

If you enjoyed *The First Stone*, the second novel in Elliott Hall's acclaimed Strange Trilogy, is coming soon.

# THE RAPTURE

Elliott Hall

*The innocent disappear first . . .*

Isaac Taylor isn't missing. According to government records, he never existed. Private Eye Felix Strange isn't convinced, not least because Isaac is an old army buddy. In fact, the man saved his life in Tehran, so the least Strange can do is dig up some leads.

But Strange soon discovers Isaac isn't the only one missing. All over the country, young and old, men and women, the good and the trying-to-be, are disappearing – quite literally without a trace. Strange realises that if he doesn't figure out what's happening fast, someone close to him will fall into a patch of thin air. What he doesn't know is that it's already too late.

*Now read on . . .*

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# ONE

'I have a proposition for you,' the young lady sitting across my desk said, and crossed her legs.

She wore a light summer dress whose floral pattern didn't disguise the sheerness of the material. Her auburn hair was swept back to display skin just brown enough to suggest a hot climate or a sunbed, and her eyes seemed to resist inspection, pushing you towards a mouth that was wide, painted and knowing. There wasn't much subtlety in her figure, but I saw how it could make a man forget his obligations.

'What can I do for you, Miss . . .?'

'Call me Mary.' The smile she gave me was toothy and completely insincere.

'Mary Smith?' I enquired.

'If you like. Before we get down to business, I'd like to know what kind of work you do.'

Maybe she'd missed the sign on my front door. 'I'm a detective, Miss Smith. Female clients usually want me to clear up certain doubts about their husbands.'

‘So you ruin marriages for a living?’

‘I put marriages out of their misery.’ I’d even broken up a wedding hours after the vows had been taken. The father of the bride had waited too long before deciding he wanted a little due diligence on his future son-in-law. He’d paid me to check up on what the groom had been up to in his old home of San Francisco, and the answer made him indictable in several jurisdictions. I flew back on her special day to ruin a reception that probably cost more than I made in a year. It was best for the bride in the long run, but I hated to see all that good food go to waste.

‘It sounds like we’re in the same racket,’ she said.

Ever since I’d seen her leaning against the door jamb, I’d been trying to figure out what I didn’t like about this woman. She was easy on the eyes, and projected an eagerness to please in all the right and wrong ways. She was the kind of dame a guy could fall for if he didn’t pay attention. It would be as easy as going down an open manhole: one wrong step and you’re in the dark.

‘So what’s your proposition?’ I said.

‘I know a certain hotel in the city where men tend to check in with friendly women. I need your help to stop these horrible crimes.’

‘Take it to the police,’ I said. ‘The NYPD love pointless cases that make them look good with the new mayor.’

The guy we’d actually elected hadn’t lasted long after the Battle of Christopher Park last year. If you’d been asleep for the last ten years it might have looked like democracy in action: the mayor taking responsibility for not stopping an urban war that had left dozens in body bags and a lot more injured. He

had held back the police while militias attacked his own constituents for the crime of being gay.

The mayor had held the NYPD back on the orders of the Elders, the assholes who actually ran this excuse for a republic. We still had a Congress that anybody could run for, but every man there (and it was all men now) and even the President never would have been elected without their help. Some of the Elders had moved into government, but most stayed at their megachurches and foundations, content for their power to be an open secret. I sometimes wished that they’d just move into the West Wing and be done with it, but America thought too highly of itself to admit that it was a dictatorship.

It was surprising that the Elders had forced the mayor out, considering he’d done what they wanted. It was their foot soldiers, the Revivalists, who had strolled into Greenwich Village with automatic weapons, whether the Elders had ordered them to or not. Maybe they blamed the mayor for the residents fighting back and putting Revivalists in some of those body bags. Even if higher powers hadn’t pressured him to resign, he would have been out at the next election anyway. He had sided with the Elders against his own city, and New Yorkers would never forgive him for that.

‘I don’t want to go to the police,’ Mary said. ‘I was raised to believe in the power of forgiveness.’

‘Especially if that repentance comes in the form of small, unmarked bills.’ Mary didn’t bother trying to look shocked. ‘You’re taking quite a risk approaching me with this idea.’

‘You come highly recommended,’ she said.

‘Who’s been singing my praises?’

‘Little Nicky,’ Mary said. Nicky Provenzano fancied himself

a wise guy because his name ended in a vowel. I'd stopped some thugs from kicking his ass all the way down Fourteenth Street a while back, and he made good by putting my name in the girl's ear. If you wanted to spread some loose talk, there was no one better in the whole world.

'So I thought we'd split things seventy-thirty,' Mary said.

'Is that so?'

'I'm going to be the one scaring up the business. All you have to do is take the pictures. This place is too classy to bug, but I've got an in across the street. It'll be a lot of money just to do this,' she said, and flexed her index finger.

'A judge won't see it that way,' I said. 'When it comes to the sentence on a blackmail rap, it'll be share and share alike.'

Mary chewed on that for a while. 'Sixty-forty.'

'I might bite if it was just photography,' I said, 'but I get the feeling you have more active work for me in mind.'

Mary shrugged. 'Some men don't want to reform. They might even react with hostility to my suggestion. If that happens, I'll need you to protect me.' She was still young enough to play the endangered little girl, but there wasn't enough innocence left in her eyes.

'If you want me to be the muscle as well, it's an even split or no dice.'

'Fine,' she said, with the petulance of a child forced into the tub.

I have this bad habit of feeling sorry for people. It usually comes in the afternoon, like an attack of indigestion. I couldn't blame her for using her looks. If a dame had a lot of lights on upstairs, the country would do its best to turn them off. Law firms didn't have female partners any more, nor did businesses

want a vice-president without a Y chromosome. It was too much trouble whenever a Revivalist official walked into the room, fixed the female professional with a stare, and asked if she was married.

Given her options, trading beauty for money wasn't a bad idea. Cash would appreciate over time, not fade into lines, wobbles and bitter longing for younger days. Mary could turn heads, but she wasn't beautiful enough to be exploited in the more respectable ways. I couldn't blame her for trying to play the hand that had been dealt her. The problem was that she was in the wrong game.

'There are easier ways to make a buck,' I said. 'The authorities come down especially hard on this kind of thing nowadays.'

Mary flashed a know-it-all smirk, and I figured out why this woman rubbed me up the wrong way. She'd ruled the town where she grew up with a manicured hand, the object of desire and envy for everyone inside the county line. Her reign of terror had given Mary an outsized opinion of her own beauty and intelligence. She thought she knew all the angles; it was written all over those high cheekbones and baby-blue eyes. The wisdom Mary pretended to was going to come to her the hard way.

'That's sweet of you, but I'm a big girl.'

I couldn't argue. She was old enough to smoke, vote in our sham elections, and dig her own grave.

'I'll call you when I'm ready to go,' Mary said as she stood. 'I gotta bounce.' And bounce she did, down the stairs, out the door, and past the men on the street who pretended not to notice.

I had another hour before I was scheduled to meet my client.

I looked at my inbox, and the email I'd been avoiding since this morning. It was the monthly update from the 82nd Veterans' Association, the official one that the government funded and kept an eye on. I guess no one had told them the army had taken a look at my medical expenses and thrown me out on my ass. It usually went in the trash as soon as it showed up, but today I'd given it a reprieve for no reason I could name. With nothing left to distract me, I had no choice but to take a look.

The news about my fellow veterans was as predictable as it was depressing. I didn't recognize any of the names. These men were Holy Land veterans, not the ones who'd gone through Iran with me. The lucky ones had found work with Stillwater, manning checkpoints in the Holy Land or guarding bases. Some ended up with the second-tier security firms standing in front of train stations. A few got out of war fighting entirely, not too easy now that you had to serve ten years before you qualified for the GI Bill. I think it was those few success stories that stopped me from blocking the emails completely.

I was about to delete the message and find another way to waste my time when the penultimate item caught my eye. Isaac Taylor had been reported missing by his fiancée Faye Grant. Anyone who had seen Isaac recently was requested to contact the association. Isaac wouldn't have been the first veteran to disappear. It was easy to walk off the grid if you were destitute, or had post-traumatic stress disorder, but most of the men who went that way didn't have any family, or a fiancée. Neither outcome sounded like Isaac, but I hadn't seen him in ten years. Nobody had to tell me what a decade could do to a person.

I got the secure phone from the bottom drawer of my desk and called Benny at the FBI's New York office. Someone picked

up, but all I heard was crackling on the other end of the line.

'Hello?' More static, and then I heard a big gulp that solved the mystery. 'Eat or talk, Benny. Pick one.'

'I don't see why I should, since you're the one spoiling my afternoon kugel break,' he said. 'Is this a social call, or are you in prison?'

'None of the above.'

'Well, since I've got you on the line, you know I have to go through the checklist.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Let's get it over with.'

'How's your health?'

'Is it your wife or the Bureau that's concerned?'

'Both,' Benny said. I doubted the reasons were the same, unless Miriam also viewed me as her property.

'Have you got all the medication you need?' Benny said. 'You know, the blue ones and the others, I think they're green, what are they called . . .'

'Benny, we do this twice a month. I would have thought you'd remember the names by now.'

'It ain't my responsibility to keep track of your personal rainbow of pharmacology,' Benny said. 'Just go through them so I can tick some fucking boxes.'

'The blue pills handle the nausea and the green are for muscle pain. The red pills stop me from going into a seizure-induced coma. Any of this ringing a bell?'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you're okay?'

'I continue to bask in the Bureau's generosity.'

When the army cut me loose rather than pay to find out what had happened to me in Tehran, I didn't expect to live long. The Veterans Administration had found a cocktail of drugs that kept

the symptoms in check, but they couldn't pay for it. After ten years of everyday scrambling to get the money for the medicines I needed, having the Bureau as my sugar daddy was a great relief, until my condition started to change.

'That's not what I asked,' Benny said. 'If you keep evading the question you're going to make me suspicious, and you know what that does to my digestion.'

'I've been having some side effects lately.' Last night I woke up on the bathroom floor with no memory of getting there or how long I'd kissed the tiles. The shower curtain was ripped, there was a hole in the wall and the razor and prescription bottles that lived on the sink had joined me on the floor. It had all the hallmarks of a seizure, but that didn't make any sense. I'd been taking the pills with my usual devotion. If it had been a seizure I wouldn't have woken up on my own. It wasn't like a bad hangover that went away after lunch.

'Side effects?' he said. 'What do you mean?'

'I'm not exactly using this stuff as prescribed, Benny,' I said. 'The VA didn't know what was wrong with us; they were making it up as they went along.' They still didn't know, and no one wanted the answer. 'Listen, it's no big deal. A little nausea is all. It's a listed side effect of my anti-nausea medication.'

'Unbelievable,' Benny said. 'It's the twenty-first century, what are you gonna do?'

'Move on.'

'Okay, okay,' Benny said. 'Now you know the second part: has any Revivalist threatened, harassed, offered to suck your dick, or contacted you in any other way?'

'As far as I know, they're holding up their end of the bargain.'

I suppose I had the Elders to thank for my current relation-

ship with the FBI. If Ezekiel White, the head of the Elders' morality police, hadn't hired me as a ready patsy to investigate the murder of Brother Isaiah, I wouldn't be so valuable to the Bureau now. Millions had listened to Isaiah's religious broadcasts, and he was still fondly remembered as a man too good for this world. If word got out that White had been involved in the murder, the Elders would end up covered in something more noisome than glory.

I didn't know the specifics of the deal FBI Director Sands had made with the Elders. The negotiations had happened while I was sitting in a motel room in south Florida, surrounded by a dozen G-men for my own protection. Every evening the agents would take me for a walk to the same roadside diner that had the same special every day. They couldn't make coffee worth a damn. I had plenty of time to pace the faded carpet, look at the swamp that lay beyond my window, and consider the relative value of my life. I was just a bargaining chip to Sands, another piece of currency no different than the coins that jangled in his pockets. In the end, he decided not to cash me in. My continued health was exchanged for keeping shtum about the location of a few significant corpses, and how they got that way.

'Nothing weird or out of the ordinary at all?'

Benny usually trusted my instincts enough not to make me repeat myself. Is something wrong?'

'No,' Benny said. 'At least, probably nothing that concerns us. There's been some rumbling in law enforcement lately. A lot of old-timers are retiring, one way or another.'

'The Revivalists are forcing them out?' I asked.

'Someone in the administration is. We don't know where the

orders are coming from. The police commissioners of Chicago, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City and Sacramento have all been replaced in the last month. When you go down the ranks to Deputies, Chief of Detectives and other brass the list just gets longer. As for the Department of Justice, forget about it. Half the Attorneys General have been given the boot.'

'Well, they serve at the pleasure of the President,' I said, 'and he was elected at the pleasure of the Elders. What's the official story?'

'Six different flavours of bullshit. Anyone who's refused to go quietly has been charged with incompetence, negligence or had dirt thrown at them.'

'Have they come after the Bureau?'

'They wouldn't dare, not after what happened last year.'

Benny didn't say anything for a while. The Brother Isaiah murder had been a big case for him, even if he couldn't brag about it. It had brought him to the attention of the Director and fast-tracked his career. That didn't mean either of us looked back on the case with fondness.

'Do you remember Isaac?' I said, jumping into the silence.

'You mean my cousin in Florida?'

'No, Isaac Taylor. He replaced Ortiz when we were holding down the Butcher School.' It was our nickname for the Medical Sciences Building of the former University of Tehran. It had been the home of our company for most of the war.

'Oh yeah, that skinny Garden State kid. I remember him. Nice enough, if memory serves. He followed you around like a lost puppy.'

'I don't remember that.'

'You wouldn't have noticed,' Benny said. 'You were too busy being an asshole.' Benny finished the last of his kugel, and

belched to eulogize its passing. 'Kid had those big Bambi eyes. How snipers resisted them I'll never know.'

'You keep calling him kid,' I said. 'He was only two years younger than us.'

'Yeah, well, you grow up fast under automatic fire. Why are you calling me about this guy out of the blue? He's not dead is he?'

'His fiancée has reported him missing,' I said. 'It's probably nothing, but would you mind taking a look for me?'

'If I say no, are you going to let the matter drop?'

'You know me better than that.'

The sound of Benny's squeaking chair censored some of his obscenities. 'Okay, Taylor, Isaac, let's see what you've been up to.' There was some typing, a pause, and then some more. It was taking longer than it usually did to dig up someone.

'Is something wrong?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Gimme a minute.' I waited while he abused his keyboard. 'That was Taylor with a "y", right?'

'Yeah.'

'I can't find him,' Benny said.

'You're saying the army has no record?'

'No one has a record,' Benny said. 'Army, IRS, banks, credit companies; it's natch across the board.' A person was in a database from the day they were born. If you learned how to drive, got a job, filed a tax return, got sick, took a mortgage, did pretty much anything besides relieve yourself, it was noted by someone, public or private. The distinction didn't even matter, since the former and the latter now shared everything anyway.

'We've seen this before, Benny.' About a year ago, when I was investigating the death of Brother Isaiah, Jack Small and I ran into some thugs who drew blanks in the usual databases.

I'd never got around to figuring out why they were after Small and his friends. I'd had one or two other things on my mind at the time. 'It stinks.'

'Of course it stinks,' Benny said. 'It reeks in a way we both recognize, and that's why we're going to forget about it.' It was no simple matter to erase a man's life. A lot of arms would have to be twisted, and a few broken, to do a job this thorough. Only a Revivalist up in the thin air of power would have that kind of authority, maybe even one of the Elders themselves. 'Don't you remember what the Director said when we pulled your nuts out of that fire up north?'

'I gave the Bureau the best scoop it's ever had, there was nothing charitable about it,' I said. 'Besides, I've been a good boy since then. I've stayed away from the administration and it's stayed away from me.'

'Well, that's what's got me worried,' Benny said. 'You've gone a whole year without doing anything stupid; I'm worried you're saving it all up to do something truly fucking idiotic. Do us all a favour and drop it, okay?'

'You know I can't do that.'

'So you served with the guy,' Benny said. 'Big deal, we served with a lot of people.'

'He saved my life, Benny.'

'So what? People save each other's lives all the time in a combat zone; it's fertile ground for that kind of activity. Why do you have to take it as some sort of obligation?'

'I don't know,' I said. That was the funny thing. I hadn't thought about Isaac for ten years, and now I felt I owed him something. 'That's just the way it is. I saved your life, and look at the shit you let me drag you through.'

'About that, I cannot disagree.'

'I'll go and talk to the fiancée,' I said. 'I'll probably find Isaac chained to the quarter slots in Vegas.'

'Will you at least promise me that you'll back off if it looks like the Elders are involved?'

'Of course I will.'

'Yeah, and I'm the fucking Pope,' Benny said, and hung up.

I took the subway to Rockefeller Center. I was early. The afternoon was bright and warm for the time of year, but there used to be more people in the plaza during a blizzard. There were still visitors from every corner of the world, snapping pictures and looking at the space where the Christmas tree went every year, but tourism had followed the rest of the economy down a toilet. The locals were doing what they usually did: everyone was struggling to get past everyone else, their heads locked forward and their feet moving quick-time. People had changed in the last year. They made a more conscious effort to keep to themselves beyond the usual, cultivated big-city indifference.

I caught a glimpse of a woman threading her way through the tourists by the statue of Prometheus. Dark, wavy hair fell against a tan raincoat, her aerodynamic legs taking the woman away from the centre at speed. It wasn't her, of course. I'd only caught a glance of the woman's face in profile, her sunglasses keeping out the light and my gaze. It wasn't Iris, but I started following her anyway.

She walked east down Forty-ninth, maybe towards Saks. I weaved between the streams of foot traffic but never seemed to get any closer. She had Iris's talent of making crowds part for her. We got to Fifth Avenue and she had to wait at the cor-

ner. I caught up with her, trying not to run, afraid what I would summon if I said Iris's name out loud. When I got within a stride of the woman my arm reached out all on its own, and at that moment I caught her eye in the store window beside us.

We stared at our reflections. The woman turned, took off her sunglasses and confirmed that I was a fool. She was older, her face etched with fine, careworn lines you couldn't see from a distance. Her small blue eyes had a look of fear I never thought I'd see on a crowded New York street in the middle of the day. A look of fear directed at me.

'I'm sorry,' I said, and let my hand drop. 'I thought you were someone else.'

The woman kept staring, expecting me to do I don't know what. Finally she put her sunglasses back on and crossed Fifth Avenue at double her previous pace, looking over her shoulder to make sure that I was receding into the horizon. I turned around and went back to Rockefeller Center, kicking myself all the way.

My client had arrived while I was busy chasing ghosts. Jose Arquez was the head of security for the Union Metropole, a hotel near the Gershwin Theater. He was a short man with a shaved bullet head and an expression of equal congeniality. Whenever I saw Jose I couldn't help but look around for the cannon they were planning to shoot him out of.

I approached while he was pretending to snap pictures of the plaza. I gawked at a large video screen and didn't make eye contact, as agreed. 'There are less cinematic ways of meeting,' I said.

In my peripheral vision I saw Arquez smile. 'Have you met the whore?' he asked.

'We are now acquainted. She told me her name was Mary.'

'Mary to you, Lucille to our doorman,' Jose said. 'She must have one of those name-of-the-day calendars. What was her proposition?'

'A standard-issue blackmail operation. I take pictures from across the street while she works her magic. The lady also expects me to play the heavy when she puts the squeeze on.'

'Broads like that never do have much imagination,' Jose said.

'How do you want me proceed?'

'Let her call the tune,' he said. 'We need to catch her red-handed.'

'It's going to be messy once a John is involved,' I replied. 'It would be easier just to ban her. If Mary is arrested for solicitation on the premises, your hotel will be on a list of suspected houses of ill-repute till doomsday.'

'I'll make sure the police never get involved,' Jose said, 'and the Committee for Child Protection is no longer a problem.'

It was a neat trick the Elders had played when they made Ezekiel White's death public. Every organ of the media and state had lionized him for 'solving' Brother Isaiah's death and giving his life trying to apprehend Thorpe. They'd repaid White's selfless courage by dissolving the Holy Rollers, firing most of his agents and rolling the rest into the Department of Homeland Security. It was a fate that the committee richly deserved.

'Are you sure she bought your story?' Jose said.

'She's on the hook; the only question is how long you want her to dangle.'

'The wrinkle in this situation is that she's corrupted one of my employees. That's why the hotel is willing to go to all this trouble. You string her along until Mary – or Lucille – fingers

the Judas. After that we'll make sure the problem goes away. Whatever unlucky sap ends up being the John won't be in a position to complain. Has she given you a timeline?'

The screen I was watching switched to the news. Behind a podium emblazoned with the seal of the Department of Homeland Security was a man I hadn't seen in ten years, and had never wanted to see again. The Presidential Medal of Freedom hung tight around his neck, falling right into the centre of the camera. His hair was whiter now but still cut to military length, exposing skin pockmarked by age and trauma. His eyes seemed crowded by his new face, compressed into something powerful and dark. The sound was off, but I could hear his voice in my head, the way he used to sound. It was impossible to forget that voice when he turned it on you. I'd heard he spoke differently now; a side effect of being shot in the head.

It had happened while he was serving in the Holy Land. The bullet had entered just below the right eye and left for other business out of the left side of his neck, taking his jaw along for the ride. He'd died on the operating table halfway through surgery, and would have stayed that way if not for the miracle of defibrillation. After he'd stabilized, it had taken six separate procedures to put his head back together. Most of his jaw was titanium and the teeth ceramic, the same material they used to rebuild the bones of his face.

The top left of the screen was owned by the ubiquitous 'REMEMBER HOUSTON!' logo. In the past year the Elders or their media lackeys had decided that the words alone weren't enough, and had added a small overhead picture of the devastation. Fallout had ensured that everything was the same as it had been ten years ago: the same buildings half destroyed, the

same cars thrown and overturned, the same craters where people had lived and worked. Only the bodies had been removed. The area had been designated a national monument, to preserve the day Death had arrived in Houston with a nuclear device in his luggage.

The picture was supposed to provoke righteous patriotic rage, but next to that man all it did was remind me of another broken city. The centre of Tehran hadn't disappeared like Houston; the buildings we hadn't bombed still stood, the streets still recognizable. It was the people who had disappeared, American and Iranian alike eaten from the inside by radiation. A group of us had survived, damaged but still alive, and the reason why was a mystery no one wanted to solve.

When I didn't respond to Jose's question, he turned to see what I was staring at, and then the look on my face. 'You know him?'

The news byline read: 'General Simeon Glass, Director of the Department of Homeland Security'. I couldn't say the name out loud. 'He was my commanding officer in Tehran.'

I felt a tremor. It came up from the ground, through my shoes and gave my bones a little shake. I was worried it was another side effect until I saw the look on Jose's face. 'Did you feel that?'

'Yeah. Was it an earthquake?'

I shook my head. It was something worse. 'Get back to your hotel,' I said. 'They're going to need you.'

Jose yelled a question at my back, but I was already on the run.

Shock had started to give way to chaos on the streets. 'Do not be afraid,' the Public Address Safety System said. It had been set up not long after the Battle of Christopher Park to

keep the public informed about what lay under the bed that day. ‘Stay in your homes, return to your places of work,’ the dispassionate, vaguely female voice said from every television and speaker in the plaza. ‘Do not panic. Stay indoors. You are not in danger. Do not panic. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil . . .”’

People weren’t inclined to take her advice. Shoppers who had boarded planes and subways to haunt the stores and boutiques now protested at being herded into those same establishments by NYPD and National Guard units. The troops had their hands full with the crowds, but it wouldn’t be long before one of them packed me in with the others. I could see black smoke rising in the south, but no more explosions. There was only the sound of sirens and people on the edge of panic.

I left Rockefeller Center going south and got to Forty-eighth Street. Everyone on Fifth Avenue was running the opposite way. There was an underground parking garage on my left, with another entrance on Forty-seventh. I ran through it, the attendants assuming I was another panic-stricken citizen worried about the health of his car.

Forty-seventh Street was empty. A few dozen people hid behind the windows of the jewellery stores. Hemmed in by luxury on velvet, they looked at me like I was on the moon. An officer on horseback rode by on the Avenue of the Americas. He paused and looked down Forty-seventh, the eyes beneath his riot helmet falling on me. I jack-rabbit into the new Lamont Hotel before he had the chance to tell me what was for my own good.

The lobby was chaos. Luggage was piled in the front entrance, probably a fire hazard. Panicking tourists besieged the front desk, demanding in ten languages information, compen-

sation and a way out of the city, right now. The three clerks had only their professional smiles as a defence. The head of security and two bellhops were trying to restore order, but nobody was listening. Normally I would have slowed my pace to blend in, but even at a full run I was the most sane-looking person there.

The Lamont’s service entrance opened on to Forty-sixth Street. On my right was an office tower. It had a little park on its grounds so employees could eat their lunch in natural light. I kept my pace, still unsure of what I was running towards. The cloud of smoke was getting bigger.

There was a building site on Forty-fifth, sealed up but accessible once I applied my shoulder to plywood. There was nobody to give me any trouble inside, so I slowed down a little. The chorus of sirens was comforting, insofar as it drowned out the emergency PA’s inspirational scripture. Helicopters were somewhere overhead, the sound of their blades joining with the charred smell in the air to bring up a lot of unwelcome memories.

I broke out on to Forty-fourth and stopped in the middle of the street. On any other day it would have been suicide. In front of me, so close I could feel the heat of its immolation, half a building had disappeared. It had been replaced by a burning absence doing its best to consume what was left. In better times brokers would have fought like animals over office space around here, but the recession had left a lot of prime midtown real estate unoccupied. Rented or not, I couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to wipe such an innocuous block of grey off the map.

I felt a hand on my arm. It belonged to a short cop in riot gear. ‘What the hell are you doing, buddy?’ he screamed at me through his plastic face shield. ‘You got a death wish or something?’

Wind caught the burning remains and scattered them on the air. A black rain fell on us, a toxic mix of incinerated wood, dry-wall and human flesh. I had seen the movie too many times: in Tehran and twice before in this city. I caught a glimpse of the burning shred of an Adamson memorial poster – the Revivalist graffiti that had gone up all over town – before it was consumed.

‘Move it,’ the cop said, pointing in the direction of Sixth Avenue. Tape was already stretched along the length of the street. Fire crews were putting on suits and air tanks, while SWAT stood by in case the building made a run for it. When I didn’t budge, his nightstick found its way into his hand. ‘Move, one way or the other.’ The cop led my body towards the tape, but I kept my head where it was. The smoke had covered the sliver of sky visible between the two blocks, plunging the afternoon into an unaccustomed darkness.

I stared at the burning building, and felt something new and terrible on the move.



