

# Reincarnology

## C. Robert Cales

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Also by C. Robert Cales:

Devil Glass

Quasi Rift

The Bookseller

# 1

## Ricochet

Jack emerged from the blackness slowly, senses filling in the emptiness of the daze. His head was pounding, ears ringing, and nose assaulted by the stinging smell of gunpowder. His first coherent thought was that he'd been shot. On the heels of that came a sudden realization. The plate in his head had saved his life, which snapped his mind into sharp focus.

The side of his face was on the floor and there was a dampness to it. He didn't move. The details of the shocking conversation he'd been having with the haggard man in his hotel room were falling into place. He opened one eye, just a slit and scanned the room as best as he could. The one who had been confessing the story was slumped over the table, brains splattered on the wall.

The assailant's dark blue running shoes passed through his one-eyed vision. He dared to open his eye slightly more, giving him a less compromised view of the room. The killer, dressed in black, was dragging a chair away from the table, silenced pistol still dangling in his hand. He positioned the chair, stepped up on it, and started tinkering with something on the ceiling.

After a moment Jack saw the running shoes return to the floor and go to a room service cart. He struggled to control his panic when he saw the can of gasoline. Luck had been with him when the bullet bounced off the plate instead of penetrating his skull. He knew if he jumped up and ran he wouldn't make it out the door before a second shot dropped him. He could hear the beep of phone buttons and after a moment a voice with a light Japanese accent.

"The leak is plugged," the shooter said as he put the gas can on the table and started unscrewing the cap. "He was spilling his guts to a fucking journalist. It would have been all over the news if I hadn't found him. They're both dead, but this was close. He was an obvious risk and should have been ended a long time ago."

Jack could hear the buzz of a response, unknowable words reaching his one upturned ear. The other one was pressed to the floor in feigned death.

"Maybe you should get out of your office and do a little fieldwork. There's a thrill in this moment, a thrill I can never remember. Mark the file closed by yours truly. See you on the flip side. Tell me what I said about the thrill." He dropped the phone on the table next to the slumped body and picked up the gas can.

Jack did a quick assessment. His wallet was under him where he'd fallen. The shoulder bag with his laptop and phone were on the night stand next to the bed. It was apparent that the room was about to be set ablaze and the sprinkler on the ceiling leaped into his thoughts. A clear understanding settled into his mind. The blue footed assassin had jammed the sprinkler.

His only chance was to wait for the man to leave, and then escape before the flames reached him. He could hear liquid splashing, the empty can hitting the table. A moment later the distinctive sound of a Zippo lighter flicking open made his body cringe. The sound was followed by a whoosh and he felt a wave of heat hit his face, but he held his death pose.

The table and body slumped across it were engulfed in an instant, but the shooter didn't run. He just stood there, watching the growing flames. It was shocking when the shooter raised the gun to his head. There was a slight thud and then the assassin's body collapsed next to the table.

The unexpected made absolutely no sense, but Jack had no time to ponder anything. He jumped to his feet clutching his wallet and grabbed the shoulder bag from the night stand. After one glance back at the unbelievable he opened the hotel door, bolted into the deserted corridor, door swinging closed behind him and ran for the elevator.

The ding of a bell announced the arrival of the car as the doors parted. He ran in, hit the button for the lobby and then saw his bloody handprint on the panel. The plunge of the express trip downward took away his stomach. A moment later he felt his knees absorb the returning weight. The doors opened onto a lobby with no guests and one worker running a vacuum cleaner over the carpet, earbuds in his ears, and the night clerk at the desk.

He resisted the urge to run for the front door and instead walked calmly, glancing at the night clerk, who was focused on the computer and took no notice of him as he continued to the front doors. Once outside beyond the glow of the hotel entrance he ran into the subdued lighting of the parking lot.

He was in the shadow of a big van, grabbing for breath when he heard the window explode outward and looked up. Flames were leaping out of the hotel room he'd just escaped from. Room lights were coming on everywhere, a fire alarm was sounding. Guests would be flooding into the parking lot at any moment.

Stooping over, he fled between cars as the first sirens pierced the night sky. He finally stopped next to a huge 4x4 pickup at the edge of the parking lot. He was under the vehicle when the first few fire trucks arrived, spotlights suddenly sweeping the front of the building.

He struggled to hold himself together as he punched the familiar numbers into his iPhone, the glow dimly lighting his face in the shadows. It was ringing and he was terrified by what he had to say.

"Hello," her sleepy voice answered.

"Mary."

"Jack, honey, it's almost 3:00. Is everything okay?"

“Somebody just tried to kill me.”

“What?”

“The biggest story any journalist has ever had just fell into my lap and I almost got killed for what I know.”

“I want to come to you right now. I’ll take the Corvette.”

“No, stay where you are. You’re six hours away and I need to know you’re safe. They have a secret and they’ll do anything to keep it.”

“Who are they?”

“I don’t know, but they just tried to kill me. For right now they think it worked, but I’m afraid that won’t last. I have to go underground and document this story. I’m going to hit a bunch of different ATM’s and get a bank of cash. I have to ditch my phone. I’ve heard enough to believe they can probably trace it, even when it’s off.”

“Jack, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m scared, too,” he said, feeling the fear squeezing his insides.

“Jack, I love you. I want you to come home.”

“I will, but not until this story is documented and handed off to someone. I love you,” he said and ended the call.

# 2

## Breaking News

Dawn was still a few hours away when the cameraman brought the bank of spotlights alive. A few hundred feet beyond his island of light was the front of the hotel, illuminated by spotlights from fire trucks. Everything seemed normal except for a scorched ring around a blown out window mid-building.

A strikingly beautiful woman with short black hair stepped into the spotlights and over to the mark etched in chalk. She cleared her throat and then nodded to the man behind the camera.

He held up three fingers, two, and one and then pointed at her.

“Hotel fires are tragic and everybody expected the worst; the place was packed with journalists and the fire started before dawn,” the reporter commented as the camera shot widened to include the hotel behind her.

“When the fire department arrived on the scene they saw flames shooting out of a window on the thirty-second floor.”

The camera shot zoomed in on the scorched area, then shifted back to the reporter as she continued.

“Inside the hotel they located the damaged room and discovered that the sprinklers in the adjacent rooms had gone off as the fire tried to spread. Fire crews extinguished the remaining fire. An anonymous fire department official reported that the sprinkler heads had been disabled and typical accelerant damage was present. The charred remains of bodies were discovered when the firemen entered the room. Evidence appears to point directly to arson. The room was

registered to Jack Michaels formerly with CBS news, but as of this report we have no victims officially identified. The bodies will be moved to the morgue for further investigation.

“This is Susan Peers with Channel Fifteen News, Las Vegas,” she finished and then held her professional, non-committal expression.

“Okay, Suze, that’s a wrap.”

“God, finally,” she said as she stepped away from her mark. “Operating on minimal sleep is not one of my strong suits.”

“You did fine,” he said as he shut down the lights. “Go home and get some sleep.”

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen. Let’s stop someplace for breakfast.”

“Okay,” he said as he opened the sliding door on the 15 News van. “I know a place, only about five or six blocks away.” He put the equipment in the van and closed the door.

# 3

## Missing Journalist

Detective Jacob Lawrence crossed the parking lot with details of the crime scene flipping through his mind like frames of film. On the surface it seemed clear. Burned hotel room and two bodies, both with a gunshot to the head. In his cop mind it was obvious. There was a victim, a shooter, and a fire intended to cover the crime, but it went sideways when the shooter apparently lost control of the fire. One of them was likely Jack Michaels, the journalist registered to the room, but it was Mullen's job to tell him who was who.

The gold shield he carried, like the gray hair at his temples, was a testament to his thirty years in law enforcement and that entitled him to question things that seemed off. He had seen murder-suicides, but this was the first to involve fire. Who set the fire? The one who then shot himself? That didn't sit quite right in his gut.

He supposed he could buy a guy killing someone, setting the hotel room on fire to cover the deed and then accidentally lighting himself up, but that wasn't exactly what the evidence was suggesting. An accident with fire resulted in panic, not suicide. The hole in the back of the man's skull was almost indisputable evidence of suicide and that made him ponder. Who set the room ablaze?

Ahead was the unmarked back door leading to Mullen's remote morgue. He was responding to a message on the answering machine. Cops usually called the coroner, but not this time. Mullen called him. When the coroner called it trumped most things.

As promised, the door was unlocked. He pulled it open and stepped into the dimly lit hallway. The bang of the door shutting behind him echoed back from somewhere ahead as he walked toward the light spilling out of an open door on the left.

The detective moved into the open doorway and saw Mullen on the other side of the morgue, bent over a table stitching up his latest customer.

“Hello, Doc.”

“Hello, Jacob,” he said without turning. The gray ponytail hanging down the back of his lab coat swayed with his movements as he continued stitching. “I’m almost done. There are doughnuts on the desk.”

“No thanks. I lose my appetite around dead bodies and you have enough stiffes laying around to open up a body parts store,” he quipped as he leaned against the only empty exam table in the room.

“There.” Mullen turned around. He had a youthful face that seemed out of place with his gray hair. “I finally got to the hotel fire autopsies,” he noted as he stripped bloodied gloves off. He stepped on the pedal of the medical waste container, flipped up the lid and dropped them in.

“The journalist wasn’t one of them.”

“Doc, are you sure? It was his hotel room.”

“Sure as the sun will come up in the morning. According to the medical files John, aka Jack Michaels has a plate in his head from Vietnam. I don’t know who those burned bodies are, but I do know who they aren’t. Sure you don’t want a doughnut?” Mullen asked as he opened the pastry box on his desk.

“No, but you go ahead,” he responded, nodding to the box. His easy, open and shut case had just derailed and he suddenly had nothing but dead ends.

“I bet that makes the journalist your number one suspect?” Mullen mused and bit into a jelly roll.

“At least a person of interest. Is there any chance of getting an identification on those burned bodies?”

The doctor laughed as he grabbed for a falling glob of jelly, managing only to smash it against the front of his lab coat.

“About as much chance as I had of catching that jelly with a pair of chopsticks.”

“Man, you are just full of great and wonderful information today. My case just fell apart and I have no leads. Sometimes I wonder why I wanted to be a cop,” he grumbled and turned toward the door. “Hope you find a zombie under one of those sheets.”

Mullen was still laughing when Jacob turned into the dimly lit hallway.

# 4

## Haru Reports

The wine glass was almost to his lips when his phone sounded the riff of Jimmy Hendrix music. It was Haru. He lowered the glass and looked at the others.

"I have to take this," he grumbled as he got up from the table and stepped away.

"Haru, what is it?"

"You never want to hear about the little operational details, so I give you bullet point action reports afterward. This action went out of control."

"What action?"

"We had a defection."

"Defection?"

"Aron De Silvano, the priest, missed his rebirther appointment. An agent was assigned and he was tracked down three days later. He was spilling his guts to a journalist. The agent reported the leak plugged, that both were dead and took the normal exit after setting fire to the hotel room."

"You interrupted my evening to tell me that you're doing your job?"

"No, Diego, my report is that something went wrong. They only found two burned bodies. There should have been three, but more significant is that the journalist wasn't one of them."

"What the fuck are you saying, Haru?"

"We are at great risk of exposure."

"Where's the agent who screwed it up?"

"He'll be back in a few hours, but *any* Commander would know the agent didn't cause this. You and the priest were-"

"Don't call him that!" Diego snapped. "He's a fucking art dealer."

"When you brought me into this forever life he was a priest. He became an art dealer, but he never lost his bleeding heart and that was a tremendous risk."

“I think what I’m hearing is that Aron is dead, but a journalist is in the wind and might have our secret.”

“We have to assume he does. As soon as the agent gets back he’ll be updated and dispatched back into the field, but it may be time for bold action.”

“Haru, we’re not ready for that.”

“Maybe not, but we’re definitely not ready to have the secret on the front page of the New York Times and then across the world. Maybe the agent closes the action and brings this emergency to an end. Maybe he doesn’t. The risk is huge. It’s time for you to make a decision, *Commander*.”

“We have a billion-dollar satellite orbiting that your team designed. A billion dollars, not to mention launch costs, just to track your agents, using their DNA. Is that right?”

“Yes, but-”

“But nothing, Haru! You have the identity of the journalist. Go deep into our network, get his DNA, digitize it, and upload it to the satellite. Find him. Kill him. If that action is unsuccessful I will have to take the steps we’re not ready for. We cannot be exposed. If there are roadblocks to my instructions speak of them now.”

“It might not work.”

“Might not? Are you serious? Tell me it doesn’t work and I enact End Solution. Get on it Haru,” Diego said and ended the call.