Fire Sale

Sara Paretsky

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Extract

PROLOGUE

I was halfway down the embankment when I saw the red-orange flash. I dropped to the ground and covered my head with my arms. And felt a pain in my shoulder so intense I couldn't even cry out.

Lying facedown in bracken and trash, I breathed in shallow panting breaths, a dog, eyes glazed, until the pain receded enough that I could move. I edged away from the flames on my hands and knees, then drew myself up on my knees and sat very still. I willed my breaths to come slow and deep, pushing the pain far enough away to manage it. Finally, I put a gingerly hand to my left shoulder. A stick. Metal or glass, some piece of the window that had shot out like an arrow from a crossbow. I tugged on the stick, but that sent such a river of agony flowing through me that I started to black out. I curled over, cradling my head on my knees.

When the wave subsided, I looked across at the factory. The back window that had blown apart was awash with fire, blue-red now, a mass so thick I couldn't make out flames, just the blur of hot color. Bolts of fabric were stored there, fueling the blaze.

And Frank Zamar. I remembered him with a sudden appalled jolt.

Where had he been when that fireball blew up? I pushed myself to my feet as best I could and stumbled forward.

Weeping with pain, I pulled out my picklocks and tried to scrabble my way into the lock. It wasn't until my third futile attempt that I remembered my cell phone. I fumbled it out of my pocket and called 911.

While I waited on the fire trucks, I kept trying the lock. The stabbing in my left shoulder made it hard for me to maneuver the thin wards. I tried to brace them with my left hand, but my whole left side was shaking; I couldn't hold the picklocks steady.

I hadn't expected the fire—I hadn't expected anything when I came here. It was only some pricking of unease—dis-ease—that sent me back to Fly the Flag on my way home. I'd actually made the turn onto Route 41 when I decided to check on the factory. I'd made a U-turn onto Escanaba and zigzagged across the broken streets to South Chicago Avenue. It was six o'clock then, already dark, but I could see a handful of cars in Fly the Flag's yard when I drove by. There weren't any pedestrians out, not that there are ever many down here; only a few cars straggled past, beaters, people leaving the few standing factories to head for bars or even home.

I left my Mustang on one of the side streets, hoping it wouldn't attract any roving punk's attention. I tucked my cell phone and wallet into my coat pockets, took my picklocks from the glove compartment, and locked my bag in the trunk.

Under cover of the cold November night, I scrambled up the embankment behind the plant, the steep hill that lifts the toll road over the top of the old neighborhood. The roar of traffic on the Skyway above me blocked any sounds I made—including my own squawk when I caught my foot in a discarded tire and tumbled hard to the ground.

From my perch under the expressway I could see the back entrance and the side yard, but not the front of the plant. When the shift ended at seven, I could just make out the shapes of people plodding to the bus stop. A few cars bumped behind them down the potholed drive to the road.

Lights were still on at the north end of the plant. One of the basement

windows facing me also showed a pale fluorescent glow. If Frank Zamar were still on the premises, he could be doing something—anything—from checking inventory to planting dead rats in the vents. I wondered if I could find a crate in the rubble that would get me high enough to see into the back. I was halfway down the hillside, searching through the debris, when the window went briefly dark, then burst into fiery life.

I was still struggling to undo the front lock when sirens keened up South Chicago Avenue. Two trucks, a command car, and a phalanx of blue-and-whites screamed into the yard.

Men in black slickers surrounded me. Easy there, miss, move away, we've got it covered, the ka-chung of axes breaking metal, my God—look at that thing in her shoulder, get her an ambulance, a giant gloved hand scooping me up as easily as if I were an infant, not a 140-pound detective, and then, as I sat sideways on the command car's passenger seat, feet on the ground, panting again, a familiar voice:

"Ms. W., what in Jesus' name are you doing here?"

I looked up, startled, and felt giddy with relief. "Conrad! Where'd you come from? How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't, but I might have guessed if buildings were blowing up on my turf that you'd be close by. What happened?"

"I don't know." The current of pain was sweeping through me again, tugging me loose from my moorings. "Zamar. Where is he?"

"Who's Zamar—your newest victim?"

"Plant owner, commander," a man outside my narrow field of vision said. "Trapped in there."

A walkie-talkie squawked, cell phones rang, men talked, engines clanged, soot-grimed faces carried a charred body. I shut my eyes and let the current pull me away.

I came to briefly when the ambulance arrived. I stumbled to the rear doors on my own, but the EMT crew had to lift me into the back. When they had me strapped in, awkwardly, on my side, the jolting of the ambulance drew me down to a tiny point of pain. If I shut my eyes I felt sick to my stomach, but the light stabbed through me when I opened them.

As we swooped in through the ambulance entrance, I vaguely noticed the hospital's name, but it was all I could do to mutter answers to the questions the triage nurse was asking. I somehow got my insurance card out of my wallet, signed forms, put down Lotty Herschel as my doctor, told them to notify Mr. Contreras if anything happened to me. I tried to call Morrell, but they wouldn't let me use my cell phone, and, anyway, they had me on a gurney. Someone stuck a needle into the back of my hand, other someones stood over me saying they'd have to cut away my clothes.

I tried to protest: I was wearing a good suit under my navy peacoat, but by then the drug was taking hold and my words came out in a senseless gabble. I was never completely anesthetized, but they must have given me an amnesia drug: I couldn't remember them cutting off my clothes or taking out the piece of window frame from my back.

I was conscious by the time I was wheeled to a bed. The drugs and a throb in my shoulder both kept jerking me awake whenever I dozed off. When the resident came in at six, I was awake in that dull, grinding way that comes from a sleepless night and puts a layer of gauze between you and the world.

She'd been up all night herself, handling surgical emergencies like mine; even though her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep, she was young enough to perch on the chair by my bed and talk in a bright, almost perky voice.

"When the window blew apart, a fragment of the frame shot into your shoulder. You were lucky it was cold last night—your coat stopped the bolt from going deep enough to do real damage." She held out an eight-inch piece of twisted metal—mine to keep, if I wanted it.

"We're going to send you home now," she added, after checking my heart and head and the reflexes in my left hand. "It's the new medicine, you know. Out of the operating room, into a cab. Your wound is going to heal nicely. Just don't let the dressing get wet for a week, so no showers. Come back next Friday to the outpatient clinic; we'll change the dressing and see how you're doing. What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm an investigator. Detective."

"So can you stop investigating for a day or two, detective? Get some rest, let the anesthesia work itself out of your system and you'll be fine. Is there anyone you can call to drive you home, or should we get you into a cab?"

"I asked them to call a friend last night," I said. "I don't know if they did." I also didn't know if Morrell could manage the trip down here. He was recovering from bullet wounds that almost killed him in Afghanistan this past summer; I wasn't sure he had the stamina to drive forty miles.

"I'll take her." Conrad Rawlings had materialized in the doorway.

I was too sluggish to feel surprised or pleased or even flustered at seeing him. "Sergeant—or, no, you've been promoted, haven't you? Is it lieutenant now? You out checking on all the victims of last night's accident?"

"Just the ones who raise a red flag when they're within fifty miles of the crime scene." I couldn't see much emotion in his square copper face—not the concern of an old lover, not even the anger of an old lover who'd been angry when he left me. "And, yeah, I've been promoted: watch commander now down at 103rd and Oglesby. I'll be outside the lobby when the doc here pronounces you fit to tear up the South Side again."

The resident signed my discharge papers, wrote me prescriptions for Vicodin and Cipro, and turned me over to the nursing staff. A nurse's aide handed me the remnants of my clothes. I could wear the trousers, although they smelled sooty and had bits of the hillside embedded in them, but my coat, jacket, and rose silk blouse had all been slit across the shoulders. Even my bra strap had been cut. It was the silk shirt that made me start to cry, that and the jacket. They were part of a cherished outfit; I'd worn them in the morning—yesterday morning—to make a presentation to a downtown client before heading to the South Side.

The nurse's aide didn't care about my grief one way or another, but she did agree I couldn't go out in public without any clothes. She went to the charge nurse, who scrounged an old sweatshirt for me from someplace. By the time we'd done all that, and found an orderly to wheel me to the lobby, it was almost nine.

Conrad had used police privilege to park right in front of the entrance. He was asleep when the orderly wheeled me out, but he came to when I opened the passenger door.

"Woof. Long night, Ms. W., long night." He knuckled sleep from his eyes and put the car into gear. "You still in the old crib up by Wrigley? I heard you mention a boyfriend to the doc."

"Yes." To my annoyance, my mouth was dry and the word came out as a squawk.

"Not that Ryerson guy, I trust."

"Not the Ryerson guy. Morrell. A writer. He got shot to pieces last summer covering the Afghanistan war."

Conrad grunted in a way that managed to heap contempt on mere writers who get shot to pieces: he himself had been hit by machine-gun fire in Vietnam.

"Anyway, your sister tells me you haven't taken monastic vows, either." Conrad's sister Camilla sits on the board of the same women's shelter I do.

"You always did have a way with a phrase, Ms. W. Monastic vows. Nope, none of them."

Neither of us spoke again. Conrad turned his police-issue Buick into Jackson Park. We joined a heavy stream of cars, the tag end of the morning rush, filing through the Jackson Park construction zone onto Lake Shore Drive. A feeble autumn sun was trying to break through the cloud cover, and the air had a sickly light that hurt my eyes.

"You called it a crime scene," I finally said, just to break the silence. "Was it arson? Was that Frank Zamar the firemen carried out?"

He grunted again. "No way of knowing till we hear from the medical examiner, but we're assuming it was—talked to the foreman, who said Zamar was the only person left in the building when the shift ended. As far as arson goes—can't tell that, either, not until the arson squad goes through there, but I don't think the guy died from neglect."

Conrad switched the conversation, asking me about my old friend Lotty Herschel—he'd been surprised not to see her down at the hospital with me, her being a doctor and my big protector and all.

I explained I hadn't had time to make any calls. I kept wondering about Morrell, but I wasn't going to share that with Conrad. Probably the hospital hadn't bothered to call him—otherwise, surely, he would've phoned me, even if he couldn't make the drive. I tried not to think of

Marcena Love, sleeping in Morrell's guest room. Anyway, she was frying other fish these days. These nights. I abruptly asked Conrad how he liked being so far from the center of action.

"South Chicago is the center of action, if you're a cop," he said. "Homicide, gangs, drugs—we got it all. And arson, plenty of that, lots of old factories and what-do being sold to the insurance companies."

He pulled up in front of my building. "The old guy, Contreras, he still living on the ground floor? We going to have to spend an hour with him before we go upstairs?"

"Probably. And there's no 'we' about it, Conrad: I can manage the stairs on my own."

"I know you got the strength, Ms. W., but you don't think it was nostalgia for your beautiful gray eyes that brought me to the hospital this morning, do you? We're going to talk, you and I. You're going to tell me the whole story of what you were doing down at Fly the Flag last night. How did you know the place was going to blow up?"

"I didn't," I snapped. I was tired, my wound was aching, the anesthesia was dragging me down.

"Yeah, and I'm the Ayatollah of Detroit. Wherever you are, people get shot, maimed, killed, so either you knew it was going to happen or you made it happen. What got you so interested in that factory?"

There was bitterness in his voice, but the accusation stung me to an anger that roused me from my torpor. "You got shot four years ago because you wouldn't listen to me when I knew something. Now you won't listen to me when I don't know anything. I am exhausted from you not listening to me."

He gave a nasty police smile, the pale sunlight glinting on his gold front tooth. "Then your wish is granted. I am going to listen to every word you say. Once we finish running the gauntlet."

The end of the sentence came out under his breath: Mr. Contreras and the two dogs I share with him had apparently been watching for me, because all three came bounding down the front walk as soon as I got out of the car. Mr. Contreras checked his step when he saw Conrad. Although he had never approved of my dating a black man, he had helped

me nurse my broken heart when Conrad left me, and was clearly staggered to see us arrive together. The dogs showed no such restraint. Whether they remembered Conrad or not I didn't know: Peppy is a golden retriever and her son Mitch is half Lab—they give everyone from the meter reader to the Grim Reaper the same high-energy salute.

Mr. Contreras followed them slowly down the walk, but when he realized I'd been injured he became both solicitous and annoyed because I hadn't told him at once. "I would've come got you, Cookie, if you'd a only let me know, no need for a police escort."

"It was late at night when it all happened and they released me first thing this morning," I said gently. "Conrad's a commander now, anyway, at the Fourth District. This factory that burned last night is in his territory, so he wants to find out what I know about it—he won't believe it's sweet nothing at all."

In the end, we all went up to my apartment together, the dogs, the old man, Conrad. My neighbor bustled around in my kitchen and produced a bowl of yogurt with sliced apples and brown sugar. He even coaxed a double espresso out of my battered stove-top machine.

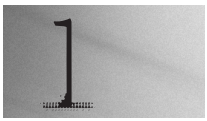
I stretched out on the couch, the dogs on the floor next to me. Mr. Contreras took the armchair, while Conrad pulled up the piano bench so he could watch my face while I talked. He pulled a cassette recorder from his pocket and recorded the date and place we were talking.

"Okay, Ms. W., this is on the record. You tell me the whole story of what you were doing in South Chicago."

"It's my home," I said. "I belong there more than you do."

"Forget that: you haven't lived there for twenty-five years or more."

"Doesn't matter. You know as well as me that in this town, your childhood home dogs you your whole life."



REMEMBRANCES OF THINGS PAST

Going back to South Chicago has always felt to me like a return to death. The people I loved most, those fierce first attachments of childhood, had all died in this abandoned neighborhood on the city's southeast edge. It's true my mother's body, my father's ashes, lie elsewhere, but I had tended both through painful illnesses down here. My cousin Boom-Boom, close as a brother—closer than a brother—had been murdered here fifteen years ago. In my nightmares, yellow smoke from the steel mills still clouds my eyes, but the giant smokestacks that towered over my childhood landscape are now only ghosts themselves.

After Boom-Boom's funeral, I'd vowed never to return, but such vows are grandiose; you can't keep them. Still, I try. When my old basketball coach called to beg, or maybe command me to fill in for her while she dealt with cancer surgery, I said "No," reflexively.

"Victoria, basketball got you out of this neighborhood. You owe something to the girls who've come behind you to give them the chance you had."

It wasn't basketball but my mother's determination I would have a university education that got me out of South Chicago, I said. And my

ACTs were pretty darn good. But as Coach McFarlane pointed out, the athletic scholarship to the University of Chicago didn't hurt.

"Even so, why doesn't the school hire a substitute for you?" I asked petulantly.

"You think they pay me to coach?" Her voice rose in indignation. "It's Bertha Palmer High, Victoria. It's South Chicago. They don't have any resources and now they're on intervention, which means every available dime goes to preparing kids for standardized tests. It's only because I volunteer that they keep the girls' program alive, and it's on life support as it is: I have to scrounge for money to pay for uniforms and equipment."

Mary Ann McFarlane had taught me Latin as well as basketball; she'd retooled herself to teach geometry when the school stopped offering all languages except Spanish and English. Through all the changes, she'd kept coaching basketball. I hadn't realized any of that until the afternoon she called.

"It's only two hours, two afternoons a week," she added.

"Plus up to an hour's commute each way," I said. "I can't take this on: I have an active detective agency, I'm working without an assistant, I'm taking care of my lover who got shot to bits in Afghanistan. And I still have to look after my own place and my two dogs."

Coach McFarlane wasn't impressed—all this was just so much excuse making. *"Quotidie damnatur qui semper timet,"* she said sharply.

I had to recite the words several times before I could translate them: The person who is always afraid is condemned every day. "Yeah, maybe, but I haven't played competitive basketball for two decades. The younger women who join our pickup games at the Y on Saturdays play a faster, meaner game than I ever did. Maybe one of those twenty-somethings has two afternoons a week to give you—I'll talk to them this weekend."

"There's nothing to make one of those young gals come down to Ninetieth and Houston," she snapped. "This is your neighborhood, these are your neighbors, not that tony Lakeview where you think you're hiding out."

That annoyed me enough that I was ready to end the conversation,

until she added, "Just until the school finds someone else, Victoria. Or maybe a miracle will happen and I'll get back there."

That's how I knew she was dying. That's how I knew I was going to have to return once more to South Chicago, to make another journey into pain.