

Excerpt
TEMPERATURE RISING
By Joel Burcat

Chapter 40

A familiar sound awoke Anna.

Click-click-click.

The sound floated through her head. It stopped. Then it began again.

Click-click-click.

Anna sat up with a start.

Silence.

She went to the door and held her breath.

Nothing. Just the humming and buzzing from the electrical systems. A clock ticking down the hall.

Slowly, she tiptoed to Connor's office. She stood behind a stack of file cabinets and looked. Dim light leaked under the door. Anna froze.

Anna wanted to run away, but she slowly walked closer.

It was dark. No steel balls clicking. The only light at this end of the floor was from the streetlights.

She calmed herself as she realized that the streetlights cast a glow into the window near Donna Russell's desk. She hoped that was the light she saw.

"Mr. Connor?" Anna whispered.

Silence.

She lightly tapped on his door.

"Mr. Connor?" she said more loudly.

Quiet.

Slowly, Anna tried the knob.

It was locked, but not pulled shut all the way.

She was sure it had been locked tightly when she tried it before.

She pushed the door open. The room was dark, illuminated only by the streetlight from outside. The desk was empty except for Newton's cradle.

It swayed back and forth, the way it did as it was coming to rest. *Conservation of momentum. Conservation of energy.*

Anna gasped. Why was it moving?

“Mr. Connor?” she said more loudly. She looked around the office.

No reply. She quickly looked behind Connor’s big leather chair. Nothing.

“Mr. Heftig?”

Silence.

Slowly, Anna turned and looked behind the door. She felt a creeping sensation on her back. The fine hair on her neck stood up straight.

Nothing.

Slowly, she continued turning to survey the entire office. Then she jumped. The air conditioner clicked on and a woosh came through the vent. A mountain range of goosebumps rose on her bare arms.

She looked at the desk. The Newton’s cradle was swaying in the breeze. She held her hand over the toy. The AC blew directly onto it. Just enough to make the balls click together quietly. They swayed in the breeze from the vent. Together. All five balls. Had this always been the case? Was the office so noisy during the day that she hadn’t noticed the quiet sound?

Anna took a deep breath, backed out of the office, and pulled the door until it clicked shut.

As she returned to her office, she glanced at the clock. It was 4:15. She was fifteen minutes late to meet Dread.

“Oh crap.”

Anna shot down the hallway to the freight elevator. It seemed to take forever to come to her floor. As the door closed she remembered something and stuck her hand into the narrow opening, pushing the rubberized safety bar and making the door open. She ran to room 2-Y and used her key to get back inside. She grabbed the beat up briefcase from the corner, the one with SOF stamped on the side, and ran back to the elevator.

The elevator slowly descended to the basement. No matter how many times she pressed the button, it went at the same annoying speed. She worked her way through the maintenance room and placed the cardboard into position at the door. She put the briefcase in the corner on the loading dock. Then she hustled to L Street and looked up and down. No Dread. No people. Not even a taxi.

The air was chilly and Anna regretted forgetting to put on her sweater, which was draped on her chair in her office. She walked up and down the street and didn't see any sign of Dread anywhere. She looked at her watch; it was 4:20.

"Damn. Damn. Damn."

Finally, a pair of headlights approached on L Street. The car was moving slowly. A big, dark green SUV, a Suburban with an extended back, pulled up and stopped. The driver wore a flannel shirt and had a beard. Anna thought she recognized him from the bar in New Jersey. He smiled pleasantly at her.

Anna smiled at the man.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Anna. Sorry, I was late."

"Hey there, Anna. Call me Jack. Don't matter to me, baby."

"Did it take you a while to get here?"

"Hours. Been looking for you for a while."

"Sorry. I fell asleep. Are you ready to do this?" Anna said.

"Never readier," the man replied, smiling. He patted the passenger seat.

"You can pull into the alley over there." Anna pointed. She started to open the door.

"Sure, if you say so." The man craned his neck to see the alley. "Is that where it's at?"

"Yes. That's where it's at. Where's Dread?" Anna asked, looking around.

The man made a face. "I'm past dread, baby, unless you're with the cops. What do you charge? I'm just looking for some quick head. I can give you twenty bucks. We can do it in the back of my Suburban or right here on the front seat. Whatever works for you."

Anna recoiled from the man. "Oh God," she said. She hopped out and retreated to the nearest doorway. The man watched her through the open window.

"Hey, come on, baby," he called. "We can do it quick. I promise. I'll give you twenty-five bucks."

Finally, he slowly moved on when another vehicle pulled up behind him and flashed its lights. A pickup truck.

Anna waited in the darkened doorway until the window of the pickup opened. It was Dread.

“Hey, Anna, hon, we thought maybe you gave us the wrong info when we talked. We were here at ten of. This is the third time we’ve circled around the block.”

Anna opened the door and got inside. Her hands were shaking.

“Calm down, hon. We got this. You look sick. Here, this will help.” Dread handed her a brown paper bag.

Anna wondered what variety of alcohol Dread had in the bag. She hoped it was vodka.

“You want a cookie?” Dread asked. “They’re chocolate chip. I baked them myself.”

“You bake cookies?” Anna broke into a smile.

“You got a problem wit’ that? Camden County’s junior baking champ in twelfth grade. I’ve got the blue ribbon at home to prove it.”

Anna finally laughed and opened the bag, releasing the smell of brown sugar, vanilla, and chocolate. The cookies were huge and smelled glorious. She took a piece of cookie from the bag. In fact, it was scrumptious. “Oh God Dread, these are yummy!”

Dread smiled her smile and Anna directed her to the alley and told her to back in. Another pickup truck backed in behind them.

“That’s Max,” Dread said, keeping her hands on the wheel and pointing with one finger. “One of my boys with the Devils. I borrowed this truck from another guy, and Max agreed to come down with me. We convoyed all the way here. Did I see you talking with someone in an SUV?”

Anna nodded. “Yes. I thought it was one of your guys. It wasn’t. He thought I was a hooker.”

Dread was twisted around her seat as she backed into the alley, and she put her foot on the brake and looked at Anna. “I can see that. A little skinny, maybe, to earn a good living. Not nearly enough meat up top. But most guys aren’t picky at 4 a.m. What did he offer you?”

“Twenty bucks for a B.J.”

“Twenty? At this time of night, poor horny dude was probably desperate. You should have held out for forty.” Dread cackled, a long drawn-out laugh. After a moment, Anna laughed too.

They slowly backed into the alley, all the way to the dumpster. Anna hopped out first. As soon as her sneakers touched the ground, something didn’t seem right. She

immediately went to the place where the documents had been hidden.

They were gone.