

THE THINGS THAT LAST FOREVER

by Peter W.J. Hayes

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Sometimes you walk into a room and what's inside changes your life forever. That sense stopped Vic just inside the doorway. A woman with skin the color of dark amber lay on the only bed, her bandaged arms shockingly white among the shadows. She was reflected in a large window in the far wall, the outside sky as black and still as the inside of a tomb. He smelled disinfectant and blood. Numbers and graph lines flared on grey-eyed medical monitors. Somewhere in the vast empty spaces of the hospital a voice echoed.

He'd never visited a burn ward.

Never had a partner so close to death.

Never thought a room could seem as hollow as he felt inside.

The feeling was so disembodied that when he reached the bed and looked into the woman's face, he half expected to see himself. But it was Liz, her forehead and knobby cheekbones smeared with ointment, eyebrows and eyelashes burned away. A bandage covered her left earlobe where her favorite earring, a small gold star, usually sat. It seemed like every breath she took pained her.

He wanted to take her hand but the bandages made it impossible. "Liz," he said softly, her name almost lost among the beeps and clicks of the monitors. Liquid dripped into a tangle of IV tubes at the back of her fist.

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Liz. Doctor told me I could talk to you."

Her eyes opened. He watched her pupils widen and narrow as they absorbed the distance to the ceiling and distinguished shadows from feeble light.

"Vic?" A hoarse whisper.

"I'm here."

She turned her face to him. "You got me out."

Relief rose in Vic's throat. "Yeah. But the house didn't make it."

"Cora Stills?"

Vic squeezed his eyelids shut and rocked on his heels. He didn't know where to start. Cora Stills. The one person who knew something—anything—about his missing teenage daughter. Liz on her way to arrest her. Instead, Liz, handcuffed to a radiator pipe as flames lathered and

stormed through Cora's house. Cora's burned-out car found two days later on a crumbling stone dock next to a deserted warehouse, the Allegheny River emptying westward.

Cora, alive and moving through that tomb of darkness outside the window. Free.

"Vic..." Liz said something more but he couldn't make it out.

He bent closer.

She forced her words from somewhere deep inside, and as she spoke, he knew this was what she saved through all the fear and pain to tell him. "Someone told Cora I was coming."