On the wall next to her bed a glass-covered photograph of a chambered nautilus flickered with an orange glow. Diane sucked in a breath, rolled over, rose on her elbow, and looked out the window of her apartment. Beyond the glistening fresh-fallen snow covering the ground, the ice-covered trees lining her street were silhouetted by an unnatural orange glow. A smoky haze drifted through the light of the streetlamps. A hail of sparks, punctuated by intermittent sounds like muffled gunshots or distant fireworks, swirled and fell from the navy blue night sky. In the distance, orange and yellow flames engulfed whatever lay beneath.

Diane swung her feet to the floor and sat up, trying to clear the fog that still held on to her brain. "Oh, God," she whispered. There were houses on that street, mostly rented by students of Bartram University. She looked at her alarm clock but found it dangling off the nightstand at the end of its cord. The illuminated digits switched from 3:06 to 3:07 as she put it back in place. *Explosion. There must have been an explosion. That's what woke me up.*

Diane reached for the phone, heard a distant sound

of sirens, and drew back her hand. Garnett, the chief of detectives, would call her when she was needed. She wasn't a first responder. Like medical examiners and undertakers, forensic anthropologists and crime scene specialists are among the last to be called—when there are only the dead to help.

Watching the fire, she sat for several moments on the edge of her bed. Briefly she thought of lying back down to try for a few more hours' sleep, but went for a shower instead. When the inevitable call came, she wanted to feel alert, and she thought a shower and coffee would do the job better than sleep.

It wasn't a call that came, but a banging on the door. Diane stepped out of the shower, wrapped herself in a robe, and hurried across the living room.

"Who is it?" she called out.

A female voice, stressed and hesitant, called through the door. "Miss Fallon? We're your upstairs neighbors."

Diane opened the door. The two of them, young husband and pregnant wife, wrapped in dark blue parkas and knit caps pulled down over their ears, stood in the doorway.

Diane stood dripping under her robe, trying to think of their names. Leslie and Shane, she remembered. They'd lived here several weeks, but Diane hadn't made their acquaintance yet. She felt a pang of guilt. A cool breeze from the stairs made her shiver.

"Hello," she said, looking down at Leslie's swollen midsection. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No." They both shook their heads. "We're just making sure everyone heard the evacuation announcement. The police are driving up and down the street calling out for everyone to leave this area. There's been some kind of chemical explosion." The young woman cradled her belly as she spoke.

"Oh, oh, my God," said Diane. "Thank you. That's

very kind of you. I was in the shower and didn't hear . . .''

She let her words trail off as the door across the hallway opened and Veda and Marvin Odell, the eccentric older couple who lived opposite her, rushed out with suitcase in hand and hurried down the stairs without stopping or even casting a glance in their direction. Diane and the young couple watched the backs of the Odells as they fled, Veda's vintage black rabbit-fur coat flapping behind her as if the animal were still alive and egging her onward. Diane was glad to see that with all their interest in death and fondness for funerals, the Odells were not eager to attend their own.

The young couple looked back at Diane and were about to say something when the sound of the police bullhorn reminded them of the urgency to leave.

''I appreciate your knocking on my door. Do you know if the landlady has a ride?'' asked Diane.

''I called her,'' said Leslie. ''Shane and I are taking her to her nephew's. She said she would check on the people on the ground floor.''

Diane nodded. ''What about the basement?''

''Basement?'' asked Leslie.

''Someone lives down there?'' Shane asked.

Diane nodded. ''You get the landlady, I'll check on the guy in the basement.''

They heard the bullhorn again and Leslie, frightened, looked over at her husband, as though they had lingered too long. Diane thanked them and watched a moment as Shane helped his wife negotiate the stairs.

She closed the door and hurried to dress quickly. *Chemical explosion,* she thought, as she threw clothes into her duffel bag. *What kind of chemical explosion do you have in a residential neighborhood? Gas leak? Chem lab? Drug lab? Damn.* Diane had seen kids playing and riding their bikes on that street. It was a

neighborhood that often had several students to a house. Diane shivered at the potential catastrophe. She hurriedly slipped on her coat and went out the door, locking it behind her. The old Greek Revival house that had been converted to apartments appeared empty and quiet. Diane locked the main door as she stepped out onto the columned porch.

In the street a line of cars was leaving the area. It was calm, not frantic. No blaring horns or angry shouts, just streams of headlights, each spotlighting the car in front, a necklace of cars.

Diane trudged around to the side of the house to where the basement entrance was located, down a short flight of stairs with wrought-iron bannisters. She was about to knock when she saw a note taped to the door. It was from Professor Keith, resident of the basement apartment, saying he had evacuated and could be reached at his office on campus. She turned and plodded back up and through the thick snow to her own car.

There was an acrid odor in the air and something that made her eyes burn. She wondered what she was inhaling with each breath. She pulled the wool scarf over her mouth as if that would help keep out the invisible fumes. Popping sounds of breaking glass grew louder and the explosion of paint cans, aerosol sprays, and all the other flammable things people keep in their houses added to the noise. A string of firecracker-like sounds made her want to run for cover. It sounded like a gun battle.

Traffic was thinning considerably, but the mass exit had turned the snowy street into a river of slush. Diane had to stand in thick ice water as she used her hands to clear snow from her windshield. By the time she finished, her hands and toes were freezing. She got in the car, started the engine, and turned the heater on high, hugging her arms to herself and blowing into her hands. She wished she had some hot coffee.

Before she pulled out into the street she saw Professor Keith's Volvo several feet ahead, exhaust coming from the tailpipe. He must have just left the note before she got to his door. Diane put her car in gear and started to ease out into the street when she noticed a man standing next to a group of tall snow-covered shrubs. He was pointing a gun at the passenger side of Keith's Volvo.

Diane grabbed her cell and started to punch in 911. NO SERVICE. *Shit.* She looked up at the Volvo again. The guy with the gun looked like a kid, the way he carried himself. He held the gun sideways like punks do on TV shows. He was shaking it at the car, obviously trying to make Keith let him in. He held the gun in his left hand, and looked as though he was favoring his right side. She tried to ease forward slowly. The sound of her tires spinning in the slush caused him to turn and look at her. Keith and his Volvo sped away, leaving Diane to face the young man now coming toward her pointing a gun and dripping a trail of blood.