

FIRST DEGREE BURN

PETER LANCE



TENACITY MEDIA BOOKS

ALSO BY PETER LANCE

NON-FICTION

Deal With The Devil
Triple Cross
Cover-Up
1000 Years for Revenge
The Stingray

FICTION

Stranger 456

For Bina and Joe who taught me how to start
fires that always burn hot and bright. And for
Christopher, Mallory, and Alison who help me
keep them under control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE GENESIS FOR *FIRST DEGREE BURN* was a remarkable documentary film produced and directed by my sister, Mary Lance. In researching *Artists at Work*, a history of the New Deal art projects during Franklin Roosevelt's WPA, she came across a little-known incident in which thousands of canvases by American artists from the 1930s were later destroyed or sold as scrap. Plumbers bought them and used some of the great paintings for pipe insulation.

There were secrets buried in these works that lesser men in later years decided shouldn't come out. That was the kernel of an idea that led me to write a screenplay called *First Degree Burn* in 1995; a script that I later adapted into this novel in 1996.

A year later it became a published book thanks to Mitch Douglas, my agent at ICM at the time, who believed that an ex-reporter from ABC News had the chops to write fiction and Denise Silvestro, my dedicated editor at Berkley-Penguin.

The research that went into the novel was extensive. Eddie Burke is an arson investigator, and the fire marshals of the FDNY live heroic but dangerous lives. In order to enter their world, I was aided by Dick Berry, an ex-firefighter who later became an insurance investigator. He gave me access to the Bureau of Fire Investigation where I had the benefit of meeting fire marshals Bill Manahan, John Knox, Fred Taylor, Tom Morano, and Gerard Trimboli of Brooklyn Base.

The former Chief Fire Marshal Michael Vecchi sat with me at headquarters and was immensely helpful in giving me an overview of the BFI. But the man who walked me through the arson scenes and helped make sure that the manuscript was bulletproof was Louis F. Garcia, the former Supervisor of Manhattan Base who went on to become New York City's Chief Fire Marshal and—I'm honored to say—a very close friend.

Louie is an extraordinary man. The exact antithesis of Mike Kivlihan, the ferret-like executive officer of Manhattan Base who torments Eddie Burke in the book. The time I spent with Louie convinced me that the fire marshals of the FDNY are a unique breed of investigators.

Like their precinct detective brothers in the NYPD, they dress in plain clothes, carry Smith & Wessons, drive unmarked Chevy Caprices and arrest felons for violent crimes. But every marshal is an ex-firefighter with years in a ladder or truck company. They've ridden the trucks through subzero, ice-covered streets. They crawled on their bellies through smoke-filled tenements.

Every one has lost a fallen brother or carried out a half-dead child from an arson blaze. When this book was first published in 1997, of the 30,000 structural fires that broke out each year in the city of New York, more than 4,000 were intentionally set.

Somebody has to track down the demented torches who start them. So the fire marshals of the FDNY come to the job of arson investigation with an emotional commitment that's unlike anything else in law enforcement. Men and women who walk through the char of an arson scene with dedication, experience and real heart. Beyond all others, this book belongs to, them.

This new edition of *First Degree Burn* is being published 16 years after the paperback original from Berkeley-Penguin and it's essential that I pay tribute to the talented people who are responsible for its return to print. First, Walton Mendelson, the extraordinary book designer who not only mounted my most recent novel *Stranger 456*, but who also designed the splendid new edition of the true-crime classic *Murder, Inc. The Story of The Syndicate* by Burton B. Turkus and Sid Feder that Tenacity Media Books published in 2012.

Murder, Inc. published in 1951, had sold more than one million copies by the 1970s and I'm using it as the source material for a new dramatic series for cable television that I'm writing – also accessing my fourth book from Harper-Collins, *Deal With The Devil*, an epic Mafia investigation with a publication date of June 2013.

The incomparable designer of the cover for this new edition of *First Degree Burn* is Wells Moore – a friend of mine dating back to the late 1970's when this updated Eddie Burke thriller is set. Wells also designed the eye-catching covers for the Tenacity Media Books editions of *Stranger 456* and *Murder, Inc.* and with each new cover, she succeeds in outdoing herself.

This new edition also had the benefit of great copy editing by Patti McNally. She brought an amazing degree of care to the process as I added multiple chapters – with a more expansive story on Eddie Burke's chief nemesis, the serial arsonist Dagoberto Rojas, aka Superman.

I want to offer a special thanks to James Moss, NYPD retired, a decorated detective from Brooklyn South Homi-cide. Together with Emad Salem, the ex-Egyptian Army officer who infiltrated a deadly al Qaeda cell for the FBI in 1992, Det. Moss cracked an infamous cold case, the 19-year-old unsolved homicide of Mustafa Shalabi who was shot, stabbed and strangled to death in Brooklyn two years to the day before the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. For this book Det. Moss gave me rare insights into the NYPD and served as a new inspiration for the character of Big Eddie Burke.

And finally, because the heart of this thriller is a two-panel diptych, "Workers of The World Unite," I want to thank the actual artist who drew the sketch.

Elizabeth Schippert was a classmate of my sister Mary's at Emmanuel College in Boston. She's one of the most talented painters I've had the privilege of knowing and it was her vision of the lost mural from 1938 that inspired me to spin this web.

ARSON IN THE FIRST DEGREE. A person is guilty of arson in the first degree when he intentionally damages a building . . . causing an explosion or a fire and when (a) such explosion or fire is caused by an incendiary device (or liquid) propelled, thrown or placed inside such building and when such explosion or fire either (i) causes death or (ii) serious physical injury to another person.

-Section 150.20
New York Penal Law



PHOT NURSE STEVEDORE
WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE, SKETCH FOR



FARMER

TEACHER

MINER

TWO-PANEL MURAL, 1938. A. GROVESNOR

Everybody has something to hide . . .
—Dashiell Hammett

FIRST DEGREE BURN

Prologue

1978 IT WAS THE COLDEST JANUARY in decades. The start of a year full of contradictions. The Sex Pistols had just given their last concert. *Saturday Night Fever* was closing out its 24th week at No. 1 on the charts. *Fantasy Island* was about to premiere on the ABC network and Ted Bundy was commencing his final killing spree; taking two Florida coeds in one night.

Now, in Lower Manhattan another fiend was at work. He was born Dagoberto Rojas, but those who survived to speak his name, knew him as *Superman*.

An ex-firefighter from Santo Domingo, Rojas had run afoul of the ruling junta in the late 1960's. He'd been jailed for years before escaping to New York where he'd found his true calling as a serial arsonist. For more than two years now he'd wreaked havoc across the Lower East Side, lighting fires, smashing boilers and breaking water mains. Landlords would hire the fearsome Dominican to clean out their rent controlled buildings and Superman did it with the efficiency of a surgeon cauterizing a wound.

Still, half a dozen people got burned in his fires; among them an elderly woman and three-year-old twins. When told of the death toll, Rojas would just laugh and say "*Muerte a los bomberos.*" Death to the firefighters who think they can stop me.

They called him Superman, in part, because no one could touch him and in part because he'd survived a six story jump when he'd been cornered by fire marshals on the top floor of a tenement. After that, he'd joke that they needed "Kryptonite bullets" to kill him.

Indeed, Rojas seemed to revel in his infamy. With the face of a cruel, pock-marked, Antonio Banderas, he had huge flames tattooed to his shoulders. His knuckles bore prison tats that spelled FUEGO on one hand and FLAME on the other. After years in stir he'd developed a jones for tall, leggy big-busted Latin transsexuals. The man just refused to get hurt or get collared and he was always four steps ahead.

This bothered Eddie Burke who had a particular problem with arrogance. A firefighter himself, he'd spent six years in an FDNY ladder company and another four in Rescue One, the oldest heavy rescue company in the world. It was Eddie's job to go in with the second alarm response and pull bodies out of burning buildings. But in one out of every five fires, he'd smell an accelerant — kerosene, naphthalene, sterno or white gas.

After gunfire, arson was the leading cause of homicide in New York City. The death toll was mounting, so he decided to do something about it — transferring to Manhattan Base where he worked as a catching fire marshal. He'd been on the job six months when he pushed Superman up to the top of his chart.

Dagoberto Rojas was the Number One, undefeated torch in the Manhattan. The Rocky Marciano of first degree burns. Twenty-two fires — six deaths and nobody could get near him — until tonight.

1

HE PULLED UP TO THE DECREPIT ROWHOUSE in a black '72 Econoline van. Dirty needles crunched on the sidewalk along Avenue C when he got out. It was a piss-numbing, sub-zero night down in Alphabet City and at half-past-two in the morning the streets were dead. The arsonist looked around before he slid the van door open. There was enough gasoline inside to take down a city block.

The two red cans looked black in the night scope as Eddie Burke watched him from the roof across the street.

"Squad four-eight to four-one," Eddie whispered over the three-inch Motorola Handie-Talkie clipped to his turnout coat.

"Four-one. You got him Burke?" Supervising Fire Marshal Mike Kivlihan was on Avenue A and Houston St. standing in front of 16 Engine and 5 Truck.

There were thirteen firefighters behind him, waiting for the word.

"Yeah," said Eddie. "And it's gasoline again, which means a fast in and out."

"So? What *about* it?"

"I asked for two *blocks*. You're five minutes away."

"Who gives a shit? The place is unoccupied."

Kivlihan was an nasty little bantam rooster. A short man in a big man's job. But Eddie kept pressing.

"A lot of crack heads use the buildings down here."

"I thought you said the windows were covered with in."

"They are."

"Then it's empty . . ."

Kivlihan turned and played to the men behind him.

"Look, this is *your* party, asshole. I got two pieces of apparatus and we're on the clock. Now are you gonna do this or not?"

Eddie shook his head. Among the marshals, Kivlihan was known as an empty suit, a desk jockey who'd gone on light duty after a minor injury his third year in an engine company. He'd ass-kissed his way through the ranks ever since.

"Just *be* there." Eddie punched out.

He grabbed a Halligan forcible-entry tool and a nylon lifeline. He moved down off the roof while, below in the shadows, Superman used an eight-inch crowbar to pop open a basement window. The building had been boarded-up for months now. The end townhouse in a block of brownstones designed at the turn of the century by McKim, Mead & White. A row of six-story belle époque buildings that had been granted landmark status in 1976. And that was their death sentence.

The law was designed for preservation, but arson investigators like Eddie Burke knew that it was an open invitation to burn. Landmark buildings could only be renovated along precise lines approved by the city's Department of Housing, Preservation and Development. Brownstones like this cost ten times as much to bring back to life as conventional structures.

So many landlords, finding themselves with an expensive "old lady" to take care of, simply put out the word for a torch.

In this case, no one knew that the landlord had already drawn up the plans for a twenty-story tan brick highrise of Section Eight housing. He'd get an insurance payout for the burn and federal matching funds to replace the glorious old brownstone that was too expensive to renovate.

And once again a little piece of the city would die. That's how things went in New York and after ten years as a firefighter watching Manhattan burn away, Eddie Burke decided to get his revenge. He could do it with a gun or a bottle, but for now it would happen when he finally put the bracelets on this piece of shit from Santo Dom. He would grab him; arrest him downstairs in the boiler room as he set the incendiary device.

The first-alarm response was on standby with Kivlihan just in case Eddie was late or the fire-starter beat him to the match. But Burke wouldn't let that happen. He turned off his radio and watched now in silence as Rojas disappeared through the basement doorway.

Inside, the arsonist worked quickly. He went to the boiler room and jerked the short chain on an overhead bulb that was dangling from a cord. The darkened room lit up. There was still power in the building, so the landlord could keep the boiler on low and prevent the pipes from freezing. In the fire investigation that would follow, he would argue that he'd fully intended to renovate the landmark but fate or some faulty wiring had intervened.

Superman pulled off a backpack and set it on the floor. He unzipped it and took out a head-mounted flashlight.

Switching it on, he turned off the light and unscrewed the bulb, plugging in a small socket that would accept an extension cord.

He then moved toward the oil storage tank for the boiler and tapped it. As he suspected, it was almost empty, so he unscrewed the caps on the 15 gallon oil cans and poured the contents into a spout at the top of the tank. It now contained enough No. 4 heating fuel to break windows a block away when it blew.

Eddie was moving through the alley at the side of the building now. There was a vacant lot next door from an earlier three-alarm blaze and he saw a half-dozen rotted out mattresses where the junkies would lie on summer nights and shoot smack. But not tonight. The temperature was 15 below.

At the back of the building, there was a fire escape with a "pull-down" ladder. Eddie reached up with the Halligan tool and yanked it down. Then he climbed up and began making his way along the old rusted fire escape. At one point it shook, and one of the second floor bolts sheared. The thing rocked.

"Jesus Christ . . ."

Eddie said it under his breath as he grabbed the rail. Fire escapes were an afterthought on a building like this and they were the last part of the infrastructure to ever get serviced. This one had rusted out years ago and Eddie wasn't sure if it would take his full weight. So he moved up cautiously to the third floor landing and headed for the roof.

Down in the boiler room now, Superman reached into the backpack and pulled out two white extension cords. He plugged one into the socket where the bulb had been, then took out a small house timer. The kind people use to try and fool the home invaders when they take a trip. Superman plugged the timer into the first extension cord and the second cord into the timer.

He clipped off the end of that cord and stripped it, exposing the wires and twisting them into a pig's-tail.

Now, with the ice-blooded precision of a veteran bomb maker, he reached into the backpack and came out with a small empty jelly jar. He'd already drilled a quarter inch hole in the lid. The jar was stuffed with cotton. In the light from the head-mounted flash, he carefully unzipped an inner pocket of the backpack and took out a prescription pill bottle full of liquid. Inside was a 30% solution of water and diluted nitroglycerine.

2

UPON THE FIRE ESCAPE NOW Eddie was two steps from the top landing when it buckled again.

The thing shook. Eddie fell back a few rungs and hung on. The old wrought iron stairwell made a creaking sound and down in the basement, Superman stopped cold. He looked upstairs, cocking his head like a predatory beast and listened again. He moved his way out from the boiler room and panned the flashlight. A rat darted across the floor and he smiled.

"El raton . . ."

Outside now, Eddie held his breath and moved up the stairs, touching them like eggshells. The fire escape creaked one more time, but he lunged up and grabbed onto the edge of the roof coping, pulling himself over. He hyperventilated, staring up at the twin towers of the World Trade Center to his right. Then he got up and moved to the bulkhead which led to the top floor brownstone landing. He inserted the Halligan tool in the door and was about to pop it, when he saw smoke.

"Mother of Christ." Eddie jumped on the two-way.

"Four-eight to four-one. There's somebody in the building."

Kivlihan clicked back.

"No shit. The fucking torch."

"No . . . Somebody's on one of the *floors*. A civilian."

"That's bullshit."

"Hey. I'm on the roof and there's smoke from a cooking fire coming out of one of the chimneys."

"Maybe the maggot decided to have a fucking burrito before he blew it."

"No. I'm goin' down to see."

"That's a *negative*." Kivlihan hissed at him, so Eddie hit the transmit button.

"Sorry. You're breaking up." He punched out and popped the door.

Now, down below, the arsonist was certain he heard a noise. He rushed back into the boiler room to finish the job as Eddie made his way down, two steps at a time through the darkened building. Because Rojas was downstairs, it was too risky to use a Maglite. But four years in a rescue crew had given Eddie an instinct for moving in the dark.

Coming in on Rescue One's Mack R truck when it was so black that he had to crawl across the floor on his hands and knees. Sucking compressed air through a Scott bottle with temperatures hitting eight hundred degrees, he'd feel his way through as he searched for bodies. Some times the smoke was so thick that he had to clip a fireproof lifeline on the first piece of metal inside the door just to find his way out.

Now, by instinct, Eddie moved down along the cast iron stairwell, checking each door on the way for any sign of light. Then, he smelled it. The smoke he'd seen on the roof. He saw a flicker of light beneath the transom. Eddie felt the door. He turned the nob and inched it open.

Inside, there was a fire smoldering in a rusted fifty-five gallon drum. Someone had started it with the wood from a shipping pallet. Across the mouth of the barrel there was a piece of chicken on a crude spit that was burned to a crisp.

The smoke was traveling up through the ducts of the old forced-air heating system. Eddie flicked on a pen-light flash and shined it across the room.

"Oh Jesus."

In the opposite corner he saw a woman in her early twenties. Black, lying on her side, her eyes wide, tongue out . . . The needle was still in her arm.

An overdose. Eddie rushed over and felt for a pulse.

"Fuck." He pulled his hand away.

The body was stone cold and stiff as a board. He was about to take off for the basement, when he saw something move under a ratty old blanket. He grabbed the butt-end of the Halligan tool, figuring it for a rat. Then he pulled the blanket away to smash it and . . .

"Holy Christ . . ."

It was an infant, lying in urine soaked "feety" pajamas and turning blue from the cold.

He pushed the two-way and whispered.

"Burke to four-one. There's one DOA and one living . . . A baby. Can't be more than three months."

"Leave it and get down to the basement. I'll have Rescue there in five minutes."

"Christ Kivie, no. If it blows . . ."

"He won't risk it. He's got to get out first."

"But this kid's gonna freeze to dea—"

Kivie stopped him.

"That is a fucking *order*, Mister. Now get down there."

Eddie hesitated. The tiny baby was trembling now. He felt like it could die any second in his arms. Then he looked down below where the target was and . . .

"Fuck it." He ripped open his Nomex turnout coat and shoved the baby inside. Then he pushed out, down toward the first-floor landing.

Now in the basement, Superman duct-taped the house timer to the side of the oil storage tank. He knelt down and unscrewed the cap on the jelly jar full of cotton. He slowly removed the top of the pill bottle and poured in the diluted Nitro mixture. It quickly saturated the cotton. This combination was known in the bomb trade as nitrocellulose or guncotton.

Next he pressed down on the cotton-nitro mixture, creating a half-inch of space at the top of the jar. He inserted the wire pigs-tail through the hole and bit off a small piece of duct tape to secure the "Y" so that it would sit in the jar a quarter-inch above the cotton.

He then screwed the cap on and carefully duct-taped the jar to the side of the storage tank a few inches away from the house timer.

Rojas checked his watch. It was 2:32 a.m. He set the timer for 2:40. Eight minutes. Plenty of time for him to get out. Finally, he pulled the chain on the overheard cord sending power through the circuit he'd created.

The highly flammable vapors would rise up from the jar. When the timer hit 2:40 a.m. it would complete the circuit, causing a short. A spark would flash along the wire pigs-tail inside the jar lid. That would blow the guncotton and set off the storage tank full of heating fuel. Superman would be having a Bustelo at a social club full of witnesses a block away and he'd laugh when the dominos fell on the table nearby from the shock of the blast.

Up above, Eddie was moving down the pitch black stairwell. He was on the second floor landing about to step down, when he stopped. Instinct held him back. Instinct and the draft he felt at the landing's edge. He reached out for the railing and there was nothing. The baby inside his jacket was beginning to cry now.

It was just warm enough to feel pain. And as Eddie switched on the penlight flash, he rocked back.

"Fuck me . . ."

He holstered the gun and looked down. Scavengers had been into the building. They'd taken out the first floor wrought-iron stairwell for scrap. Now there was a fifteen foot drop to the first floor and Eddie had an infant in his coat.

He hit the two-way.

"Move in."

Kivlihan jumped on the radio. "You got him?"

"Not exactly. But this kid here's about to die. Send EMS. Thermal blanket. The full load-out."

Kivlihan almost exploded. "Where the fuck's Rojas?"

"I don't know, but the fire escape's gone and I'm a little short of a first floor landing here."

He looked down at the open drop to the basement when just then, through a hole in the floor where the scavengers had hacked away at the stairwell, he saw a light flash.

Superman.

Eddie dropped the lifeline from over his shoulder and snapped it onto the second floor railing with a carabiner. He held his right arm around the baby and slid down the line with his left . . . boom . . . to the first floor.

When he heard the sound Rojas stopped in his tracks. He ran his odds and thought fast. If the bombers came in, he would give them a little *regalo*. Take the fucking skin off their faces.

So he moved back to the boiler room, shined the light on the timer and shortened the blast time.

Now it would go off in four minutes at 2:36. Just enough time for him to climb out through the basement window.

He was on his way there when Eddie Burke came down the back stairs and reached the opposite end of the basement. He drew his Smith & Wesson .38 and moved toward the boiler room when he smelled it.

The gasoline.

Ten feet away he could hear the timer. *Click, click, click.* He looked around left, then right, searching through the dark with eyes that few other men had. That's when he saw it. The flash of silver as Rojas pulled out a narrow blade.

Eddie pointed the Smith at the shadow just below the window and cocked it.

"That's it Rojas. Come out where I can see you.

From the dark he heard. "Fuck you man and fuck your mother."

Eddie turned toward the timer which was just clicking past 2:34.

"You shoot me this whole fucking place gonna blow," said the arsonist.

"That's *one* way to end your career," said Eddie. "Now get the fuck out here."

Click, click click.

"It's set to blow in two, cabrone."

Just then, from outside, they heard the sirens. Now Superman had to make a decision. He could take his chances up the back stairs with a piece-of-cake jump from the first floor landing or run into half-a-dozen six-foot Irishmen with fire axes coming in the front door.

It wasn't even a choice.

"Fuck you man . . ."

And with that he darted out through the dark toward the back of the basement.

In a second, Eddie was after him, drawing the baby to his chest as he chased the Dominican psychopath down along the basement hallway toward the back. Superman was almost at the foot of the stairwell when, suddenly . . . Eddie lunged forward and threw out the Halligan tool. The ax-like blade spun end-over-end and knocked the arsonist down.

Eddie ran up to him, about to pull out the cuffs, when, the baby cried. Rojas smiled like a pit viper. He knew that Eddie was vulnerable, so he slashed out with the knife.

“Christ.” Eddie went down in agony.

Rojas had cut a six-inch slice across his thigh.

“Fuck you maricon,” said Superman. “You could of had me but you stopped for some fucking kid that was dead before it was fucking born. You deserve to blow . . .”

And with that, he jammed the knife into Eddie’s thigh, kicking past him and taking off up the stairs.

Eddie was almost in shock now from the pain. The narrow bladed stiletto was buried up to the hilt. But the baby was crying and the fire marshal knew that there wasn’t much time.

He looked at the luminous dial on his black plastic Casio. 2:35 a.m. Less than a minute to go. With all the strength that he had, Eddie pulled himself up by the stairwell railing.

The little baby was bawling now as Eddie backed up the rear stairs, one at a time.

Blood was pouring from the knife wound and across the basement, the timer clicked away.

Finally, Eddie got to the first floor landing.

He pushed to a hallway window and, with his good leg, kicked away at the tin. A flap opened in the corner of the window and he looked down.

It was twenty feet to the pile of rubble in the lot next store where he'd come in.

The baby was starting to convulse now and Eddie wasn't sure if it would survive the fall. He couldn't even feel his leg. The stiletto was buried down to the bone. He checked his watch – thirty seconds – and kicked out at the rest of the tin.

The Mac R truck from Rescue One screeched into the lot next door and a four- team jumped off. They shined their lights up at the building as Eddie climbed onto the window ledge. He looked down at the mattresses in the lot below and yelled.

"Get back. Its about to blow . . ."

And with that, the timer clicked. The circuit was made. The line shorted out. The sparks flashed and the nitro-soaked cotton ignited, blowing Eddie Burke, arms across his chest to swaddle the infant, out the window and down twenty feet to the mattresses as the rescue team rocked back from the blast and the landmark brownstone erupted in flames . . .

That's all Eddie remembered. The sight of the rescue truck and their lights and then blackness, until he woke up ten minutes later on a gurney. A paramedic leaned in over him and flicked on a flashlight to check his vitals.

Eddie coughed up some blood and wheezed out, "The kid?"

The paramedic shook his head.

"It was gone before the thing ever blew."

"What was it?" said Eddie. "A boy or a girl?"

"Little girl. Sorry Ed."

The fire marshal started to get up, but then felt the shooting pain in his thigh.

Just then, Bobby Vasquez moved up to him smiling.

He'd worked with Eddie back at 214 Engine in Bed Stuy and was now a fellow marshal at Manhattan Base.

Bobby held up an evidence bag with Superman's pearl handled stiletto. "Right down to the fuckin' femur Burke. This is definitely gonna affect your golf game."

"I don't play golf."

"That's good, cause you sure as shit can't start now." A half dozen firefighters nearby laughed. Bobby moved over and patted Eddie on the back.

"The old man'd be proud."

For some reason, the reference to his father caused Eddie to look away bitterly, when just then, Kivlihan, the rat-faced supervisor, rushed up to him.

"Goddamn you, Burke. There's a chain of command here."

Eddie pushed himself up on the gurney as Vasquez turned to Kivlihan.

"Hey Kivie. Lighten up for Crissakes. He oughta get the Bennett Medal for this."

"What he's gonna *get* is a goddamn write-up with IAB." Kivlihan looked across at the burnt-out hulk.

"Landmark building. Six alarms."

"So, what was he gonna do? There was a kid in there."

"Yeah, a dead kid."

Eddie pushed himself up on his good leg. He gritted his teeth from the pain. The morphine was kicking in.

"You know somethin' Kivie?"

"What's that?"

"I don't *like* you."

And with that, Eddie hauled back with his left and broke Kivie's jaw. The Supervisor went down like a sack of shit as Eddie dropped back on the gurney.

"Jesus Christ," said one of the probationary fire-fighters, who moved in to see. "What the hell was that?"

Vasquez looked down at Eddie and shook his head.

"That, my friend, was a righteous left-cross."

The probie smiled.

The EMS guy strapped Eddie onto the gurney and nodded to his partner to wheel him off. As they moved past Kivlihan, the partner looked down.

"What about *him*?"

Kivlihan was on the ground now in agony. He was holding his jaw shut with his hands.

The paramedic grinned. "This fuck can wait . . ."