



Stealing Fire

He glared into the campfire as though it were his bitter enemy. Tension lines—muscles taut and charged with adrenalin—were highlighted in the amber glow. Flickering shadows transformed his eyes into pits. Though hidden, they burned with an intensity greater than the coals.

The fire played along the twigs, delighting in its rampage as the wood charred beneath. The kindling popped and crackled, accompanied by the dirge of a cricket. The insect was lost in the trees beyond his campsite, beyond his battered Triumph Thunderbird.

Fire was capricious—an idiot child with a flair for destruction. Its dance sickened him to the core.

Memories stirred. The fire became a portal to his torment. He scowled, repeatedly clenching his gloved fists as the nightmare played through his mind.

The flailing arm was always first. Amy's. The tiny arm reached through the steel bars that entombed her inside the bedroom. Heat and irony assaulted him in waves as he fought to free his little girl. The bars he'd intended for her protection became her death sentence.

He wrenched at the bars with all his strength as Amy's pleas, then screams, tore the heart from his chest. His desperation wasn't enough. The bars never yielded, nor the flames. The fire was ever hungry.

Black, billowing smoke stung his eyes and raked his throat but couldn't drive him away. Despite the pain, the heat, and the stench, he held that tiny hand until the world faded to black.

His memories soon shifted to Sonya.

She survived that night, burnt beyond recognition and crippled by more than physical injuries. 'I should have done more', she had mumbled through ruined lips. Even after the bandages came off, Sonya tormented herself with the chant.

Those were the last words he had ever heard from his wife and they haunted him to this day. The fire had stolen her too. Without Amy, or a face, her spirit surrendered.

He saw it in her eyes that last day. That dancing flame. Where her light should have been. Dissatisfied that Sonya was spared the withering brutality of its embrace, the flame drove her to the hospital roof, and to her death.

In turn, it drove him to the road. To the life of a wanderer. An avenger.

He glared at the campfire, willing his demons to quieten. Clenching his fist again, to the sound of scrunching leather, he moved in closer to the flames. The heat surged in anticipation. Twigs popped like snapping bones. His face grew hot but he ignored the sensation. The heat barely registered. Not after this long.

His focus honed to a tiny black sphere, a pinpoint aimed directly at the heart of the fire. Flames licked the air, eager for a taste of the flesh suggested by his singed hairs. The fire flickered, darting to and fro in the hunt for combustibles to devour.

He rolled back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing a maze of burn scars along his forearm. It was time.

He thrust his hand into the centre of the fire. The hand that held Amy's till the very end. Flames took hold within a heartbeat. The stench of burning leather and flesh filled his senses, the familiarity bittersweet. Tapping into his ball of rage, he tightened his fist, then snatched it back out into the night air.

The fire squirmed and writhed in his hand. An animated yellow-white flame, fey, vaguely humanoid. A parody of life. The elemental spirit flailed in his grasp, desperate to return to its sheath of flames. Leather sizzled and smoked from its throes. Caught naked in the cold air, the flame quickly fizzled inside his fist.

Barely aware of the blistering and lingering heat, he rubbed the smouldering glove on jeans ingrained with soot. The smell of scorched skin wafted across the campsite.

He watched with feral delight as the campfire dulled. Despite the available fuel, it waned before his eyes. With its heart, its essence, stolen, the fire soon sputtered and died.

The scene was almost played out by rote now. He'd lost count of how many fires he'd stared down. Only the scars kept score.

Under the glow of moonlight fractured by the trees, he retrieved the sleeping bag stowed on his bike and unfurled it over the lumpy earth. He eyed the charred firewood, the dead coals, and then climbed inside his bedroll.

Carefully, he removed his glove. His nerve ends were long dead, the pain excised. Only the sight of raw skin and the stink of charcoal and burnt flesh remained.

His thoughts strayed back to his family and the happiness he'd lost. Too many fires raged out there in the darkness. Too many dancing flames to steal away people like Sonya and Amy.

It was cold comfort but one less fire would burn tonight.

