

FIRE

A Novel

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Bang.

I bolt upright in bed, startled to hear the sound of gunfire. The room is pitch-black. The only light I see is a small glow coming from the nightstand next to the bed. It's a digital clock. The number readout tells me it is 3:15. I wake up enough to realize where I am. It's the Big Chile Inn in Las Cruces, New Mexico. It's hard to forget. Like the name says, there's a big red chili sitting in the front parking lot.

I arrived in Las Cruces yesterday afternoon from Virginia and needed a place to stay. As I drove through the neighborhood last night, it didn't raise any red flags. All I see is a nondescript strip of fast food restaurants and motels. It never occurred to me that I'd hear gunfire. But the way this country is these days, when it comes to guns, should I be surprised when I do?

I sit motionless, listening for a follow-up shot. Suddenly, I remember that I had put my gun in the nightstand drawer. Should I take it out and have it ready, if needed? I decide to wait. After several minutes of silence, it occurs to me that the noise didn't come from outside. It came from my dream.

Or, should I say, what's becoming my nightmare?

I remember reading somewhere that when you pull the trigger of a gun, there's an incredible adrenaline rush. For me, nothing was further from the truth.

The bullet roared out of the chamber. The noise made me flinch.

I'll never forget the sting on my fingers from the recoil of the gun against them. My ears began to ring as the gun erupted. They still ache. Acid boils up in my stomach. If I hadn't quickly swallowed when it hit my throat, I would have spewed my dinner onto the floor.

The images start flooding my brain... again.

Quicker than I would have thought possible, the bullet reaches its intended target. It blows a hole in his shirt directly in the center of his chest. The blood starts oozing from Aaron Mitchell's chest.

You never imagine how hard it will be to watch a man die. You'd think I would be immune to it after seeing it on TV all the time. How could I be so stupid? Did I really think I could put a bullet into someone and it would do nothing to me?

Even though it happened more than a day ago and over 1,800 miles away, I can feel the blood draining from my face once again. I switch on a light and rise from the bed to get a glass of water. As I stand, my knees wobble. I have to put my hand against the wall to steady myself. The nightmare continues even though I'm awake.

Real life is nothing like television. I was an idiot to think it was.

I make my way to the sink and remove the cellophane wrapping from one of the plastic cups that sits on the counter. Several gulps of cold water help.

I go to the window and pull aside the curtain. The Organ Mountains tower in the distance to the east. The sky is cloudless. A perfectly formed full moon shines brightly from the west.

I stare at the moon. But in no time, I'm looking at the face of Aaron Mitchell. He looks older than his 37 years. If I had to guess, I'd say years of being a tool for the gun industry gave him a fair share of stress lines. He was such a good tool. It made him the obvious choice to be the first to die. I want to hurt them as much as they've hurt us. Killing Mitchell will hurt them.

I send the last few swallows of water down my throat and put the cup back on the counter near the sink. The nightstand catches my eye. I cross to it and open the drawer. There's the .22 lying right next to the Bible. The gun is mine. The Bible was left there by the hotel. I pick up the gun and return to the window. As I hold it up, the glow from the moon glides off the barrel. It looks so pretty when it shines. For a moment, I almost forget how much I hate guns.

I remember the picture I saw of Aaron Mitchell and his family in the newspaper after I decided I was going to shoot him. His wife, a strikingly beautiful brunette, looked noticeably younger than Mitchell. His two children - standing waist and knee-high on opposite sides of him - seemed so innocent. By all appearances, they are the antithesis of the evil that was in their father. A sudden rush of sadness comes over me. I think of the reaction these children will have to their father's death. Will they ever understand why he had to die?

I swear after I shot Mitchell I saw his spirit rising up to the heavens. In my frenzied state, it could have been my imagination. After all that has happened, believing in God and heaven just isn't working for me.

I put the gun down by my side and quickly shut my eyes. The images fade from my mind. When I open my eyes a moment later, I see the blood spurting from Mitchell's chest.

As I watch Mitchell bleed to death, the first thing that comes into my head is that I am a murderer. So many times in the past few weeks I've justified ending his life. But I never once thought that if I did, it would make me a killer. Now that I've done it, that's all I can think of. His face in my brain won't let me forget it.

Shooting a man to death doesn't make me feel better. It makes me feel worse. I raise the gun to my head and stare directly into the barrel. One pull of the trigger could end the hurt. But then both Aaron Mitchell and I would be dead for nothing. I lower the gun, return to the nightstand and put it back in the drawer.

When I made the decision to shoot my first victim, I spent weeks strategizing every detail. I planned out where I would purchase the gun. I decided the best way to learn how to shoot it. I wondered for weeks where I would shoot him. As I followed Mitchell, I searched for a place where he would be alone. Could I get near enough to shoot him without him putting up a fight? Once I find the location, what's my plan for getting out?

All my efforts led me to this remote cabin in the Shenandoah Valley. I learned about Mitchell's weekend getaway purely by accident. As I watched him, I followed him to his favorite Washington diner. I ate there enough times to develop a thing for the tuna melt. Last Tuesday, I was able to get a booth directly behind Mitchell. I overheard him telling a colleague that he would work on the legal brief they were discussing at his cabin over the weekend. His wife was going to her parents' house with the children and he'd be there by himself. I think I smiled.

I return to the bed and sit on the edge of it. The clock reads 3:45. I should try to get back to sleep. I've got a busy day tomorrow. I lie back down and stare up. The glow of the moon streams across the white ceiling. I notice a spiderweb hanging from the light fixture.

What I never took into account when I decided I would do this is what would happen after I actually fired the gun. Maybe I didn't want to go there. I think if I had, I never would have acted on my intentions. My mind blocked it out so that I would act. I wish my mind could block out what's happening now.

I want to look away from Mitchell, but I can't stop staring. He looks surprised, like he is trying to form the word, "Why." Mitchell never knew me. Six months ago, I didn't know who he was. The last thing he would imagine was me breaking into his mountain home and shooting him dead.

The last thing he would imagine. Hmm... that's morbidly ironic.

My goal was to fire the gun once. I wanted to make this as fast and clean as possible. Not having done this before, I did my research. It indicated a single bullet to the chest would be the most effective. It was. At such close range, it was hard to miss. I didn't.

Finally, I needed get in and out of there as quickly as possible. Mitchell is only the first step. It's going to take more than a dead lobbyist to shake things up. To do that, I have to avoid being caught.

I doze off to sleep.

The pool of blood is enormous. I keep waiting for it to stop. But it just keeps flowing and settling around the body. That's another thing that shootings on television really don't do justice to - the massive amount of blood. It makes the pain in my stomach intensify. Tears well up in my eyes. My throat starts to close. My knees buckle again. I feel like I'm going to faint.

Mitchell lets out one last gasp. A long, low, bellowing moan escapes from his mouth. The sound jolts me. I snap back to the moment and stand straight up. Then I pause to listen. I know I'm alone. There's no one for miles. But I stand motionless, expecting the groan to draw attention.

I stare at the body, looking for any sign of movement. There is none. His breathing ceases. The blood has stopped oozing from the wound. The red surrounds Aaron Mitchell's lifeless body like an aura. This image, coupled with the stillness that has fallen over the room, produces a weird sense of serenity.

I was correct. One bullet was all that was needed. I heave a deep sigh of relief.

I've got to get out of here.

I turn to the door, then pause. I'm forgetting something. The note! I'm so caught up in the moment, I almost forget the note. I slip the gun into my right coat pocket and pull a plastic sandwich bag out of the left. In the bag is a Post-it. The latex gloves on my hands make it a little tricky to unseal the bag and remove the note. I start back towards Aaron Mitchell's body, then decide against it. If I put the note on the body, I'm surely going to get my shoes in the blood. A bloody footprint could risk leading authorities to me. I can't let that happen.

Instead, I go to a wall on the opposite side of the room and attach the note to it.

I turn one last time to take a long, last look at the man I just shot dead. Instead of seeing Mitchell, I see an intense blinding light coming at me. It is so bright, I have to shield my eyes.

I wake up.

The sun has risen. Its rays are rushing through the motel room window. The bed is angled so that the sunlight is directly hitting my face. I put my hand over my eyes to shield them.

This is not the way I intended to spend my Saturday morning.

I had to get out of a nice warm bed before dawn on my day off and drive an hour through a dreary, rain-spitting morning into the mountains where the temperature is just above freezing. The aftertaste of the cup of 7-11 coffee I bought along the way sits like a weight in my mouth. Could anything be worse? Then I stare at the man slumped over before me and I have my answer. Getting a bullet through the heart is a lot worse. All of a sudden, the coffee doesn't taste so bad.

His name is Aaron Mitchell. He made it to 37 years of age. He has... had a wife and two kids. Cause of death? A .22 caliber handgun - one bullet fired directly into the chest with pinpoint accuracy. Mitchell didn't stand a chance. By the coroner's estimate, he bled out in 10 minutes.

And that, in a nutshell, is all I know.

In the five years since I was promoted to detective in the Harrisonburg, Virginia police department, I can count on one hand the number of murders I've investigated. And I'll still have four fingers left. Yes, this is my first homicide. The Shenandoah Valley is better known for its sweeping views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, crystal clear lakes and bass fishing than for dead bodies. The locals will tell you it's a great place to get away from it all. Of course, Aaron Mitchell was expecting to return to it all on Monday. You can't tell by the look on his face, but it's safe to say he wasn't intending this trip to be permanent.

My captain likes to tell stories. And the one that comes to mind right now is the one he tells about the first time he saw a dead body. It was years ago and Captain Francis Jennings was just a patrolman. It was a bitter cold December morning, the day after the Harrisonburg Christmas party. A firefighter had challenged the captain to a drinking contest and patrolman Jennings had won.

That victory was weighing heavily on his stomach as he answered his first call - a lifeless body discovered in the alley in back of the A&P. It was an old homeless guy who had frozen to death while most of the town was celebrating the holidays. As the captain tells it, his knees were buckling slightly as he knelt down on the off chance he could find a pulse. When he touched the body, it fell forward. The man's head landed right on the captain's face. The stench of the body filled the captain's nostrils. The next thing he knew, he was puking his guts out in a nearby dumpster. When he finished, he stood up, straightened his back, inhaled a deep breath of cold fresh air and took care of business.

The captain would finish by making this point - no matter how bad things get on the job, you've got to take a deep breath and take care of business. As I replay his words in my mind, the coffee does a summersault in my stomach. As I feel it start, I take a long, deep breath. The queasiness subsides. No need to look around for a trash can. The captain would be proud.

Now, it's time to get down to business. Who shot Aaron Mitchell?

I can rule out robbery. Mitchell's wallet with a couple of hundred dollars and several credit cards was found in his pants pocket. His Patek Philippe is still on his wrist. Outside the cabin door sits Mitchell's Lexus. Nothing of value is missing.

Everything I'm looking at tells me Mitchell was spending a relaxing evening at his getaway retreat. He had settled into an oversized recliner. There's a half drunk glass of scotch next to a newly open bottle on the table to the right of the body. But he couldn't ignore his work. A legal brief sits in his lap. It's opened to page five. On the dining room table I spy more legal documents in an open briefcase. It doesn't take a detective to figure out that Mitchell was a lawyer.

A quick Google search tells me he was a good one. Mitchell was a partner with Goldstein & Lewis, a high-profile Washington, D.C. firm known for its lobbying expertise. I guess if I spent my week hounding senators and kissing congressional ass, I'd certainly want a change of scenery over the weekend.

Maybe the motive has something to do with Mitchell's business. It's not out of the realm of possibility that his legal dealings made him some enemies. But if that's what got him killed, it would seem to make sense that his briefcase would be missing.

Another thought is that Mitchell was simply looking for a little time away from the wife and kids. He made this trip alone. According to the driver's license in his wallet, he lives in Arlington. I alert the local authorities there. A desk sergeant tells me she'll send a patrol car to Mitchell's house. A few minutes later, a patrolman calls back to update me - no one was home. He spoke with a neighbor out walking a dog and learned that Mitchell's wife and kids are visiting her parents in Norfolk. Is that what he was trying to escape - a weekend with the in-laws? Too bad. Had he chosen that option he'd most likely still be alive.

Though I'd say whoever did this was pretty determined. If it didn't happen last night, it would have sooner or later someplace else. And I'd still be a homicide virgin.

My next call is to the Norfolk station to ask someone to find and notify the wife - a miserable assignment, but it has to be done. Another part of taking care of business.

The cabin belongs to Mitchell. It seems a little more upscale than any of the other cabins I've seen in my few trips to the valley. But it's definitely designed for weekend retreats and those couple of weeks in the summer we like to call a vacation. It has three bedrooms. I'm assuming one for mom and dad, one for the kids, and one if you wanted to invite guests. The bedrooms look like they haven't been used in a while. Makes sense. We just said goodbye to winter a couple of weeks ago.

Last night's action all happened in the main room. It's a cozy-feeling space, framed by an oversized stone fireplace. The only nod to modern technology is a giant flat screen mounted on the wall. Other than that, the furniture would best be described as second home chic - comfortable, worn, not expensive.

I would argue the selling point of this place is the location. If you wanted to get away, you've come to the right place. It may not be the middle of nowhere, but it's not too far from it. Unfortunately for Mr. Mitchell, it turned out to be the perfect location to commit a murder.

A neighbor - if you can call someone who lives five miles away that - was driving by this morning and spotted Mitchell's car. The two occasionally fished together and the neighbor wanted to ask Mitchell if he had plans to hit the lake. Who knows how much longer the body could have sat here if that neighbor hadn't decided to say hello. As it is, whoever shot the lawyer has about a 12-hour head start. Preliminary estimates put the time of death at between ten and eleven last night.

By all indications, it doesn't appear that Mitchell was meeting someone. Though I'll definitely look into that as an option. Another woman, an affair, is never out of the question. It has to be part of my investigation. But I doubt it's the reason he was murdered. My gut tells me that Mitchell just wanted some alone time. The killer knew he would be here and surprised him. That makes me think whoever killed Mitchell might have known him. I start to wonder what Mitchell was thinking when he saw his killer - when he heard the gun firing and realized a bullet was coming at him.

It's inconclusive if this were a forced entry. With many of these getaway lodges, security is not always state of the art. Sure, this cabin is nicer than most in this area, but if someone really wanted in, it wouldn't take much effort. Of all the obstacles the killer may have faced, breaking into this cabin wasn't one of them.

Our investigation estimates the shooter was between five and ten feet away. Close enough that he, or perhaps she, wouldn't need to be a marksman. But it was still far enough away that whoever fired the shot had some basic proficiency with a firearm.

So far, I have no clue who that might be. My team hasn't found any fingerprints. There's not a trace of DNA evidence. Of course, that's pretty much the norm these days. I blame the TV cop procedurals. Watch enough of them and they'll teach you quite a bit of what you need to know about how to make it harder to catch you. Anyone with a brain can figure out how to avoid leaving evidence. And if you're going to go to all the trouble to put a bullet into someone, you're going to take steps to not be sloppy when it comes to clues. But that's why they pay me the big bucks - to solve a mystery with almost nothing to go on. Something tells me I'm going to earn my pay on this one.

We do have the bullet. It went straight through Mitchell and was imbedded in the chair. It came out of a .22. Now all we have to do is figure out which one of the six million pistols in the United States fired this bullet. What was I saying about having my work cut out for me?

My thoughts are interrupted by the crime scene investigator.

“Detective Murphy, you’ll want to see this,” he tells me.

Even though I was promoted almost five years ago, it never gets old to hear someone call me detective. Maybe it's because I'm the first woman in the Harrisonburg, Virginia Police Department to hold the position. At age 28, I was also one of the youngest to be promoted out of uniform. Yeah, I heard the talk. I was just in the right place at the right time. I got that detective's badge as a result of an affirmative action move because the department was trying to look more diversified and my skin color helped check that box. My sex didn't hurt either. Every time I hear that, it makes me mad. And that makes me work harder. And every chance I got, I show just how much I deserve to be called detective. One advantage is my height. At six foot one, I tower over many of my colleagues. And the ones I don't, I can look straight in the eye. I'm really good at staring someone down when need be. It took some time, but eventually I started to hear the respect in the voices of my fellow offices - especially when they say, "Detective Murphy."

We walk to the opposite side of the room and I'll be damned, there is a clue. It was intentionally placed right in the middle of the crime scene. On the wall is a Post-it note - a message that maybe explains why this man was murdered

I grab the Post-it and hold it between my latex glove-covered fingers. It reads, “Aaron Mitchell fought for my Second Amendment rights. So I shot him.”

The coffee takes another turn in my stomach.