

Prologue

I know exactly what I'm doing...

This was the thought drifting through Ian's mind as he sat there bleeding on the cold floor. Already his vision blurred at the edges. And he knew this was it. No more hiding, no more running. He looked down at his seeping wound and pressed his hand tight against it.

No more!

He looked up at his friends, still fighting desperately with everything they had. He pressed harder against the wound. He was not going to lie down and die, not when he was so close. A shape appeared in his fading vision, he could no longer tell friend from foe, and they reached out to him. He swatted at them like a stubborn child who didn't want his medicine, and his efforts were about as effective. There was a warm sensation of pressure on his abdomen and his wound wasn't quite so painful. He felt his eighth, maybe ninth, wind coming on. He could do this, he just had to stand up.

Ian pushed his body up, using the wall behind him for support. As he climbed to his feet his mind ran over all the circumstances that had led him here. Everything he'd sacrificed. Everything he'd lost. All the unfathomable suffering that the world would endure if he couldn't get up. He'd fought so hard to prevent that, too hard to simply give up now. He drew in a wet, ragged breath.

Okay, you can do this.

"This can all stop if you merely accept the inevitable, Ian!" A voice called out. There was more, but the rage that voice brought on blocked it all out and pushed Ian to his feet.

Digging deep, Ian latched onto that unfathomable, unyielding spark which always gave hope in the darkest of hours. He turned towards the voice and focused everything that he had left into putting one foot in front of the other. Blood continued to seep slowly through his fingers as he pressed heavily on his stomach. He gritted his teeth and pushed on. He would not allow his friends to die for him, he would not allow the darkness to win, and he would never forgive those that stood in his way.

He stumbled through a doorway and out into a hall filled with people. Blearily he looked around and then started his trek forward.

*All right, I have about twenty solid feet to pull this off... I know **exactly** what I'm doing.*

Chapter 1

One week ago-

Ian sat in front of his cookie-cutter desk in the 7th Precinct of the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department. His broad shoulders hunched, and elbows tucked in he tapped away at his keyboard. Standard one-size-fits-all did not apply to someone Ian's height.

"Why were you even there, Pinkus? Why weren't you with your boss across town?" Ian mused to himself.

Dirty blonde hair framed his thin, pensive face. He stopped now and again to push the locks back behind his ear when they fell in front of his dark green eyes. He glanced over at the framed photos on his desk, his parents. Whenever he was struggling for inspiration to come he often looked at the photo.

After high school, Ian had gone off to college to become an engineer. Then in his last semester, Ian's father fell ill. Emphysema, a smoker's best friend. Ian had to return home to help his mother, Thea, with the mounting bills. It had been hard on him to leave his life in West Virginia, especially so because of Marci Bowers. They'd been together almost the entire four years of his college career, and he'd assumed they would marry once they had both graduated. Marci even offered to drop out and move back to D.C. with him, insisting that her degree could wait. But Ian refused. He didn't want her to throw her future away on him. They attempted a long-distance relationship for a few months but couldn't make it work. He'd heard she was now married to a marine biologist and living in New Zealand.

He'd ended up in the academy within the week of his return home. Ian had become a patrolman after the twenty-eight-week course, top of his class. He remembered the look on his father's face when he graduated with distinction. Pride. And that was the last good memory he had of him. An arduous three years later, almost to the day, the battle ended for the senior McClintoc.

Ian never regretted his decision, but he did sometimes wonder what might have been. Once he and his mother had buried Ian's father, he couldn't bring himself to leave her all on her own. He never considered going back to school since he found that he had a knack for police work, and a year after the burial he passed his detective's exam. He knew his father would be proud.

That had been three years ago and time marches on. He had expected the job to be at least a little like the movies. Instead, it was a lot of paperwork, a lot of footwork, and a lot of dead ends. Much like the case he was working on today: homicide, dead gang member, no witnesses, no weapon, no prints. In short, a waste of time. Still, he couldn't give up. Everyone deserves justice.

He pulled himself back from the past and continued punching away at the keys hoping to find any miniscule detail that could break the case. He double-clicked the icon on his Desktop which read "RootyTootyPointAndShooty.exe." It was a trajectory mapping software that Marci had designed. He used it to start plotting out the origin point of each gunshot. Granted the lab techs were going to do their own analysis, and he trusted them, but Ian still preferred to go over it himself.

As Ian finished entering in the last of the data and hit execute, the door to the bullpen opened. In waltzed his partner Martin Anders, carrying a box that looked suspiciously like doughnuts from the Sugar Shack. And two coffees. Glorious coffee. Ian wasn't interested in the

box since he'd had his fill of the stereotypical cop-doughnut humor over the years. But coffee - now *that* he could get behind.

"Morning Anders," Ian rumbled. His already deep baritone was a bit gruffer at this early hour.

Anders had close-cropped black hair giving him a military look, but in truth Anders only wanted to avoid having to comb or style it in the mornings. His square jaw, square broad shoulders, and short legs often gave the impression of a bulldog. Anders had been his partner since Ian got promoted to the detective unit, and a mentor long before that.

Anders sat the doughnut box on his desk and pulled out a sugary number while removing one of the coffees from the holder. He slid the steaming cup across his desk and onto Ian's. The alluring aroma tickled his nose and Anders nodded in satisfaction.

"Now that I've got your attention, Captain assigned us a new priority case." He set the doughnut aside and pulled out his phone thumbing through the assignment feed, adding smudges of maple icing to the already dirty screen. "Though I should warn you, it's also a bullshit assignment. Petty vandalism stuff from the sounds of it. A Mr. Gwilt from the Historical Society, who it just so happens is one of the Mayor's top donors, called the Captain directly. Apparently, the Mayor's idiot assistant gave out the Captain's personal number. He was checking on their site on Anacostia Drive and saw, and I'm quoting here, 'men dressed in red robes, and flashes of green and gold light.' And he heard what sounded like," Anders did air quotes with his free hand as he continued, "'a bull being slaughtered' coming out of an abandoned waterfront warehouse nearby. Translation: kids were playing shitty music and tagging the building, maybe throwing around smoke bombs and glow sticks."

Ian leaned back and furrowed his brow as he cogitated on the particulars, recalling similar reports. "Let me guess; middle of the night, unpopulated area, same as the others?"

Anders nodded as he dropped his phone on his desk and went back to chomping away.

There were similar reports floating around town lately, especially in the 7th district. But for some reason they didn't find a single worker, drifter, or loiterer near any of the locations. Ian had lived in D.C. his entire life and liked to think that he had his finger on the pulse of his city. He wanted to chalk this report up to the local fraternities coming up with some new kind of initiation. Or at least he hoped that's all that it was... But the homeless issue was nagging at him.

Anders finally swallowed, "Yup - we've already got the go-ahead from the bank to search the place. So our gang case has been reassigned."

History was a big deal in D.C. It was both the pride and bane of many people's jobs, including the police. Ian was sure that was the real reason the Captain had assigned it to them. And the media was dramatizing this vandalism as history being erased. Which only put additional pressure on the Captain to put the case to bed. Ergo the higher-ups chose to placate everyone by putting two detectives on a one beat cop job.

The door to the pen opened a few more times as the morning shift filtered in. Ian waved to a few of them while Anders wandered off to socialize. Ian stared blankly at his monitor, not really seeing it. He was busy running over the rest of the vandalism reports in his head. So far, there were five counts of strange lights and sounds coming from the waterfront. Here in the 7th, and up along the 2nd district. Almost all the reports were the same, amounting to nothing more than some property damage to the old, long-abandoned buildings.

Anders came back and landed heavily on the seat at his adjacent desk. Seeing how comfortable he was getting made Ian smirk. Ian chose that moment to get up from his desk. Catching his knee yet again on the underside of the tiny desk as he adjusted his legs, Ian let out a

familiar sigh. Being his height was both a blessing and a curse. Ian had to endure what he often called 'Goldilocks syndrome,' since everything in this world seemed to be made for a maximum height of six feet. He had learned to excuse grace in favor of everyday functionality, but nothing ever felt "just right."

Ian went to the coat rack, after rolling down the sleeves of his white button-down shirt, he grabbed his navy-blue suit coat and slid into it. Patting his pockets to make sure he had his phone, he went back to his desk to retrieve his distracted partner.

"C'mon, you lummoX - we can't sit around all day."

Noticing his partner's impatience, Anders made a show of deliberately licking the amalgam of sugary toppings from his fingers before standing up to follow. A petty revenge on his part.

The pair navigated the precinct's narrow hallways heading towards the carpool. Ian had never liked the white, utilitarian paint job covering the walls from floor to ceiling. Bureaucratic signs hung everywhere along with 'helpful' colored lines in the linoleum. The lines made it almost impossible to follow one without disobeying the other. They, however, knew where they were going.

They saddled up to their nondescript car in the parking lot. As per usual, they had a coin toss to determine who would be driving today. And as per usual, Ian lost. He was certain that Anders was cheating, but he couldn't figure out how. It frustrated him to no end.

Chapter 2

They pulled out into morning traffic. Rush hour was always a nightmare in D.C., but they were thankful at least that Congress wasn't in session. That made it slightly more bearable. It took them about an hour to make the fifteen mile trip to the riverfront.

Anders squeezed the car into a spot a short way down the street from the marker on his GPS.

"Dispatch, ten-lincoln-thirty at the scene on Anacostia Drive," Anders said, calling in their arrival on the car radio.

"Dispatch acknowledged." The dispatcher replied before they both climbed out.

The sound of their heels striking pavement echoed back at them, returning with a sense of desolation. No people in sight, no other cars passed by, and no birds flew overhead. Not even a breeze off of the Potomac, which was surprisingly void of boat traffic. It was a bit off-putting.

They soon reached a concrete box of a guard-house located next to the property's gate. It had clearly suffered the ravages of time. The roof had caved in long ago and the exposure to years of rain left everything inside an unrecognizable heap of waste. The only thing that looked new was a nearby For Sale sign hanging from the rusty chain link fence. Next to that were the faded, cracked remains of a sign with the letters L-U-M scrawled across it.

So, I guess it was a lumber yard, Ian thought. His assumption was further supported by the capacious lot beyond the fence, in the center of which stood an abandoned main building. From the gate, they could see that its walls too were crumbling and deteriorating.

Ian's critical eye took in the nearby points of interest. Across the street sat the historical building, where their witness had claimed he was last night. It also had a sign on the fence, though this one indicated that it was undergoing renovations. Earl's Ship Repair Shop was to the right of the lumberyard and was decorated in bright red-painted letters reading: "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted!" On the other side, another For Sale sign was posted in front of the husk of an ancient building.

Finding no cause for his growing sense of discomfort, Ian focused back on the towering gate. *Well, maybe this has something to do with it. It looks like one of those gates that mustachioed villains always have surrounding their compounds...*

The gate even had an intricately stylized M stamped in the middle of it. The long-ago finely crafted iron had rusted and rotted away over many stagnant years. The bottom right-hand side of the gate was twisted, causing it to stick out like a crooked finger that beckoned to them. The level of damage almost certainly indicated an explosion of some kind. Ian pondered on that as he crouched down to examine the wreckage.

The heavy flakes of rust all around the base of the gate meant the damage was fresh. A new padlock stood out starkly against the pulverized remains of a rusted chain next to his feet. Ian stroked his stubble-covered jaw before retrieving a pen from his breast pocket. Using the pen as a probe, he carefully lifted a link that had remained intact and held it up. The end was melted. Ian did a double take, it took a lot of heat to melt steel.

One of his eyebrows rose as he looked up to Anders, holding up the link of chain. He gestured with his eyes and a slight tilt of his head towards the melted links on the ground. Anders had a look of concern on his face, before turning his attention to a series of long slashes gouged into the fences. Ian knew Anders well enough to read his partner in an instant;

he might as well have been saying, *I found some even freakier shit*, as Anders jabbed a finger towards the damage.

Ian followed Anders' hand, noting the somehow painful looking lacerations in the fences, and how they bore similar melting patterns. This was all very strange. The heat and blast required to cause this kind of damage would have been immense.

Applying the insights that his almost-degree afforded him, Ian calculated how this kind of damage could've been caused. Angles and trajectories flew through his mind as he finally stood up, letting the link he'd been holding fall back to the ground.

Both men could sense the unease and foreboding atmosphere emanating from that building in the center of the lot. Ian's partner shrugged; acting aloof was Anders' way of processing.

Ian recalled stories of the haunted house in the neighborhood where he grew up. Supposedly an old woman had died there after butchering her children and hiding their bodies in the walls. When he and his friends would play in the streets, dares would ensue to see who could get the closest to the decrepit front door. Who could make it up the creaky old stairs and across the rotted porch? Who would run away screaming in terror?

Ian hadn't. He'd managed to get all the way to the crumbling door every time, smacking it with a burst of confidence as he elicited cheers from his friends. They'd always thought he was so brave. But even back then, as now, there was an ever-present tingle of fear. The caress along his spine. The resulting goosebumps, and the rising sense of panic. Now, his job required more than simply touching a door.

Anders gave the gate a shove. Stepping through the shattered remains, they drew their weapons and prepared to sweep the scene. Anders flicked the safety off on his standard-issue 9mm Glock. Ian, however, had filled out a mountain of paperwork allowing him to carry his Walther PPQ, which had no safety catch. Their eyes scanned the building, trying to penetrate the dark, gaping holes in the walls for any sign of life.

"Should we call this in?" Anders whispered.

"Whatever happened here is long over from the look of things. Let's sweep first, then report in and call the bank attorney once we have some answers. It'll only take a minute." Seeing Anders' face turn to a scowl Ian added, "If you're brave and you don't cry I'll get you an ice cream after."

Ian jerked his chin towards the other side of a car-sized hole in the wall, indicating to Anders that he should take that side. Meanwhile, he slipped to the right. Anders squinted at Ian while taking up position.

"Mint chocolate chip, bitch." He said in a low whisper.

"On three," Ian whispered back while cracking a smile.

Chapter 3

Ian mouthed the count down. One. Two. Three.

As he finished mouthing the count, Anders swept through their makeshift door. Carefully watching his footing as he passed over the loose bricks and plaster littering their chosen entryway. He raised his gun, quickly pivoting from left to right as he'd done hundreds of times over the years. Ian immediately followed, having to duck his head where Anders had not. Ian paced close behind as they began their sweep, their eyes adjusting to the dim sunlit interior.

In every direction, they saw demolished crates, rotting piles of lumber, telltale signs of a rat infestation, and mounds of other unidentifiable detritus. A mass of deformed metal in the center of the expansive room. Scorch marks and severe burns surrounded the lump. Ian had to assume that it had once been a pallet jack, although now it was more like a failed attempt at modern art. All this created an obstacle course that forced the pair to move around the perimeter of the room.

Overhead a series of grated catwalks with corroded metal railings crisscrossed the entire ceiling. The whole apparatus hung in the air suspended by thick steel cables. A few of the cables had failed, causing some sections of the grating to dangle precariously.

They headed towards the one-story square office structure on the far side. A building within a building, the office space was nestled flush against the corner of the warehouse. A set of stairs ran along one side that led up to the catwalks above.

As they neared the offices, Anders pointed with his elbow and a jerk of his chin towards the wall next to him. Ian felt puzzled by this until he noticed that the smaller holes in the wall didn't match the rest of the deterioration. They were bullet holes. And the stains on the ground were definitely dried patches of blood; there was no mistaking that rusty-red color.

Must've been one hell of a fight. How did we not get a 9-1-1 call on this? Ian wondered.

So far there were no bodies, which was surprising judging by the clear intensity of the fight. Footprints were everywhere on the grit covered floor. Ian noted more bullet holes in the walls as they drew closer to the office. Etched in the concrete floor were deep gouges, like they'd come from a blade of some kind. The best on-the-fly assessment that he could come up with was that a gunfight had broken out and that had then devolved into a chainsaw fight.

Focus, Ian! He chastised himself as they reached the double traffic doors. They looked like they belonged in the back of grocery store, with their chipped black paint and worn steel kick plates.

Anders drew up to the left side and Ian took the right. After casting a quick glance through the porthole window on his side, Anders slid back and shook his head, indicating that he couldn't see into the pitch-black space. The pair held a silent conversation of head nods and hand motions. Anders kept signaling that he was ready to move into the offices, but Ian kept waving him off.

Ian couldn't say why, but he didn't want to step into that office. He could sense Anders' frustration with him. The veteran detective let out a muffled but exasperated sigh, holding up three fingers in a countdown while Ian was lost in his thoughts.

There is something more to all of this... Ian's mind raced, trying to see the pattern in the chaos. His gaze drifted across the room, searching for the source of his apprehension.

Anders dropped one of his fingers, holding up the peace symbol now.

Ian's eyes traveled along the trail of footprints that they had made in the dust a few moments ago.

Anders dropped another finger, and had Ian been paying attention to his partner, he might have been offended by the one remaining.

At last Ian saw it, and his eyes went wide. There were a series of elephantine tracks amidst their own in the dust behind them. He hadn't noticed them right off because they were too far apart, too alien, but looking from the office doors it became a clear trail. Ian reached out to stop his partner, but Anders had already dropped his last finger and kicked the door open.

"D.C. POLICE!" Anders shouted.

"WAIT!" Ian cried.

The doors came flying back and smacked into Anders and Ian. The pair went skidding in opposite directions as a section of the wall came down. Ian landed on his back with every trace of air forced out of his lungs. Sounds of desperate gasping spilled from his lips. His vision blurred around the edges as he fought to breathe.

Survival instincts took over, arresting control and forcing Ian's body to breathe. His mind cleared with each breath, affording him the luxury of asking questions. And it only had one for him, fight or flight?

He settled on fight.

Chapter 4

Ian propped himself up on his arms and took stock of his situation. Jagged scraps of metal were peeking out from a pile of detritus, like a shark's ravenous maw. He'd landed with only a few inches between himself and the rust monster. He backed away and scrambled to his feet, coughing and waving a hand to clear away the choking cloud of dust.

As the air cleared, Ian could see nothing more than a shadowy silhouette looming over the ruins of the office. It couldn't possibly be as massive as it looked, Ian was sure that the low light was playing tricks on his eyes. His first instinct was to call out to his partner, but he had to be cautious for both their sakes.

A faint whistle was Ian's only warning as a thick piece of rebar came spinning through the air. He whipped his head around, following its course as it spun off into the darkness. Ducking low, he looked for cover while another wildly flying projectile whizzed past. Then another, and another. Until the air was almost humming with concrete blocks and metal shards, all aimed in his general direction.

A sunbeam shone down through a skylight on a grimy old forklift, putting the machine into a halo of light. He thanked whatever god was helping and dove behind it. He took a breath trying to slow the chaos of his mind, hoping that Anders had found a similar refuge. As he leaned against the cab he called out to his partner.

"Anders!" His voice came out strained and hoarse.

He trembled as he struggled to grip his gun properly and steady his cumbersome form. He wanted to make himself as small a target as possible. Hearing no response from Anders, he risked a quick glance around the side of his cover. He was barely beyond the reach of the dust cloud. The sunlight struggled against the impenetrable miasma, preventing Ian from seeing his adversary. Indistinct shapes formed and faded as Ian watched heavy sections of wall come flying out from the roiling cloud, leaving wispy dust trails in their wake.

Ian heard a faint groan that was unmistakably Anders'. He did not think, he simply reacted with the urgency demanded by the sound and scabbled around the side of the cab. As the pained groan faded away, he was left only with the sense of rising panic. His advance was repelled by another round of projectiles. The roof of the cab caved in as a mammoth chunk of wall collided with Ian's meager cover. Glass rained down around him and forced him to retreat behind the ruined lift once more.

Don't panic, Ian. Just focus damn it! His mind screamed. It simply wasn't possible. There was no way that a man could hurl such weight around, no matter what kind of drugs or rage trip he might be on. The chunk that had mangled the cab had to weigh at least a ton.

Ian bobbed his head around what remained of the vehicle's frame to scan for new cover. Off to his right, he spotted a staircase leading up to the maze of catwalks. Reasoning that some high ground might give him a better chance at survival, and having no other brilliant ideas, he went for it.

"Hang on buddy, I know exactly what I'm doing," Ian shouted over the crushed cab. With gritted teeth he dove for the stairs, dodging another salvo of rocks along the way. He was passively aware the stairs were squealing in protest under his weight. He craned his arm

around and fired off a few pot-shots at his attacker, aiming high to avoid Anders. Ian hoped this would force whoever he was fighting to take cover.

Rock-Chucker McGee had apparently missed the memo on the dangers of bullets. Ian glanced back over his shoulder and saw another hunk of wall, bound for the space that he currently occupied. He ran as the staircase buckled and shook from the impact. He gripped the rail to avoid losing his balance and spilling back down the stairs. He pulled himself up the final step and gained the catwalk.

The catwalk swayed precariously as he walked down the slender path. The squealing metal told him that every step was a gift. He went as fast as he dared with one hand following the railing, if only for the illusion of safety. Below him, the dust had settled but Ian still couldn't make out what it was that he was fighting, and losing, against. It was almost as if the light in the warehouse were shifting away from his opponent, keeping the figure occluded in darkness.

Ian managed to find a relatively sturdy section of grating with a lone piece of sheet metal welded to the right-hand side of the rails. It would provide a meager amount of cover. Cursing under his breath he banged the back of his head against the sheet metal. He couldn't risk hitting his partner. His previous shots were fired in a panic and he knew that he couldn't make that mistake again. Somehow, he *had* to get to Anders.

The sounds of a sharp cry of pain and a grinding, wet *pop* and jostled him out of his thoughts. Ian got to his feet and peered over his cover. Tumbling through the air directly at him was the larger portion of Anders. His left arm was missing. Ian stretched out over the railing, trying to catch his partner as his body collided with the sheet metal.

For what seemed an eternity, but was only the whisper of a moment, he managed to hold fast to a bit of Anders' jacket, pausing his descent. Ian felt a rush of triumph, then the fabric tore and Anders fell. Hurling towards the floor with only a delirious groan Anders' landing was met with a sickening crunch.

Ian let out an anguished sound as he watched his partner crumple on the floor, unconscious, or dead. Anders' blood began pooling on the floor below, and rage tore through Ian's chest that exploded in a bellowing challenge. "YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

He raised his gun and fired, his shots pinging and sparking as they ricocheted around the warehouse.

The monster returned fire in kind. Ian felt a splash of warmth across his face and the odd sensation pulled him from his reckless outburst. He turned to the source; bile rose in his throat as he saw Anders' detached arm slap up against the railing. It spun around the rail once before falling to the floor next to his partner's broken body. Ian was not afforded any time to process this carnage as more projectiles flew towards him. The catwalk shook hard enough to send Ian sprawling along the rusty metal. The cinder blocks and concrete hunks struck the grating and some of the aging cables snapped.

Those incessant shots punched additional holes into the walls and ceiling allowing more sunlight to break through. The shadows and dust were at last beaten back allowing Ian to see his assailant clearly.

A ten-foot tall dust-covered metal colossus stood below him. In each four-fingered fist was a cinder block, poised above its head and ready to be thrown. Its bulky frame was dark-gray and shaped somewhat like a man, though with incongruous proportions. Each joint was a complex weave of intricate machinery composed of whirring gears and gyros.

Strange runic etchings revealed themselves as blue-white light extended down its heavy arms and across its barrel chest, like electricity flowing through a circuit board. At its waist was a basketball-sized gyro that spun faster and faster as the light grew more intense. While the

whirring sound of all the internal mechanical parts crescendoed, the body itself remained frozen in place. Broad elephantine feet lit up next, uncovering more etched runes as the lines of light flowed up short stubby legs to converge with the upper lights at its core.

When it had nowhere else to spread, the veins of light shot up into its rounded dome of a head, which sat directly atop shoulders rather than a neck. For all the detailing on the creature's body, this face looked more like an afterthought, being only a blank surface with two holes for eyes. Ian's thoughts were suddenly arrested when he gazed into the blue glowing embers burning within the eye holes. Its eyes narrowed in anger, causing the panic that Ian had been fighting to penetrate his very being. Finally breaking its statuesque abeyance, the beast straightened its arms and began spinning them. They became a blur like the rotor blades on a helicopter, leaving behind trails of light. It was hypnotic to watch.

Without warning its right arm came to a halt and released a cinder block missile. It smashed through the sheet metal forcing Ian to hastily roll to the side to avoid obliteration. He then abandoned the idea of any further attack on the creature. He pulled himself to his feet and made a sprint back towards the stairs. Another cinder block came hurtling through the air as he retreated. A squeal worse than any nail on a chalkboard rent the air as the walkway twisted and writhed beneath his feet. His free hand gripped the railing as he shot a glance at the cables holding him aloft, knowing they couldn't take this kind of stress.

"Fu-!"

Cables snapped, metal groaned, and the world came crashing down around him. With a bone-jarring quake, the catwalk gave way. His grip on the railing loosened and he went tumbling forward.

This is how I die. He knew that as well as he knew that the Earth was round.

But as he fell towards the ground it seemed that Lady Luck wasn't quite ready for him to give up the ghost. No, she had decided that he would live to fight another day. A loose bundle of electrical wiring came whipping down, no doubt ripped from its mooring by the collapsing walkway. It coiled around the railing like a whip and brought the falling metal to a halt. Ian had a brief reprieve and prepared to breathe a sigh of relief... until gravity kicked in.

Lady Luck left him, and physics took over. The jolt had shaken his hand free of the rail as the catwalk tilted sideways. Ian tumbled in a mad free fall, striking his legs, chest, and arms along the way to the floor. His left arm shot out on reflex to shield himself. There was a loud **snap** and a cry of pain as his forearm gave. He landed in a heap on the ground and his gun went spinning out across the floor.

The walking mountain of metal was slow to react. It too had expected Ian to expire, and it was as if its programming shorted out when it saw that the target was still moving. Turning towards Ian in a tauntingly slow manner it reached for another slab of concrete.

Ian scrambled to his feet, letting out another scream of pain as he mistakenly pushed himself up with his broken arm. Through clenched teeth, he rose while scanning the floor. He spotted his gun laying in the dust and ran for it, ducking low as another lump came tearing through the air. The projectile came so close that he felt the breeze from it along his back. His right hand snatched up the pistol, but his long legs tangled and caused him to trip. He kept a firm grip on his gun as he fell, ignoring the pain he rolled through the fall and onto his back. He raised his gun and took aim. There would be no second shot.

He fired.

The bullet spiraled through the air towards the only vulnerable part that Ian could see - the eyes. He knew it was a one in a million shot, but with Anders' life on the line, there was nothing to do but try. Everything slowed down as the bullet flew through the air. Ian would

have sworn that he saw the spiraling trail left behind by the bullet as he waited for it to reach the target. Those few grams of lead would determine whether he lived or died in this moment.

The monster cocked its arm, preparing to throw the block that would end Ian. Ian's head fell back against the hard floor, expecting a crushing weight to hit his body. Instead, the room fell silent for a scarce few seconds after the bullet slid through the right eye socket and pierced the fiery ember.

The sound of air rushing into a vacuum convinced Ian to lift his head and look. The lights on the golem's body were now pulsing. Dust swirled and rushed towards the golem as its arm fell, dropping the last piece of ammunition. As the wind increased in intensity the flashing hastened. Ian struggled to find a grip to stop his procession into the newly formed vortex.

The lights continued to brighten and pulse as the sound became unbearable. It was as though a train whistle were going off right inside Ian's skull. The lights grew so bright that it was akin to staring at the sun, and he had to close his eyes. Blindly grasping and flailing with his good arm he found no purchase to stop his slide towards the monster. There was an intense pressure in his ears followed by a *whump* deep in his chest. Everything went black and still.