

# Fire Ice

John Day

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**Acknowledgement to my wife Carole for all her help and support.**

**READ BOOK 1 FIRST**

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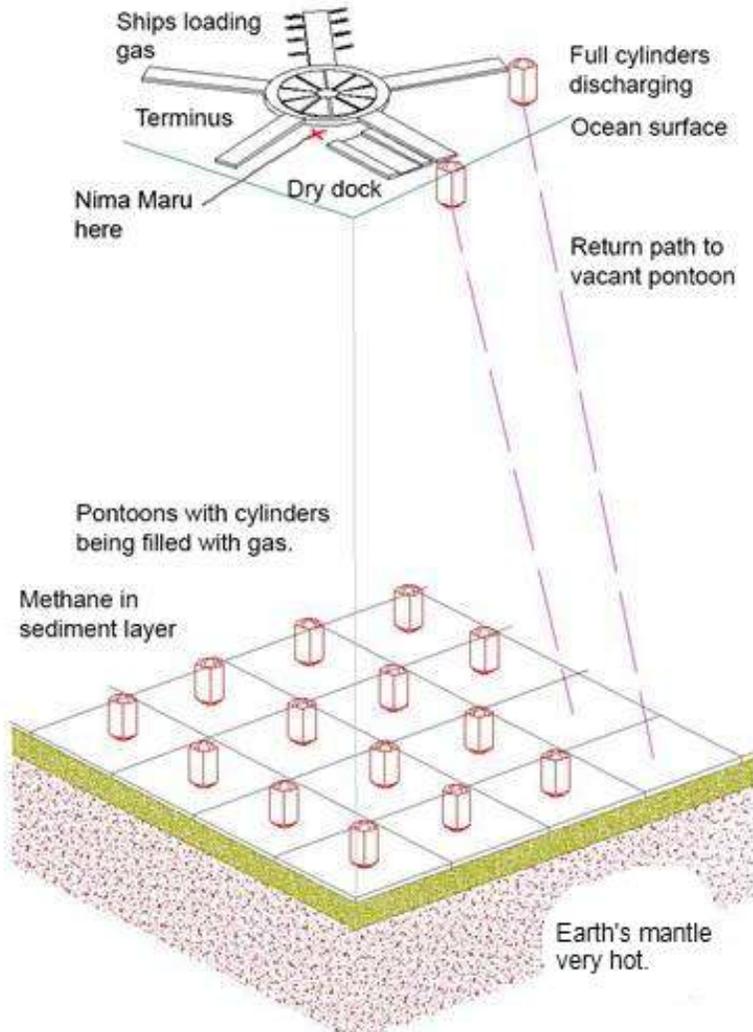
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## Prologue.

It was a perfect night. The sea was calm like a millpond, the warm breeze gently caressed her bare skin as she stared ahead, mesmerized at the white churning wake, gouged into the dark water. She gazed up at the infinite black sky and focused on the brightest stars. As she looked, fainter stars in their hundreds appeared and now, millions of even fainter stars appeared around them.

Out here on the ocean, there was no light pollution, no cloud to obscure the beauty of nature. The world was a truly wonderful place.

Sarah was so happy to be alive; at 18 years old, she had everything to live for, and she knew it. She had anticipated the excitement of this cruise for what seemed like ages and now here she was, hoping that this would be the first of many more cruises in her lifetime.

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The air around her suddenly chilled, the stench of it made her retch, she was suffocating. Turning away from the handrail she lurched towards the entrance, back into the perceived safety of the cruise liner. Panic set in as she began choking, desperate for oxygen. Her thoughts raced as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

She remembered now; the Sargasso Sea, right at the tip of the infamous Bermuda Triangle. It was supposed to be legendary for disastrous, inexplicable happenings to ships and planes – *surely not, it is only a legend after all?*

The sound and vibration of the ship's engines changed, as though suddenly supercharged, and sparks followed by flames shot from the massive exhaust vents high above the liner.

The air ignited in an intense light blue fireball, propagating five nautical miles ahead of the ship. The enormous shockwave and searing heat, crushed and melted the superstructure of the vessel; to be instantly quenched, as it sank to the seabed, miles below.

## Extinction Event (book 1) ending.

Sam Leighton had discovered that his man in charge of The Organization's hazardous waste plant in Egypt, was being blackmailed by the Russian Mafia. They forced him to dump planetloads of ionizing nuclear waste into the active volcano on Montserrat.

Based on scientific prediction, the waste could reach critical mass at any time in the next ten thousand years: the half-life of the material.

The resulting nuclear explosion deep within the earth's mantle, or possibly the core itself, would extinguish all life on the planet. The

calculated force of the ejected material would act like a short burst from a rocket motor, and propel the planet into a different orbit.

Academic though it is for an earth without life, depending on the direction of the blast, it would upset the orbits of neighboring planets and possibly drive the Earth into them, into the sun, or out into space.

Ultimately, our entire solar system would change.

Sam explained all this to Max and asked that he go to Montserrat with a small team of scientists, to check for any evidence that could implicate The Organization. If evidence was discovered, until the planet exploded there was every reason to cover up the disaster.

It was not a question of doing the right thing, admitting to the problem and leaving the world to clean up the mess. There was no way of extracting the molten waste from the magma, deep inside the earth.

Either the earth blows up, or it doesn't!

The team of scientists returning to their dinghy were drenched in lava, as the volcano belched its way to an eruption.

Unaware that he was all alone, Max investigated an odd formation, low down inside the crater. It turned out to be the remains of a large cylinder filled with nuclear waste.

Max had come into contact with the lethal rays and knew that by now he was a dead man walking. Should he dislodge the evidence and let it fall into the lava - it was heading that way in any case - or should he just leave now, and let someone else clean it up?

The cylinder of waste might just be the trigger for extinction!

Fate took the decision for him; he saw the cylinder topple and fall in to the seething magma.

On his way back to the dinghy, Max found the remains of his team, and envied them their instant death.

The legs of his protective suit were rapidly filling with vomit and diarrhea, as the cells in his intestines were being killed off by the radiation oozing from the cylinder.

He eventually reached the dinghy, stripped naked and collapsed in the sea, to wash himself.

Max made his final report to Sam Leighton, just as delirium overcame him. He launched the dinghy in the hope that Sam would send help before he was killed, either by radiation sickness or the volcanic eruption.

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### **Adrift.**

The roar of the helicopter engine grew louder, and the down wash from the rotors whipped the sea into foam and driving spray, around the small rubber dinghy.

Something inside his subconscious assured him help was coming soon, but Max was past caring whether it was friend or foe. The effects of primary hypothermia were clearly evident as he lay back naked in the dinghy. His core body temperature was now below 27°c and he had long since passed through the stage of shivering into total numbness. Thought was no longer possible, his heart rhythm was severely disordered and his pulse undetectable.

A small team of scientists had flown out by helicopter, from Guadeloupe, to observe the volcano on Montserrat, as it became more unstable. On approaching the island, they flew at low level directly over Max, and spotted the light reflecting from his white body, in contrast to the surrounding dark water. The helicopter immediately dropped lower and hovered, as the occupants decided how they would make the rescue.

The two crew members standing on the skids struggled to drag his stiff, awkward body aboard. The pilot wrestled with the controls to keep the cabin above the waves, the skids often plunging below the surface. There was no hoist fitted to this machine for rescue, it was not there for that purpose.

To the medically untrained eye, Max appeared dead. There were no detectable life signs, so they placed the body in a secure position within the cabin and went about their scientific observations.

At that moment, the volcano exploded; there was a blinding light, followed seconds later by the shock wave. The crew and scientists, still blinded and awestruck by the event, failed to notice the dented and crested water surface, racing in an ever-widening arc towards the lifting helicopter. It tossed the light aircraft upwards, out of control like a leaf in a storm.

The pilot had heard the chatter amongst the scientists, about what happens when volcanos erupt; he immediately realized that pyroclastic flow was the ultimate problem to face.

Once the shockwave had passed, he regained control and applied full power in a gradual climb, at maximum forward speed back to Guadeloupe. He had mentally calculated that he could neither out climb nor outrun the following cloud, but a bit of both was better than just giving up and waiting for it to hit them.

“Buckle up everyone,” the pilot commanded, “ in a few minutes we will be hit by the pyroclastic cloud, so close all openings and pray we get lucky!”

The minutes ticked by as everyone waited tensely for the inevitable, expecting the sudden impact of the gas and ash, as it punched into the fragile machine. They knew the searing heat would melt, blister and ignite anything combustible; the solids of clogging ash and scouring dust particles would be sucked into the turbines, coating and then melting the delicately balanced precision blades.

Within a few milliseconds, a destructive vibration would occur that could cause the engine to explode, or at best, shake free of its mountings. The rotor blades would certainly snap off as each blade ploughed into the dense cloying ash cloud, and they would plummet into the sea which hurtled by just below.

From one quick look back at the cloud, the pilot was in no doubt that it was gaining on them, rapidly.

The seething gas cloud tumbled over itself as it raced across the surface of the ocean; the entire cloud appeared to be dragged along by its upper part.

The only option was for the pilot to start descending and so increase forward speed; then perhaps drop below the upper bulge of the cloud. At least if they were close to the surface when the cloud struck, they would not die from falling out of the sky.

A minute later, the helicopter levelled out just feet above the water. The pitch of the screaming engine also dropped, as did the forward speed.

Looking back again, the pyroclastic cloud was right on them and looking up, the cloud was over them.

"It's about to hit us," the pilot shouted to no one in particular, and they all braced even tighter.

Death was looming, any moment now!

The seconds ticked by and still no impact; the pilot glanced back and the cloud was hovering, but were they holding their own?

Checking again, they were slightly ahead, or was it wishful thinking? No, they were outrunning the cloud, it was losing energy and they could still make it out alive.

As the cloud dropped back, the pilot started to regain height and checked his position; they were getting close to Guadeloupe and safety! "Looks like we are going to make it after all," he announced through the intercom.

A loud cheer from his passengers pounded his ears through the headset.

"I will radio ahead and get attendance for the dead man in the back, you lot owe me a drink." Another loud cheer, and a broad grin spread across the pilot's face.

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The landing at Guadeloupe was one of supreme relief for everyone on board, except Max, who was still in a coma. The ambulance crew who collected the body did a perfunctory examination, and became extremely agitated when they detected a heart flutter.

"Hey! We've got a live one here. Radio ahead and warn them of an incoming hypothermia case."

The vehicle left the airport, wheels screeching and siren blaring, as they raced swiftly away in an attempt to save the patient's life.

A few minutes later, a medical team wheeled Max at speed on a trolley through the hospital. One nurse ran alongside with an oxygen mask clamped over his face and another sat astride his naked torso, applying chest compressions.

Max's cold, thick blood was hard to circulate in his hypothermic state. The difficult task ahead was to raise his core body temperature to thin his blood, getting oxygen to his brain and other vital organs. They may soon be damaged, if they were not already.

A cut down and bypass to the vascular system was inserted and functioning. This at least would soon warm the blood, as it passed through the heating equipment and circulated to the vital organs.

As the resuscitation took place, other serious symptoms manifested themselves. He was found to be suffering from chronic cell damage, totally unrelated to the hypothermia, so several specialists were called for a consult.

The core temperature increased, as did Max's metabolism and the damage from the radiation exposure developed at an increasing rate. They were winning on one front, but losing on another.

With no clues as to his identity or case history, and only common sense to guide them, it was fortunate that one consultant recognized the symptoms. He was ridiculed at first, there were no nuclear sources in the area that could account for the condition, but nonetheless, the patient's symptoms were unambiguous.

Treatment for radiation exposure commenced at once and a call put through to the Authorities. Tests confirmed the diagnosis and arrangements were made to transfer Max to a secure facility in Langley (suburb of McLean, VA) as soon as he could be moved. The CIA believed him to be a terrorist, and that interrogation could lead to the arrest of other members of the cell or cells!

Max's condition continued to confound the medical team. Initially, they agreed there was no prospect of recovery, just the slow and inevitable decline as his irradiated organs shut down, but contrary to expectations, his condition was improving.

A new challenge; Max now had a rising temperature, probably indicating a serious infection, yet to be identified.

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Meanwhile, the CIA was investigating every database in the world that could shed light on the identity of the patient. This alerted Sam Leighton, head of The Organization, to the fact that Max was alive and his location. The Organization held interests in the companies and provided support, to individuals responsible for software development across the world, and they had altered Max's records to prevent him from being identified.

Max was still in a deep coma, so the CIA could not advance their investigation beyond fingerprints and DNA. To their frustration, the fingerprints did not show a match and the DNA results continuously threw up anomalous results, due to stem cell treatment.

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Shortly after Max had become involved with the Organization, he was badly injured and unbeknown to him, he was the subject of an experiment. The stem cells should have remained local to the injury, but as revealed during frequent medical follow ups by The Organization, they had spread throughout his body. So far, the effects were miraculous; it had rejuvenated his whole body.

However, the most recent test after his mission in Egypt, showed signs of the cells turning cancerous. Sam decided not to tell Max, but sent him on the suicide mission, to report on the dumping of nuclear waste into the volcano on Montserrat.

### **Carla goes to Afghanistan.**

Sam called Carla Day into his office.

“Come in Carla, please take a seat.

“I have some great news for you about Max. He is in hospital in Guadeloupe, but the CIA are waiting to question him about his medical condition. They suspect him of being a terrorist and of handling nuclear material. He is suffering from radiation poisoning and is in a serious condition.”

“Will he recover, will he be all right?”

“We don’t know yet. Our contact in the hospital is monitoring his condition and keeping us informed.

“Our greatest concern is the CIA, and whether Max can be made to tell them anything about The Organization or his last mission. I will be frank with you, either Max dies there, or we get him out.”

Carla’s guts churned over and a chill of fear drained down through her body like iced water; she knew the score and realized just how pathetic and futile it would be to shout and scream, and let forth floods of tears.

Max Fortune was everything to her; he was her best friend, her lover. They had met one year ago, when she was twenty-six, he was forty-five. They hit it off almost immediately; he was her soul mate, kind, amusing, and easy-going. Ultimately, they had both chosen this life of excitement, admitting they were adrenaline junkies, and it had to end sometime!

“There is hope, Carla. We will do all that is humanly possible to get Max safely back with us.”

Carla knew Sam was being sincere, but she really needed to be involved; hanging around waiting was just not her style.

Sam made it quite clear he would try to get Max back, but the easier option would be to destroy the body and modify the CIA records, so that any evidence they had gained so far would lead nowhere. The Organization had connections worldwide, so altering the data was not a problem, but keeping the alteration undiscovered was much harder. Any evidence of hacking, for example, would close off essential openings into the systems, following the strengthening of security.

“According to the team in Guadeloupe, the hospital is heavily guarded. Max is still in a coma rather than deteriorating, so we will see how things play out.” Sam added “If he dies or is extensively brain damaged, that resolves one option; the trail will go cold at that point. If Max recovers and is well enough to be questioned, we must either get him out before the CIA move him, or terminate him there.”

Carla spoke determinedly. “I wish to volunteer to help get Max out.”

Sam replied in soothing tones, “I doubt there is anyone more determined to get him back than you, or more able, but the CIA will be looking out for any new faces in the area.

“They suspect Max is part of a terrorist cell, and it would be reasonable to expect that the cell would terminate any links to them, which is why you cannot go.

“The team in Guadeloupe already live and work there, so they will be unlikely to cause any suspicion.

“Don’t forget, you and Max are not the only members we have working for us; we are the world’s biggest employer in a collective sense. As you know, we have key people in so many businesses all over the world; they in turn know of, are friends with or are related to everyone else on the planet.”

Carla already knew this, Sam was re-focusing her mind. Her emotions were affecting her judgement and she knew perfectly well that were she to become involved with Max’s rescue, she would be a liability.

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Sam continued, “To take your mind off the situation, and to ensure you cannot interfere; I would like you to help one of our team get back to safety.

“Her name is Anita Harooni, she is in Jowzjan province, Afghanistan. She has valuable commercial information for us, of a technical nature, and we need her brought out at once. It will not be easy, but she is not in any trouble or under suspicion by the authorities; it is just difficult to leave there.

“I believe you speak some Dari?” suggested Sam.

“Yes, just very basic social stuff, I will need to take a phrase book for anything more than that.”

“Interesting,” murmured Sam, as he wondered why she might speak that language.

Sam continued, “Anita is a scientist and as you might expect, lacks your considerable skills to come and go at will. That is where you come in. We have set up an exit route. You are required to get her from her current position, to the location from which we can extract her.

“Can I leave that in your capable hands, Carla?”

“Yes, of course, but please keep me fully informed about Max.”

“Yes I will, certainly.”

Sam gave her the full briefing and she departed for Jowzjan province.

### Escape.

The medical team had now managed to bring Max’s high temperature back under control. What they had assumed to be infection was in fact a massive reaction by his body to repair itself. The stem cells had been working overtime, but as this level of regeneration was totally unnatural, it had resulted in the elevated temperature. Left unchecked, it would have been fatal.

As consciousness returned, Max realized he was in hospital, but under guard. Feigning his unconscious state, he tried to formulate some escape plan whilst his body regained its strength.

Overhearing snippets of conversation, he knew he must escape as soon as he was well enough, before the CIA could take him into custody. But how could he slip out of the side ward with the guard on duty, then walk out of the building, and get home to Italy?

If only Carla was here, he longed to hold her again, to see her cheeky grin, and hear her chuckle at some mischief she had planned!

Just then, Max was distracted from his thoughts of escape by a male voice whispering repeatedly in his ear, and grasping his limp hand.

“Max! Max! Listen carefully. Squeeze my hand gently if you can hear me, but make no other sign that you are conscious.”

He lay still and considered the implications of response; *the voice* repeated the request.

Max decided to take a chance, he squeezed for a second or two and relaxed.

*The voice* said, “I must go now, but will return and speak to you again.” He left the room to report back to Sam Leighton.

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As Max thought more about his situation, it dawned on him how vulnerable he was. On the one hand, the CIA wanted him for interrogation and on the other, The Organization would want him silenced. There was no way anyone would attempt to rescue him in his present weakened state.

Fear swept over him, his stomach contents turned to water, and he was about to double up with pain. There was no option; he could give no sign of being conscious, so he lay perfectly still and emptied his bowels in the bed.

The next nurse to check on him could tell from the smell what had happened, Max was starting to come out of his coma, and she reported it to the doctor. Minutes later, the patient had been cleaned up and the doctor commenced a series of tests; he knew that Max was feigning unconsciousness, but for some reason had decided to keep it to himself for the moment.

When someone holds your eyelid open whilst shining a torch into your eye, or touches the eyeball with a sterile swab, it is impossible for a conscious person not to respond with closing pupils, or a blink and a watering eye.

In that instant, Max knew he had practically no time left to mess around trying to come up with a plan.

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There was no one else in the room as Max opened his eyes and peered around. He tried to raise himself up in the bed, but felt weak and dizzy. He flopped back to recover and think.

Laying there he visualized the whole room. There was a large window to his right, it had opening panels. To the left was a wall between the room and presumably a passage. The head height glazed panel and door allowed nursing staff to look in as they passed by. The two remaining walls in front and behind him were solid.

There was a bedside cabinet and a laundry cart on his left side and judging by the odor, his fouled bedding was in it. There was a pull around curtain for privacy, folded back against the wall.

Which floor level was he on? A look out the window would confirm that.

Again Max quietly and slowly raised himself up, fighting the dizziness and now nausea, as he slid off the bed.

He switched off the monitor and removed the connections to his body, no point in setting off the alarms.

At any moment a guard or passing nurse could see him standing, so he quickly made his way to the window. The room was well above ground level, probably on CIA instructions, to hamper any plans of escape or perhaps assassination.

Max opened the window wide as though he had climbed through, then shuffled his way back to the curtains. He looped the finger sensor cable over the curtain rail and knotted the two ends together, so he could hang from it.

To widen the furled curtain, he unhooked several adjacent curtain hooks in a series, so it lay against the wall, wide enough to cover him. Slipping behind the folds, tight to the wall, he eased himself up by standing on the bed, and slipped his arms through the cable loop, and passed it under his armpits. He stepped off the bed and dangled, pulling the curtain tight to him with his free arms. His feet were well above the hem of the curtain, so he was completely hidden.

Max hung there motionless, wondering how long it would be before someone noticed he was missing. The thin cable cut in painfully, as he hung by it and prayed this would work.

Moments later, there was a shout and people rushed into the room. First, they looked out the window and speculated he had walked along the narrow ledge. The CIA agent searched the room, looking under the bed, in the cabinet and then in the laundry cart.

He cursed fluently and profusely, as his frantic search through the soiled sheets left Max's fecal matter smeared over his hands and suit. He tentatively brushed at the curtain with his arm, not wanting to soil it with his fouled hands, and was satisfied it was not a viable hiding place.

Everyone in the room concluded the patient had obviously escaped through the window, so they left, apart from the agent washing his hands and attempting to wipe his suit. Finally, he closed the window and locked the door as he left.

Max dropped to the floor and worked his arms to revive them. He still had to escape, and now he must get out of sight quickly.

Very carefully he climbed into the laundry cart, arranging the soiled sheets uppermost and exposed, hoping it might deter someone else from searching in there.

Minutes later the recently fouled agent returned with more CIA agents, and as they discussed options, someone else wheeled out the laundry.

From the casual pace of the trolley and the passing voices, Max assumed he was on his way to the laundry. What would happen then? Would he be left alone in a queue of carts, or dumped down a chute, or be discovered when someone pulled the sheets off him?

He now entered a lift and descended a floor, someone got out of the lift, and it continued down.

"Well, you got out then!"

Max recognized the voice of the man who had whispered to him earlier, at his bedside.

"I must admit, I had not come up with a way of getting you out. I have informed Sam Leighton you are conscious, and once you get out of the building, we will get you home. I am taking you down to the morgue.

"A funeral home will collect you at 9am tomorrow from fridge **D1**, be in it before then. I will switch off that unit, so you should not get too cold.

“The funeral home are not part of the escape plan, so when I leave you in the passage, you are on your own. I have a family; this is some serious shit you are in, and I don’t mean the fouled sheet, so I don’t intend to get involved any more than this.

*Ding*, the lift stopped.

“The coffin will be searched! The body you will be replacing, will be taken to one of our infamous drug lords,” the lift door opened and the trolley wheeled out and stopped “to lie in state,” the voice added. “Don’t get caught there, it would not be pleasant!”

*The voice* walked away.

Max listened carefully, his body tensed with the fear of imminent discovery. He heard a swing door open and footsteps approached. There was a rustling sound and he only just held back a scream of panic, as something heavy and soft fell in on him!

After leaving Max alone, *the voice* called Sam and updated him on the escape so far. Sam then called Carla and explained, warning her that the difficult bit was yet to follow, so not to get her hopes up.

She knew Max was surprisingly resourceful, but could not imagine how he would pass himself off as an autopsied corpse, to trained CIA agents or indeed to the loved one who would view the body in state.

According to *the voice*, the hospital was locked down tighter than a crab’s ass, when the tide comes in.

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The final autopsy for the day was completed; the last person to leave was the technician who had dumped his scrubs in the laundry cart, putting the fear of God into Max.

The man was eager to get home to his family; he would be back at 8am the following day, to box up and ship out the murder victim of the local drug lord.

All was quiet again. Max peered out from the depths of the laundry trolley and looked around. He was outside the morgue on the ground floor, and there was no one nearby. Judging by the time, the staff had left for the day and all he had to do now, was slip into the fridge unit **D1** and hide there until the morning.

He tried the exit doors to the outside world; they were solid and locked, so no way of slipping out through them.

Max began to shiver, his teeth chattered noisily and uncontrollably: fear, adrenalin and standing naked, on the smooth tiled floor in this air-conditioned room at 5°C, was the reason. He needed to find some clothes and try to keep warm somewhere, but no chance of that in here.

Looking around, Max saw the rows of fridge units, *D1* in particular. He reached up to open the small door, and eased out the sliding cradle. The chamber was not empty, which surprised and shocked him somewhat; it

was something he had not considered. The focus on escape and the tension when hiding, had occupied his every thought until now.

Yes, he had got out of the nice warm side room and given the CIA the slip, so far, but in reality he was no closer to freedom. He imagined the agents would have had a secure perimeter around the building from the start. Everything in and especially out of the hospital would be carefully checked. They would easily spot an unfamiliar, probably still naked, adult male.

At this very moment, the agents were systematically working their way through every room, cupboard and duct, searching for him. It was just a matter of time before they reached the morgue, and time was all on their side.

Max pulled back the sheet covering the head of the body. The corpse was a girl in her mid-twenties, no doubt of Guadeloupian origin and in spite of her facial injuries, was a beauty.

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It now dawned on Max that escape was impossible. *The voice* said he had to be in the coffin for collection that morning, and they would check the corpse. There was no way of passing himself off as a dead woman, either to the CIA, the attendant who put the body in storage, or the relative receiving the body.

There had to be another way!

By now, agents would have searched the roof and top floor. Agents on each floor, including the ground floor where he was, would be checking every movement past them, as their net tightened.

All his options were on this floor, so he left the morgue and put on the technician's cast off autopsy gear. Apart from the lift, a few large storage rooms, the passage and toilets, there was nowhere to go. An agent was guarding the only access point to the area.

Max looked at the ventilation ducting and drain access, these were all physically too small to get into and would be examined anyway.

Back in the morgue, he looked in the long-term storage freezer and bio waste storeroom. The long term bodies hung in clear but frosted up bags, easily checked; not that it was a real option because in there, he would freeze to death within minutes.

The waste drums were just large enough to hold three heads, not a whole body. It reminded him of the daft joke one of his clients told him years ago.

*A prisoner had to have a series of major amputations over several months and the governor called the prisoner into his office. The governor said, I know what you are up to, first you have your leg off, then your other leg, then your arm.*

*You are trying to escape, bit by bit, aren't you!*

At that very moment, Max knew the way out!

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