

## CHAPTER | 4

Thursday morning



The site was still cordoned off by red and white security tape. The air smelled sour: of smoke and vaguely of garbage.

I met arson<sup>55</sup> investigator Roger Beck at the grass-roofed picnic pavilion that was untouched by the fire and followed him as he ducked<sup>56</sup> under the tape.

“Let’s go around to the back, that’s where the fire was started,” Beck said.

“So, you already know that someone started this fire  
10 deliberately?” I asked.

<sup>55</sup> fire that is started deliberately and is illegal

<sup>56</sup> to bend down

“No doubt in my mind,” he answered, kicking aside a fallen beam that blocked our path. “Whoever started this fire wanted to be 100% sure that it would work. From the evidence I found, this is a case of overkill<sup>57</sup>, probably  
5 the work of a first-time arsonist.”

We walked deeper into the clubhouse ruins, stepping over collapsed walls and mangled metal table legs.

“Is this your first arson case?” asked Beck pointing the way to a large back room.

10 “Yes, believe it or not – even after more than a decade on the force.” I felt a bit embarrassed, but soon realized that Roger Beck just wanted to know what he needed to clarify for me.

“Let me explain something you need to know: there  
15 are two ways of making a fire burn hot, strong and fast. Firstly, light it low down. On the ground floor or basement, for example. Secondly, ventilate it high up, making a path for the air to flow upwards. Every fire needs a good supply of oxygen, without it your fire will  
20 die out sooner rather than later, no matter how much lighter fluid<sup>58</sup> you pour on.”

We had arrived at the large recreation room<sup>59</sup> at the back of the clubhouse – presumably one of the rooms in which the ‘Clewiston Casino’ was to be found on Friday  
25 nights.

57 too much of something

58 liquid which burns, e. g. used in cigarette lighters

59 a room for relaxing or having fun

“So it looks like our arsonist opened the roof vents<sup>60</sup> and knocked a few holes through the first floor ceiling.”

Beck pointed to two holes in the ceiling on the far side of the room.

5 “And, see this?” said Beck, pulling back a blackened scrap of what once must have been wall-to-wall carpet and pointing to a black shape burned into the floor boards.

10 “This is where he first poured the gasoline. We know it’s gasoline because the fire fighters said yesterday’s smoke was black – that’s a sure sign in itself.”

Even I could have told you it was gasoline: my nose was tingling and twitching from the smell that still hung in the air.

15 “The arsonist wanted to make sure the building was completely destroyed, so he splashed gasoline against these two walls.”

Beck drew a large arc<sup>61</sup> with his arm against the far wall and another on the wall opposite. I started to cough  
20 from the smell. Beck didn’t seem to notice, so I patted my chest and followed him to a corner of the room, where he bent down, rubbed the floor and smelled his fingers.

25 “He probably lit the fire with a slow-burning cigarette attached to a pack of matches – totally low-tech. There is no evidence of any kind that he used a mechanical or electronic timer. Once he lit the cigarette, he had just a few minutes to get to the other side of the building.”

60 opening for air to go through

61 a curved line, part of a circle

Beck led me out of what was left of the recreation room, back into the entry hall and then down a small corridor to the right.

“This used to be the dining room,” he said pointing the way to a large room with only three walls left standing. Tables and chairs bore the scars of the fire.

“This was a large room. The arsonist probably poured gasoline in two different spots – unnecessary really. For some reason, this guy wanted to make sure that after the fire the building would be beyond repair. The clubhouse was a wood structure with just a few brick walls. That means all the walls and floors were highly flammable: set them alight and they will burn. I’m surprised the fire didn’t set off electrical explosions, which would have knocked this amateur<sup>62</sup> off his feet.”

“I guess he made it out all right,” I said, looking up at a framed picture of Ocean Drive along Miami Beach. One corner of the frame had melted and a black wave where the photo had burned seemed to be rising up from below.

“Of course,” continued Beck, “there is also the possibility that there were two or more people involved and that the fires in both locations were started at the same time.”

| 62 opposite of professional