

SKIN DEEP

by Mark Del Franco

CHAPTER ONE

As she leaned back in her seat, the van's motion vibrated against the base of Laura Blackstone's skull. She rocked her head, hoping it would soothe her tense muscles. It didn't. Odors tickled her nose—the scent of hot electronics, clean gun oil, and leather uniforms. If someone blindfolded her and spun her around, she'd still know immediately that she was inside a SWAT-team van.

She couldn't see outside the van, but she didn't need to sightsee in Anacostia. With years of law enforcement under her belt, she knew all of Washington, D.C.'s neighborhoods well. The historic Anacostia had its share of crime and urban blight mixed in with bland strip malls and expensive homes.

This time, the neighborhood had a drug lab that the local SWAT team wanted taken down. Nothing unusual about that—it was what SWAT teams did. And since Captain Aaron Foyle needed specialized backup, he called someone he could rely on: Laura Blackstone. Actually, he called “Janice Crawford.” That's the persona Laura used when she worked with the local D.C. SWAT team.

Laura looked at the men in the van and, not for the first time, wondered what humans thought of her, really thought of her. Did they see the person behind the ability?

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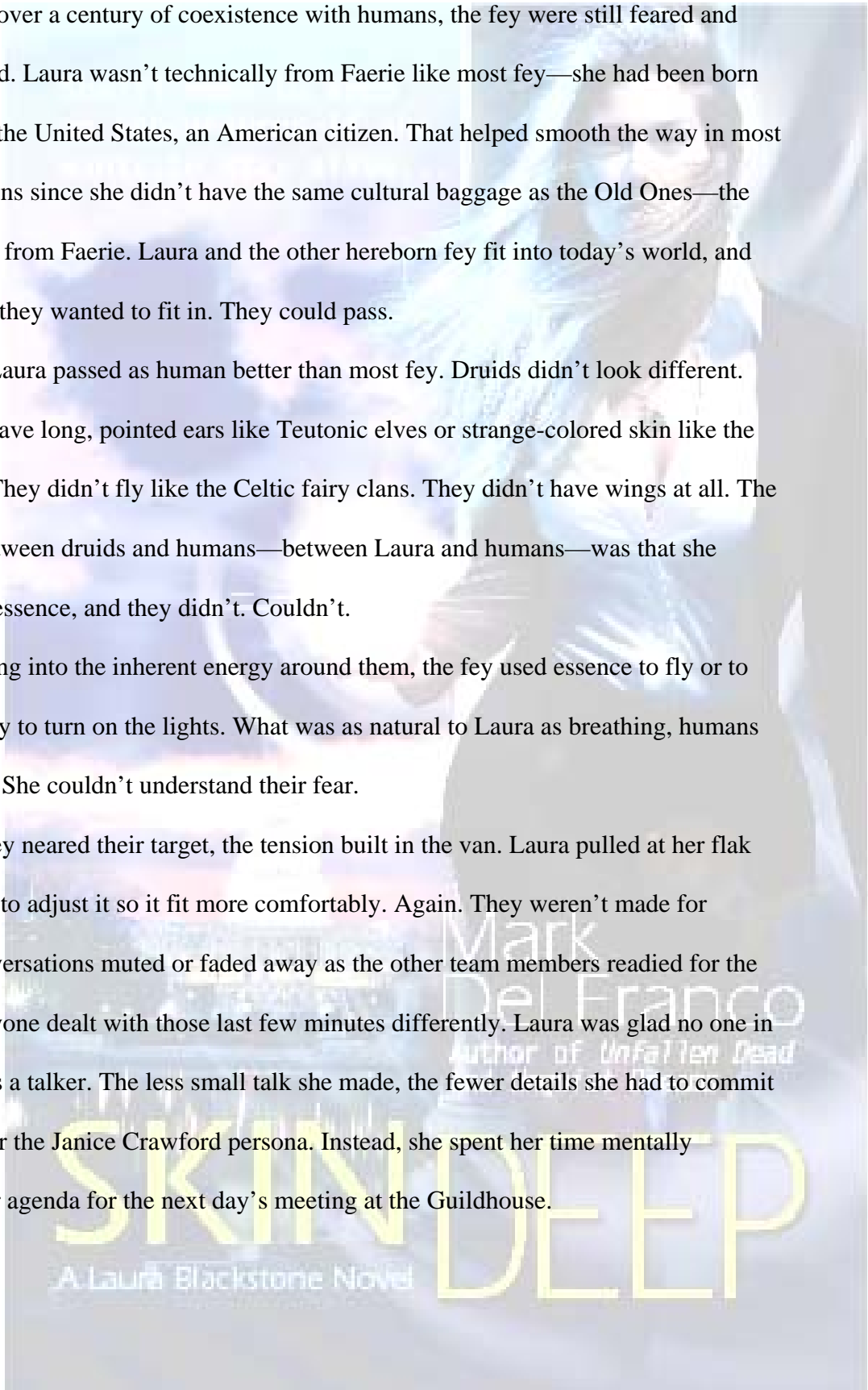
Or was she always perceived as this fey being who manipulated essence, some inhuman thing with the power to perform what they believed was magic?

After over a century of coexistence with humans, the fey were still feared and misunderstood. Laura wasn't technically from Faerie like most fey—she had been born and raised in the United States, an American citizen. That helped smooth the way in most social situations since she didn't have the same cultural baggage as the Old Ones—the fey originally from Faerie. Laura and the other hereborn fey fit into today's world, and what's more, they wanted to fit in. They could pass.

And Laura passed as human better than most fey. Druids didn't look different. They didn't have long, pointed ears like Teutonic elves or strange-colored skin like the solitary fey. They didn't fly like the Celtic fairy clans. They didn't have wings at all. The difference between druids and humans—between Laura and humans—was that she manipulated essence, and they didn't. Couldn't.

Tapping into the inherent energy around them, the fey used essence to fly or to fight or simply to turn on the lights. What was as natural to Laura as breathing, humans called magic. She couldn't understand their fear.

As they neared their target, the tension built in the van. Laura pulled at her flak jacket, trying to adjust it so it fit more comfortably. Again. They weren't made for women. Conversations muted or faded away as the other team members readied for the assault. Everyone dealt with those last few minutes differently. Laura was glad no one in the group was a talker. The less small talk she made, the fewer details she had to commit to memory for the Janice Crawford persona. Instead, she spent her time mentally reviewing her agenda for the next day's meeting at the Guildhouse.



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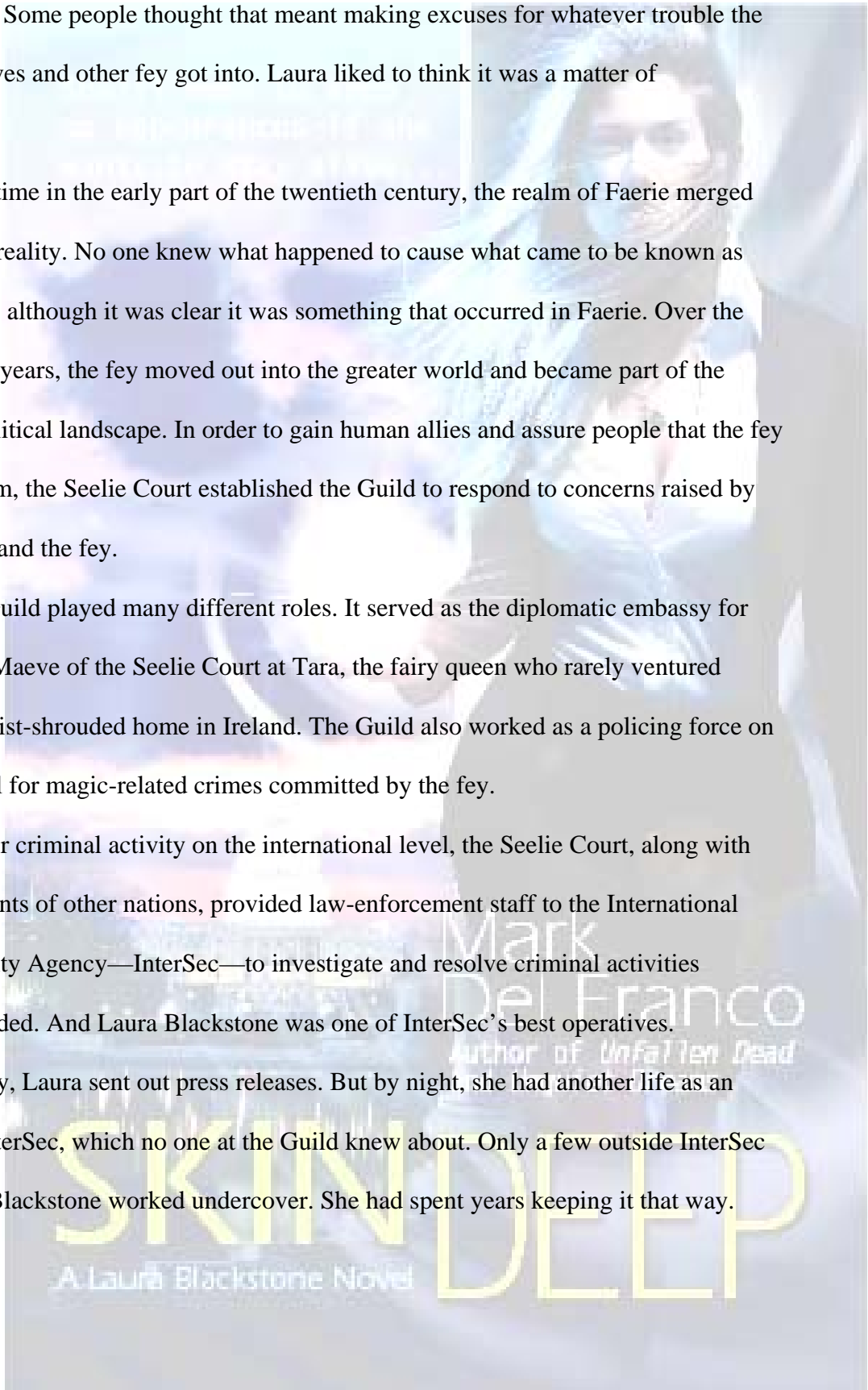
When the public saw Laura Blackstone—the actual Laura Blackstone—it only ever saw a public-relations director for the Fey Guild. Her role was to put a good face on fey activities. Some people thought that meant making excuses for whatever trouble the fairies and elves and other fey got into. Laura liked to think it was a matter of perspective.

Sometime in the early part of the twentieth century, the realm of Faerie merged with modern reality. No one knew what happened to cause what came to be known as Convergence, although it was clear it was something that occurred in Faerie. Over the next hundred years, the fey moved out into the greater world and became part of the social and political landscape. In order to gain human allies and assure people that the fey meant no harm, the Seelie Court established the Guild to respond to concerns raised by both humans and the fey.

The Guild played many different roles. It served as the diplomatic embassy for High Queen Maeve of the Seelie Court at Tara, the fairy queen who rarely ventured outside her mist-shrouded home in Ireland. The Guild also worked as a policing force on the local level for magic-related crimes committed by the fey.

But for criminal activity on the international level, the Seelie Court, along with the governments of other nations, provided law-enforcement staff to the International Global Security Agency—InterSec—to investigate and resolve criminal activities wherever needed. And Laura Blackstone was one of InterSec's best operatives.

By day, Laura sent out press releases. But by night, she had another life as an agent with InterSec, which no one at the Guild knew about. Only a few outside InterSec knew Laura Blackstone worked undercover. She had spent years keeping it that way.



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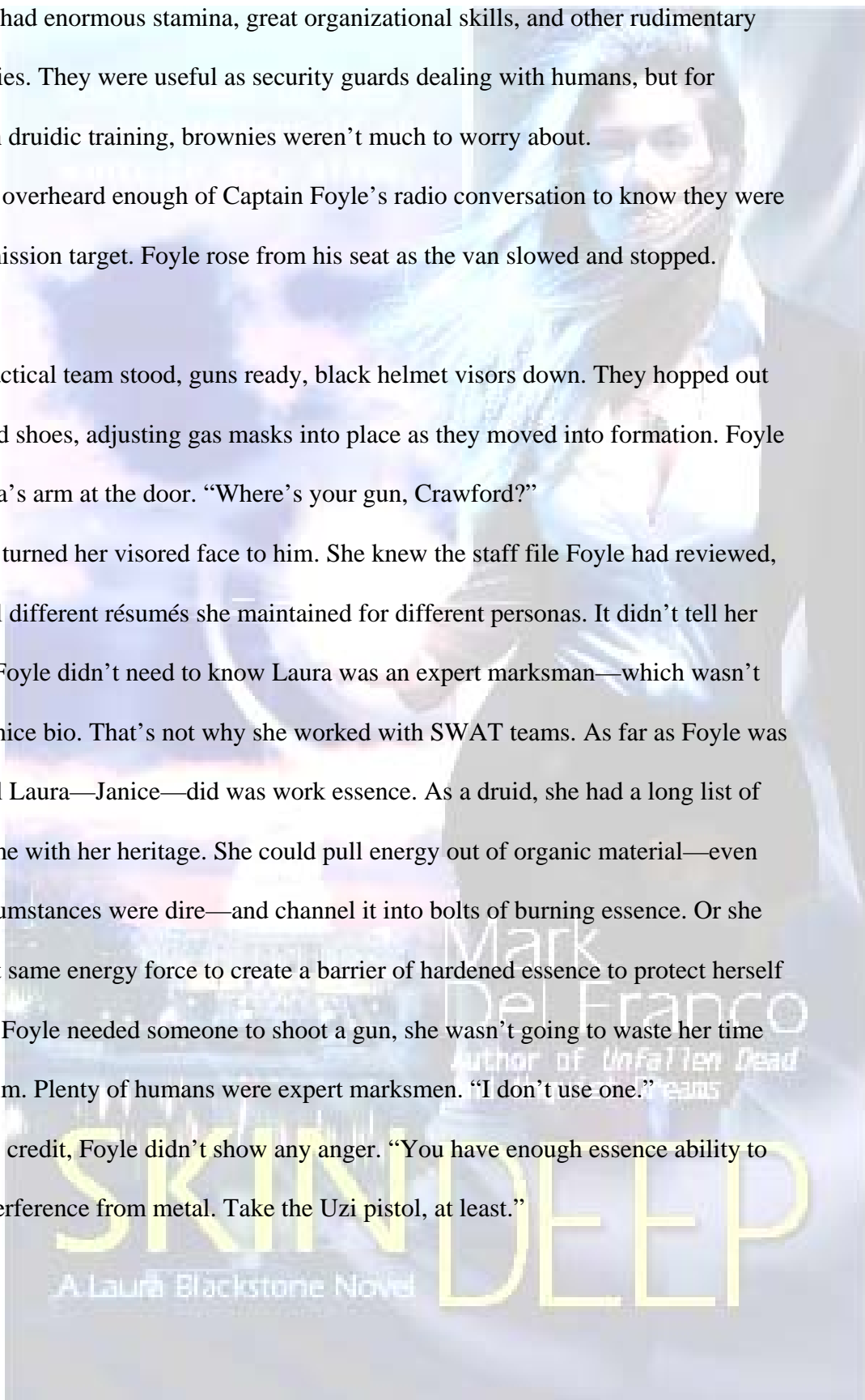
The SWAT team's intelligence had uncovered information that the drug lab had two brownies as security. Brownies were low-powered Celtic fey. From an essence point of view, they had enormous stamina, great organizational skills, and other rudimentary essence abilities. They were useful as security guards dealing with humans, but for someone with druidic training, brownies weren't much to worry about.

Laura overheard enough of Captain Foyle's radio conversation to know they were close to the mission target. Foyle rose from his seat as the van slowed and stopped. "Arrived."

The tactical team stood, guns ready, black helmet visors down. They hopped out on silent-soled shoes, adjusting gas masks into place as they moved into formation. Foyle grabbed Laura's arm at the door. "Where's your gun, Crawford?"

Laura turned her visored face to him. She knew the staff file Foyle had reviewed, one of several different résumés she maintained for different personas. It didn't tell her whole story. Foyle didn't need to know Laura was an expert marksman—which wasn't part of her Janice bio. That's not why she worked with SWAT teams. As far as Foyle was concerned, all Laura—Janice—did was work essence. As a druid, she had a long list of skills that came with her heritage. She could pull energy out of organic material—even people if circumstances were dire—and channel it into bolts of burning essence. Or she could use that same energy force to create a barrier of hardened essence to protect herself and others. If Foyle needed someone to shoot a gun, she wasn't going to waste her time doing it for him. Plenty of humans were expert marksmen. "I don't use one."

To his credit, Foyle didn't show any anger. "You have enough essence ability to overcome interference from metal. Take the Uzi pistol, at least."



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Metal, particularly iron, complicated using essence. Unless, as Foyle said, someone had enough ability to overcome its effects, metal warped the aim of an essence-bolt or caused a spell to fail. Laura had no problem with metal at all. The Janice persona profile gave her enough ability to be competent against it. Laura didn't change the tone of her voice. "If you saw my file, you also saw I've never shot anyone. I don't intend to start tonight. We do our job right, I won't need a gun."

It was an equivocation on her part. Janice had never shot anyone. Laura had, though. She wasn't keen to do it again. They stared at each other. Foyle released her arm. "Okay. Stay where I can see you."

Laura hopped to the pavement into the stark white light of a street lamp. Other units moved in the shadows outside the pool of light, checking their weapons. Foyle had chosen a nighttime assault to avoid the presence of civilians as much as possible. They stopped a block from the target—a brick apartment complex, run-down and mostly abandoned. Laura fell in behind the rest of the team while Foyle took the lead. He led them down the street at a hustling gait. Laura liked Aaron Foyle. He had the classic command résumé, a former Marine who had risen through the urban-assault ranks at an above-average rate, someone people looked up to.

Sweat trickled down her back. In addition to the standard SWAT-team gear, she wore her natural body shield. To the sharp-eyed, a slight air distortion shimmered around her body when light struck it from certain angles. Her body signature was strong, especially for a druid, and the shield drew enough energy from it to blunt the force of anything thrown at it.

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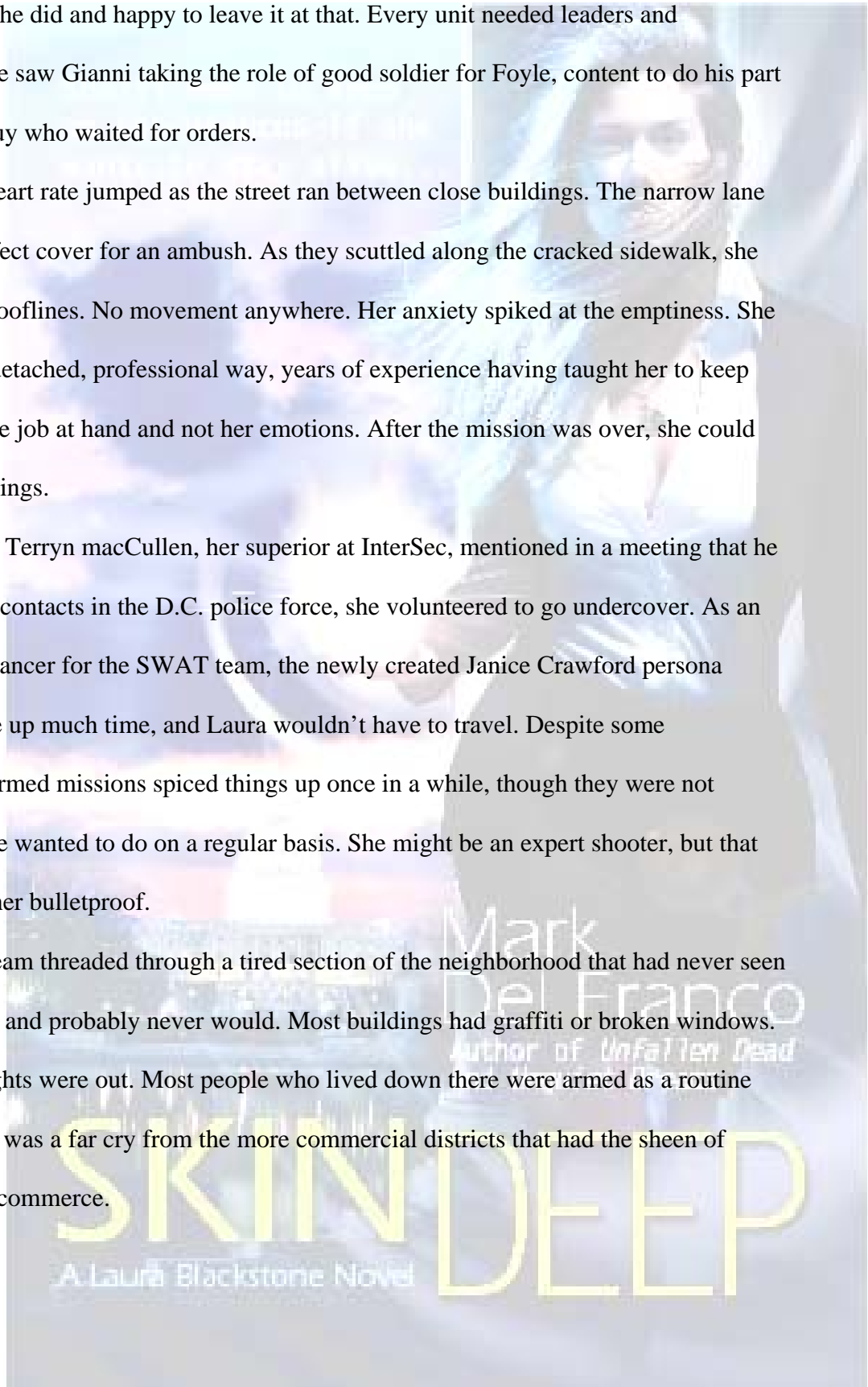
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Behind Foyle, Salvatore Gianni carried the battering ram, which looked like a toy in his large hands. Gianni was a big slab of a man and struck Laura as the type who was good at what he did and happy to leave it at that. Every unit needed leaders and followers. She saw Gianni taking the role of good soldier for Foyle, content to do his part and be that guy who waited for orders.

Her heart rate jumped as the street ran between close buildings. The narrow lane provided perfect cover for an ambush. As they scuttled along the cracked sidewalk, she scanned the rooflines. No movement anywhere. Her anxiety spiked at the emptiness. She noted it in a detached, professional way, years of experience having taught her to keep focused on the job at hand and not her emotions. After the mission was over, she could deal with feelings.

When Terryn macCullen, her superior at InterSec, mentioned in a meeting that he wanted more contacts in the D.C. police force, she volunteered to go undercover. As an InterSec freelancer for the SWAT team, the newly created Janice Crawford persona wouldn't take up much time, and Laura wouldn't have to travel. Despite some misgivings, armed missions spiced things up once in a while, though they were not something she wanted to do on a regular basis. She might be an expert shooter, but that didn't make her bulletproof.

The team threaded through a tired section of the neighborhood that had never seen gentrification and probably never would. Most buildings had graffiti or broken windows. Most streetlights were out. Most people who lived down there were armed as a routine precaution. It was a far cry from the more commercial districts that had the sheen of middle-class commerce.

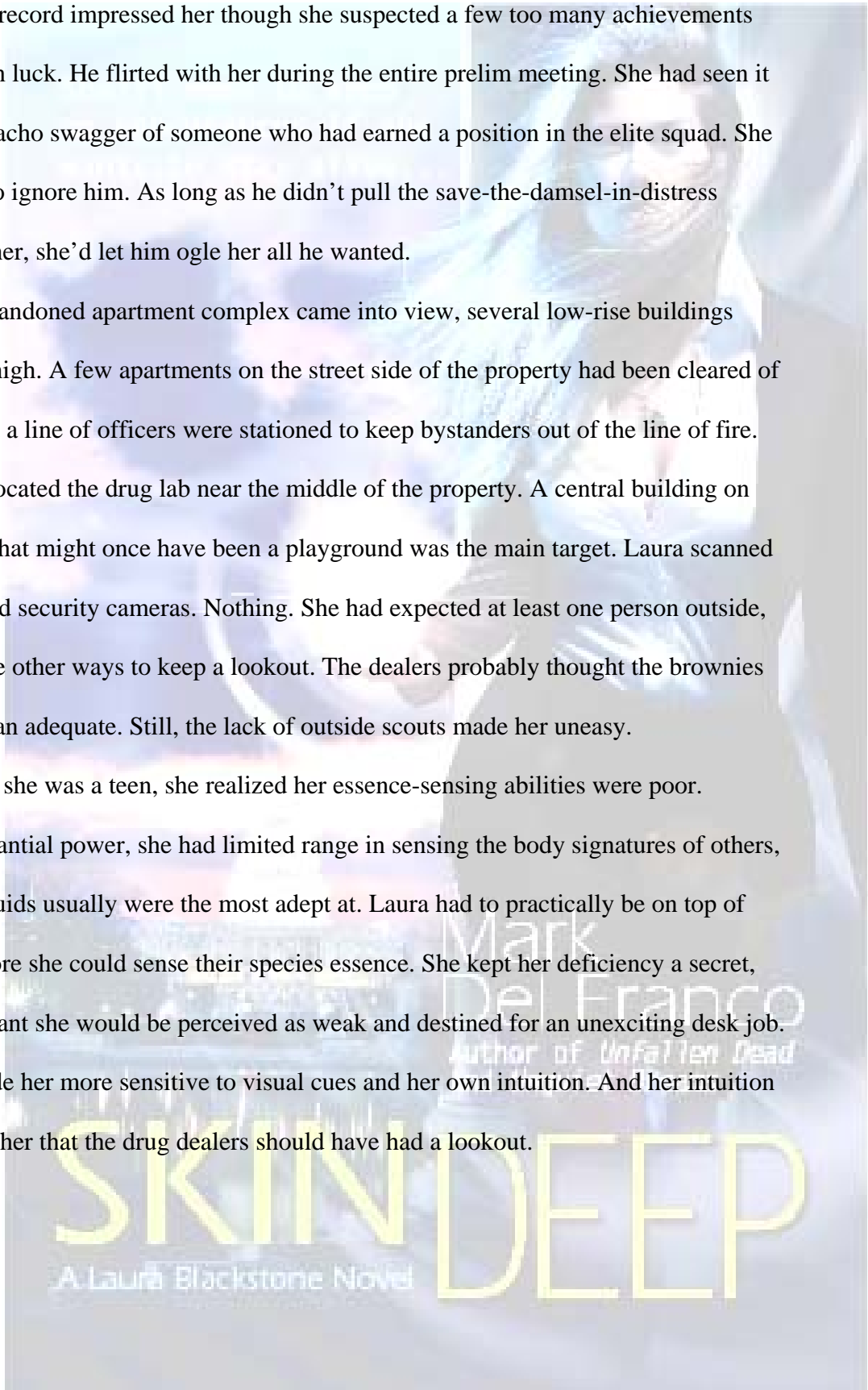


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Behind Gianni ran Gabrio Sanchez, a tough guy whom Laura pegged as someone who liked the adrenaline rush of confrontation, liked being point man as much as possible. His record impressed her though she suspected a few too many achievements were based on luck. He flirted with her during the entire prelim meeting. She had seen it before, the macho swagger of someone who had earned a position in the elite squad. She did her best to ignore him. As long as he didn't pull the save-the-damsel-in-distress routine with her, she'd let him ogle her all he wanted.

An abandoned apartment complex came into view, several low-rise buildings three stories high. A few apartments on the street side of the property had been cleared of squatters, and a line of officers were stationed to keep bystanders out of the line of fire. Intelligence located the drug lab near the middle of the property. A central building on the edge of what might once have been a playground was the main target. Laura scanned for snipers and security cameras. Nothing. She had expected at least one person outside, but there were other ways to keep a lookout. The dealers probably thought the brownies were more than adequate. Still, the lack of outside scouts made her uneasy.

When she was a teen, she realized her essence-sensing abilities were poor. Despite substantial power, she had limited range in sensing the body signatures of others, something druids usually were the most adept at. Laura had to practically be on top of someone before she could sense their species essence. She kept her deficiency a secret, worried it meant she would be perceived as weak and destined for an unexciting desk job. That fear made her more sensitive to visual cues and her own intuition. And her intuition kept warning her that the drug dealers should have had a lookout.



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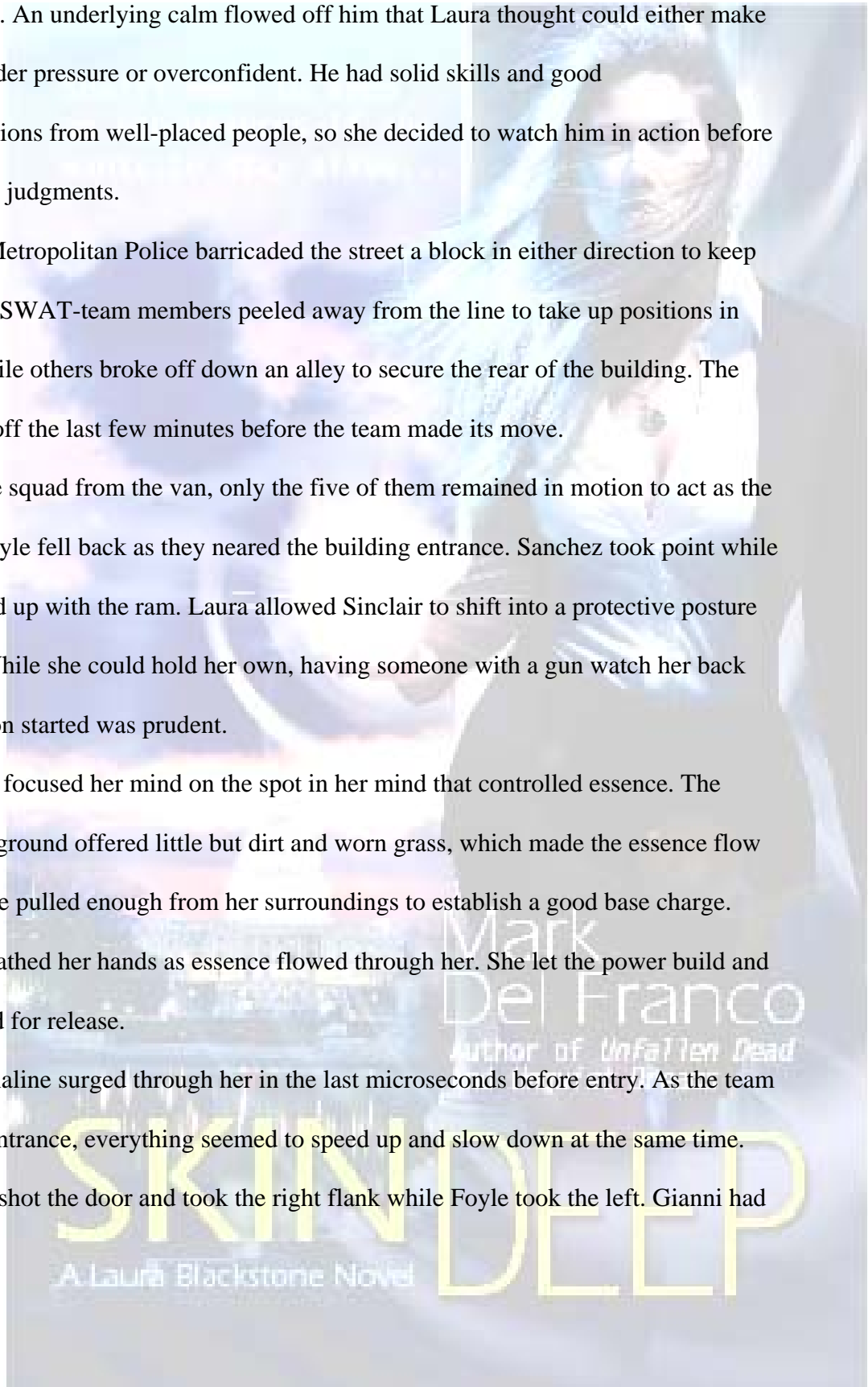
Jonathan Sinclair, the last of the entry unit, took position in front of her. He was the newest member of Foyle's squad. Where Gianni was stout and wide, Sinclair was tall and imposing. An underlying calm flowed off him that Laura thought could either make him sharp under pressure or overconfident. He had solid skills and good recommendations from well-placed people, so she decided to watch him in action before she made any judgments.

The Metropolitan Police barricaded the street a block in either direction to keep civilians out. SWAT-team members peeled away from the line to take up positions in doorways while others broke off down an alley to secure the rear of the building. The clock ticked off the last few minutes before the team made its move.

Of the squad from the van, only the five of them remained in motion to act as the entry unit. Foyle fell back as they neared the building entrance. Sanchez took point while Gianni moved up with the ram. Laura allowed Sinclair to shift into a protective posture beside her. While she could hold her own, having someone with a gun watch her back until the action started was prudent.

Laura focused her mind on the spot in her mind that controlled essence. The desolate playground offered little but dirt and worn grass, which made the essence flow feeble, but she pulled enough from her surroundings to establish a good base charge. White light bathed her hands as essence flowed through her. She let the power build and held it primed for release.

Adrenaline surged through her in the last microseconds before entry. As the team reached the entrance, everything seemed to speed up and slow down at the same time. Sanchez overshot the door and took the right flank while Foyle took the left. Gianni had



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the ram in motion as he slipped between them. She and Sinclair hung back to let them do their work.

Essence cluttered the doorways. Everyone and everything left essence behind on things they touched, even the air. It dissipated over time. At narrow entry points like doors, people crossed and recrossed their essence trails, leaving a jumble of signatures for anyone fey to sense. Even standing several feet away and with Sinclair blocking the way, Laura felt a flurry of species signatures. Illicit activity brought together diverse people, and here it was no different: humans, elves, druids, and odd sensations that meant solitaires—fairies who fit no general fey category. The trails were fresher than she would have liked, but she trusted Foyle had moved the team in at the right time.

With a single strike from the piston-action ram, Gianni took out the door. It jumped in its frame, curling outward in a puff of dust. In a synchronized dance, Gianni spun away as Sanchez grabbed an edge of the metal door and yanked. It slammed to the ground. Foyle tossed in a flash-bang grenade, and everyone ducked. Despite her visor, closed eyes, and turned head, Laura saw the flash. The wall vibrated against her back from the concussive force.

A fraction of a second after detonation, Sanchez led the entry team in while shouting identification. Three humans lay inside the door. Laura sensed they were dazed and dismissed them. The point team leaped over the prone bodies, leaving them for the sweep unit to secure.

They charged down a dark narrow hall, Gianni and Sanchez running shoulder to shoulder. Laura moved in a crouch behind Sinclair and Foyle. Ignoring the shouts of “Police” and “Stand down,” she opened herself to the surrounding essence, searching for



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the body signatures of her targets. Her job was to take the brownies out of commission.

The rest of the team would secure the drug lab.

Tightening her focus, she found the distinct body signatures of two brownies. Intelligence on the mark, she thought. One signature felt stronger, and she thought a brownie had been standing in the hall shortly before the door came down. Twenty feet in, she felt the second signature, then the cool static of air of a cast spell.

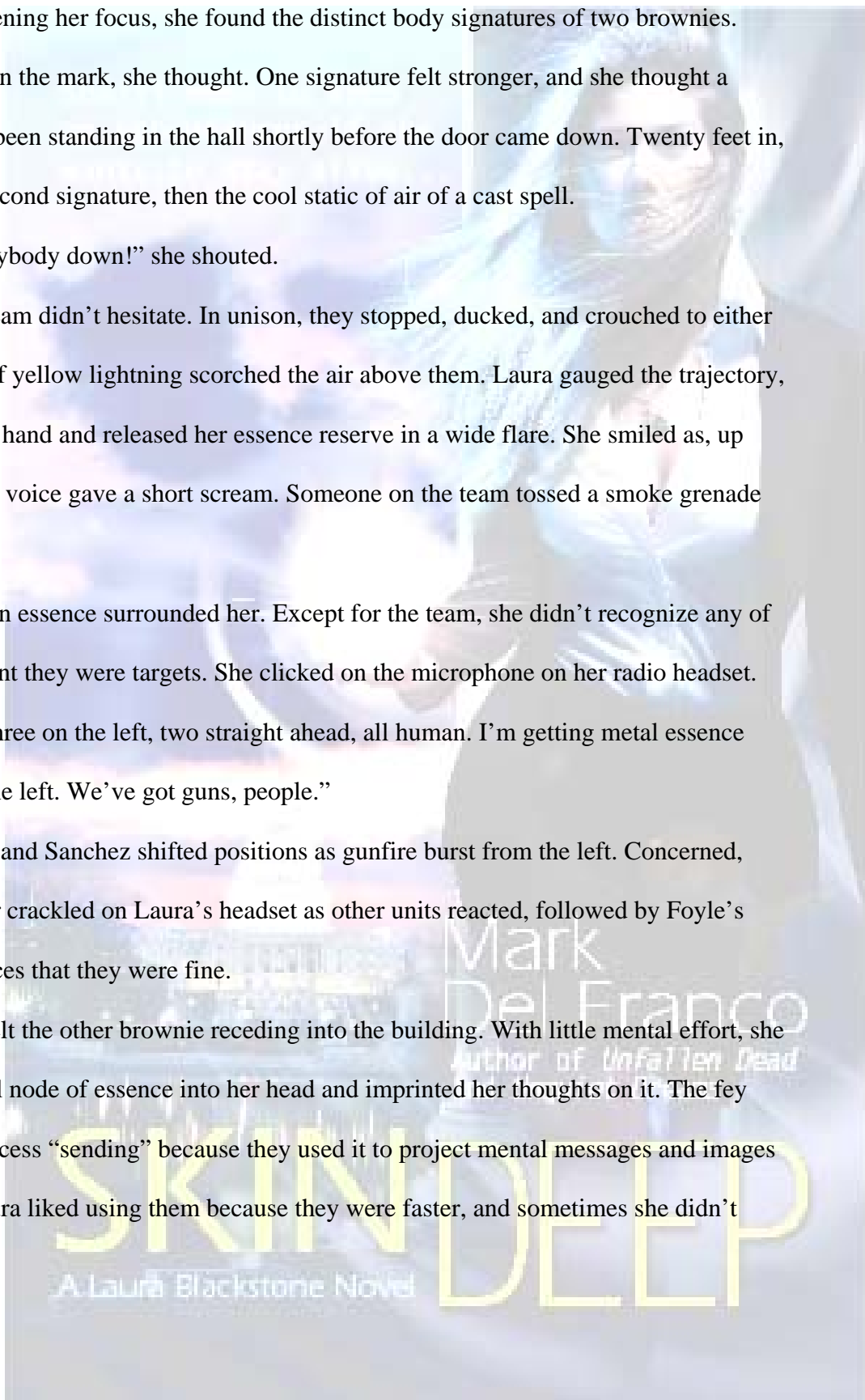
“Everybody down!” she shouted.

The team didn’t hesitate. In unison, they stopped, ducked, and crouched to either side. A bolt of yellow lightning scorched the air above them. Laura gauged the trajectory, threw out her hand and released her essence reserve in a wide flare. She smiled as, up ahead, a male voice gave a short scream. Someone on the team tossed a smoke grenade forward.

Human essence surrounded her. Except for the team, she didn’t recognize any of it, which meant they were targets. She clicked on the microphone on her radio headset. “We’ve got three on the left, two straight ahead, all human. I’m getting metal essence warping on the left. We’ve got guns, people.”

Foyle and Sanchez shifted positions as gunfire burst from the left. Concerned, urgent chatter crackled on Laura’s headset as other units reacted, followed by Foyle’s calm assurances that they were fine.

She felt the other brownie receding into the building. With little mental effort, she pulled a small node of essence into her head and imprinted her thoughts on it. The fey called the process “sending” because they used it to project mental messages and images to others. Laura liked using them because they were faster, and sometimes she didn’t



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have the few moments to dial a phone number or click on a radio. She threw the sending to Foyle's mind. *The first brownie is down. The second is running to the rear. Second unit back there can't handle it. I need to go in.*

Foyle's voice came over her headset. "Sanchez with Crawford. Gianni and Sinclair, cover fire on my lead."

Straight ahead, Laura sent to Sanchez. She stepped around Sinclair to move in close with Sanchez. Foyle and the others opened fire as she and Sanchez charged past the open doorway. Stray reaction fire responded.

"What've we got?" Sanchez radioed.

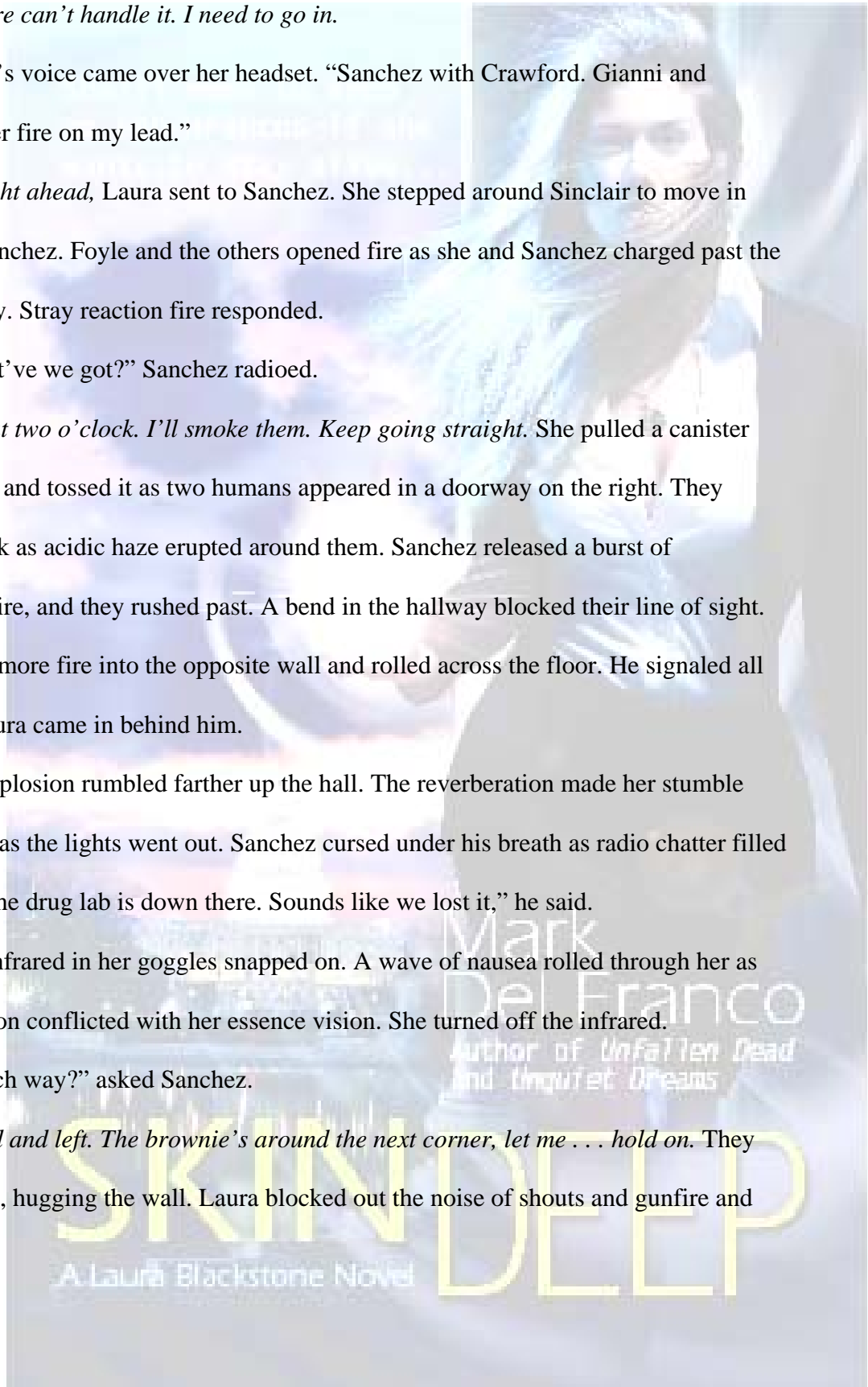
Two at two o'clock. I'll smoke them. Keep going straight. She pulled a canister from her vest and tossed it as two humans appeared in a doorway on the right. They stumbled back as acidic haze erupted around them. Sanchez released a burst of suppression fire, and they rushed past. A bend in the hallway blocked their line of sight. Sanchez laid more fire into the opposite wall and rolled across the floor. He signaled all clear, and Laura came in behind him.

An explosion rumbled farther up the hall. The reverberation made her stumble into Sanchez as the lights went out. Sanchez cursed under his breath as radio chatter filled their ears. "The drug lab is down there. Sounds like we lost it," he said.

The infrared in her goggles snapped on. A wave of nausea rolled through her as the night vision conflicted with her essence vision. She turned off the infrared.

"Which way?" asked Sanchez.

Ahead and left. The brownie's around the next corner, let me . . . hold on. They froze in place, hugging the wall. Laura blocked out the noise of shouts and gunfire and



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concentrated on the body signature. The brownie essence wavered in her senses. One moment it felt like a brownie should feel, the next it intensified. She pushed at her essence-sensing ability to sharpen its acuity. The brownie felt normal again. Brownies liked to work with wards, stones the fey used to accompany spells. The brownie ahead of them must have some kind of ward on him, an amplifier perhaps, to boost his firepower.

We're good. Lay down cover, then drop. I'll hit the target. You secure, she sent to Sanchez.

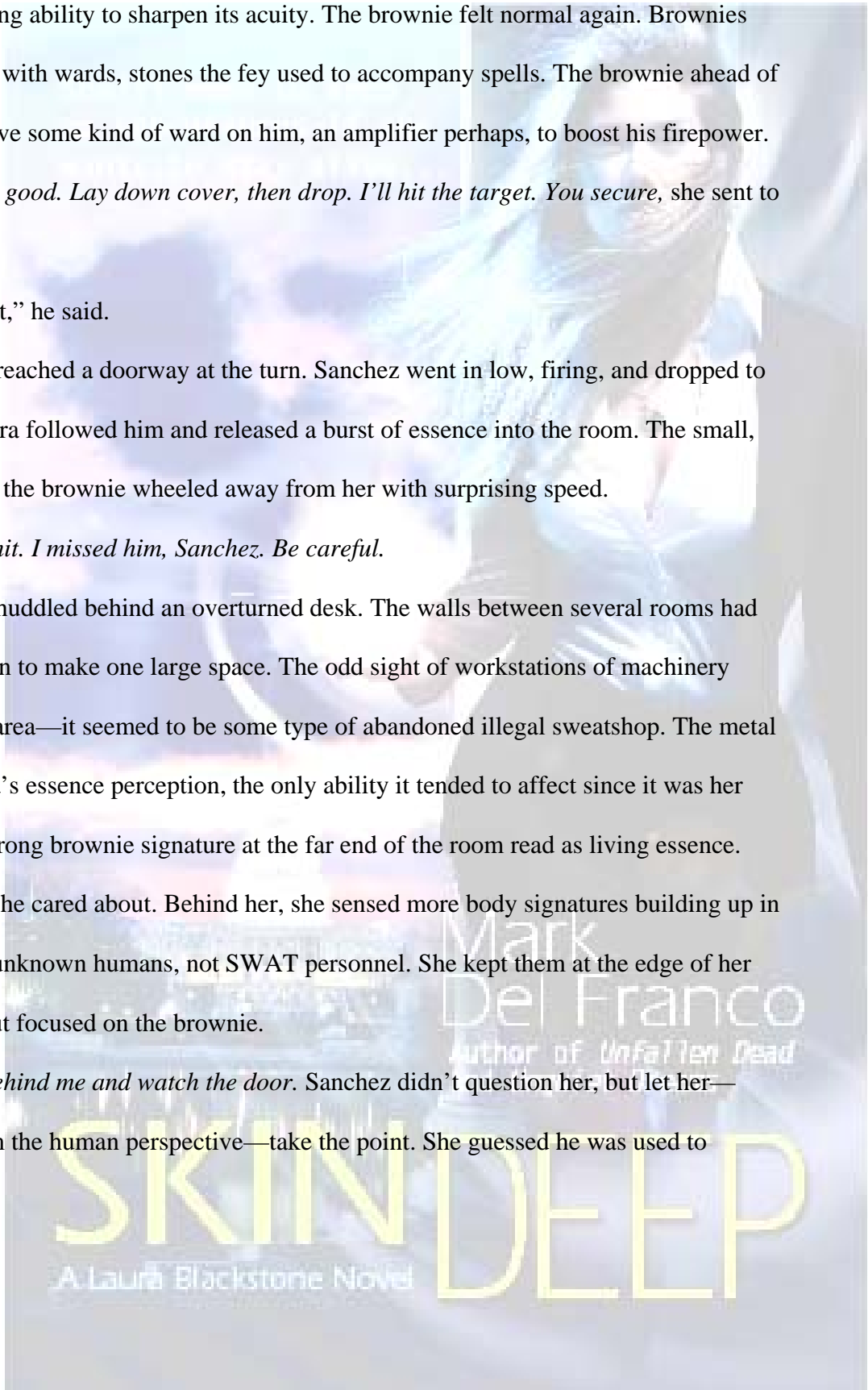
“Got it,” he said.

They reached a doorway at the turn. Sanchez went in low, firing, and dropped to the floor. Laura followed him and released a burst of essence into the room. The small, dark shape of the brownie wheeled away from her with surprising speed.

Dammit. I missed him, Sanchez. Be careful.

They huddled behind an overturned desk. The walls between several rooms had been torn open to make one large space. The odd sight of workstations of machinery cluttered the area—it seemed to be some type of abandoned illegal sweatshop. The metal warped Laura's essence perception, the only ability it tended to affect since it was her weakest. A strong brownie signature at the far end of the room read as living essence. That was all she cared about. Behind her, she sensed more body signatures building up in the hallway, unknown humans, not SWAT personnel. She kept them at the edge of her awareness, but focused on the brownie.

Get behind me and watch the door. Sanchez didn't question her, but let her—unarmed from the human perspective—take the point. She guessed he was used to



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working with fey folk, probably partnered with the team's regular druid, who was out on sick leave.

She drew essence into her hands, a charge large enough to knock the brownie unconscious. Taking a deep breath, she sprang up and fired, running the length of the room. The brownie appeared for a brief moment—almost as tall as she, medium brown skin and rust-colored hair. His plain face twisted in annoyance as he raised his own hands and returned fire. Laura dodged it and caught him with a shot full in the chest. He fell behind a stack of packing crates.

Laura skidded to a stop. The brownie essence wavered and faded away, replaced by another species signature. Glamoured. He wasn't a brownie. She was chasing an Inverni fairy glamoured to appear as a brownie. He had been playing the same game she was—hiding his true nature behind an illusion, and a dangerous illusion at that. Janice Crawford, with her supposedly limited abilities, could handle a brownie. An Inverni fairy, though, was at least as powerful as Laura Blackstone's full abilities.

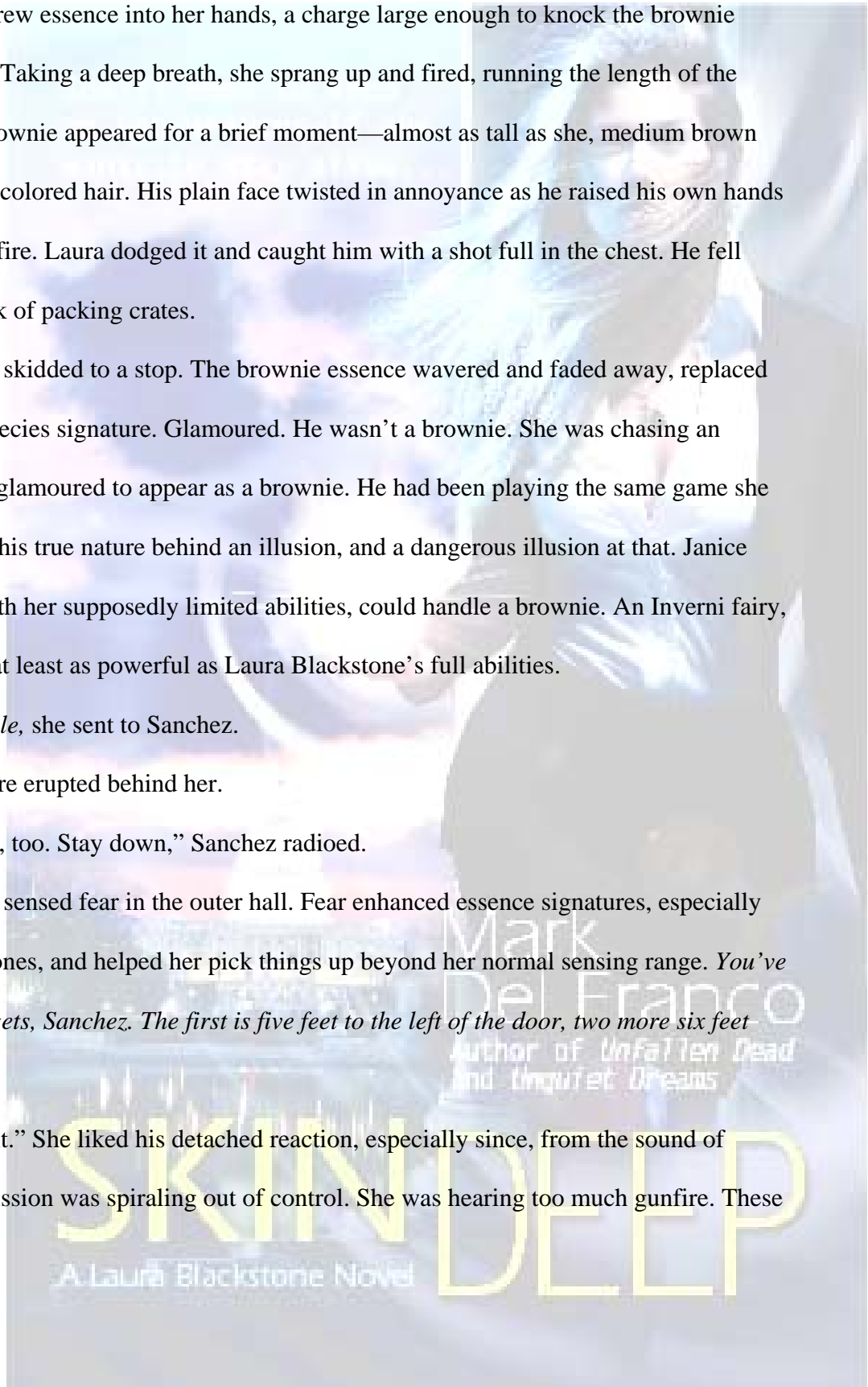
Trouble, she sent to Sanchez.

Gunfire erupted behind her.

“Here, too. Stay down,” Sanchez radioed.

Laura sensed fear in the outer hall. Fear enhanced essence signatures, especially faint human ones, and helped her pick things up beyond her normal sensing range. *You've got three targets, Sanchez. The first is five feet to the left of the door, two more six feet behind him.*

“Got it.” She liked his detached reaction, especially since, from the sound of things, the mission was spiraling out of control. She was hearing too much gunfire. These



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people were prepared, better prepared than the intel had anticipated, to say nothing of the unexpected challenge of an Inverni fairy. Behind her, Sanchez fired. By the screams in the hall, she judged it a good hit.

The Inverni wasn't moving. Laura imagined that he was doing the same thing she was—assessing the next move, trying to gauge the power of the opponent. Invernis were among the most powerful of the fairy clans. They had stronger resilience against essence-fire, which made them challenging enough to face without the other huge advantage they had maneuvering against a druid: Invernis could fly.

She decided surprise and aggression were her best options. Because of their power, Invernis tended not to expect frontal assaults. She hardened her body shield and ran toward him. As she reached the crates, he rose with a fiercely determined face.

Laura ducked as he gestured, pale blue essence crackling from his fingers. The machinery nearby warped the strike, sending it off target. Laura reached out with her own ability and reflected the bolt back at him. It splintered in two, one branch arcing back to the crates, the other hitting the workstation next to Laura. The Inverni ducked. Laura's right side burned incandescent white as her body shield absorbed the backlash. She released her shield to deflect the overflow into the floor. In that moment of exposure, a stray essence-spark grazed her shoulder. Essence coursed through her, like an electrical shock of hot pain. Her essence-sensing ability flickered and vanished.

Dammit. I'm head-blind, Sanchez.

“Tie that up back there. I've got four more on me.” Sanchez's voice sounded tight in her earpiece. More gunfire exploded and another flash-bang went off.

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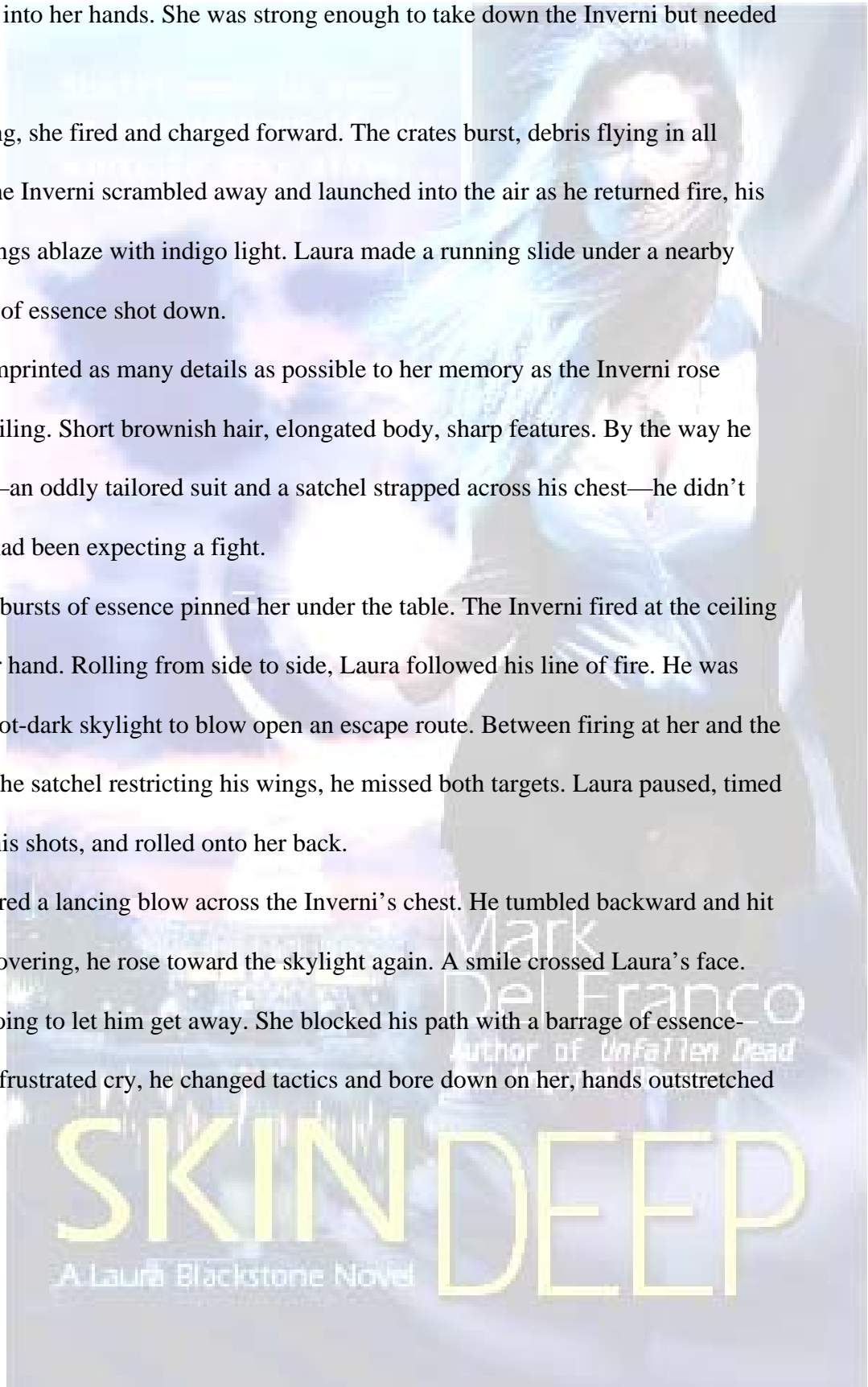
Laura shook her head, but the head-blindness stayed with her. Something wasn't right. No one protected a drug lab this much. She hardened her body shield again and drew essence into her hands. She was strong enough to take down the Inverni but needed to be closer.

Aiming, she fired and charged forward. The crates burst, debris flying in all directions. The Inverni scrambled away and launched into the air as he returned fire, his blade-like wings ablaze with indigo light. Laura made a running slide under a nearby table as bolts of essence shot down.

She imprinted as many details as possible to her memory as the Inverni rose toward the ceiling. Short brownish hair, elongated body, sharp features. By the way he was dressed—an oddly tailored suit and a satchel strapped across his chest—he didn't look like he had been expecting a fight.

Short bursts of essence pinned her under the table. The Inverni fired at the ceiling with his other hand. Rolling from side to side, Laura followed his line of fire. He was targeting a soot-dark skylight to blow open an escape route. Between firing at her and the skylight and the satchel restricting his wings, he missed both targets. Laura paused, timed her move to his shots, and rolled onto her back.

She fired a lancing blow across the Inverni's chest. He tumbled backward and hit the wall. Recovering, he rose toward the skylight again. A smile crossed Laura's face. She wasn't going to let him get away. She blocked his path with a barrage of essence-bolts. With a frustrated cry, he changed tactics and bore down on her, hands outstretched and glowing.



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The pile of crates next to her toppled. She rolled away as they thundered down, trapping her under the remains of the table. She heard glass breaking and shards hit the floor around her.

“Crawford?” Sanchez radioed.

I'm good, she sent. She lifted her head. Debris caged her in, splintered crates on all sides. Inches away from her face, incongruous, a USB thumb drive lay among chips and scraps of wood. It was cracked and hot when she picked it up, and she slipped it into her vest.

“Your target escaped. I could use you back here,” Sanchez radioed.

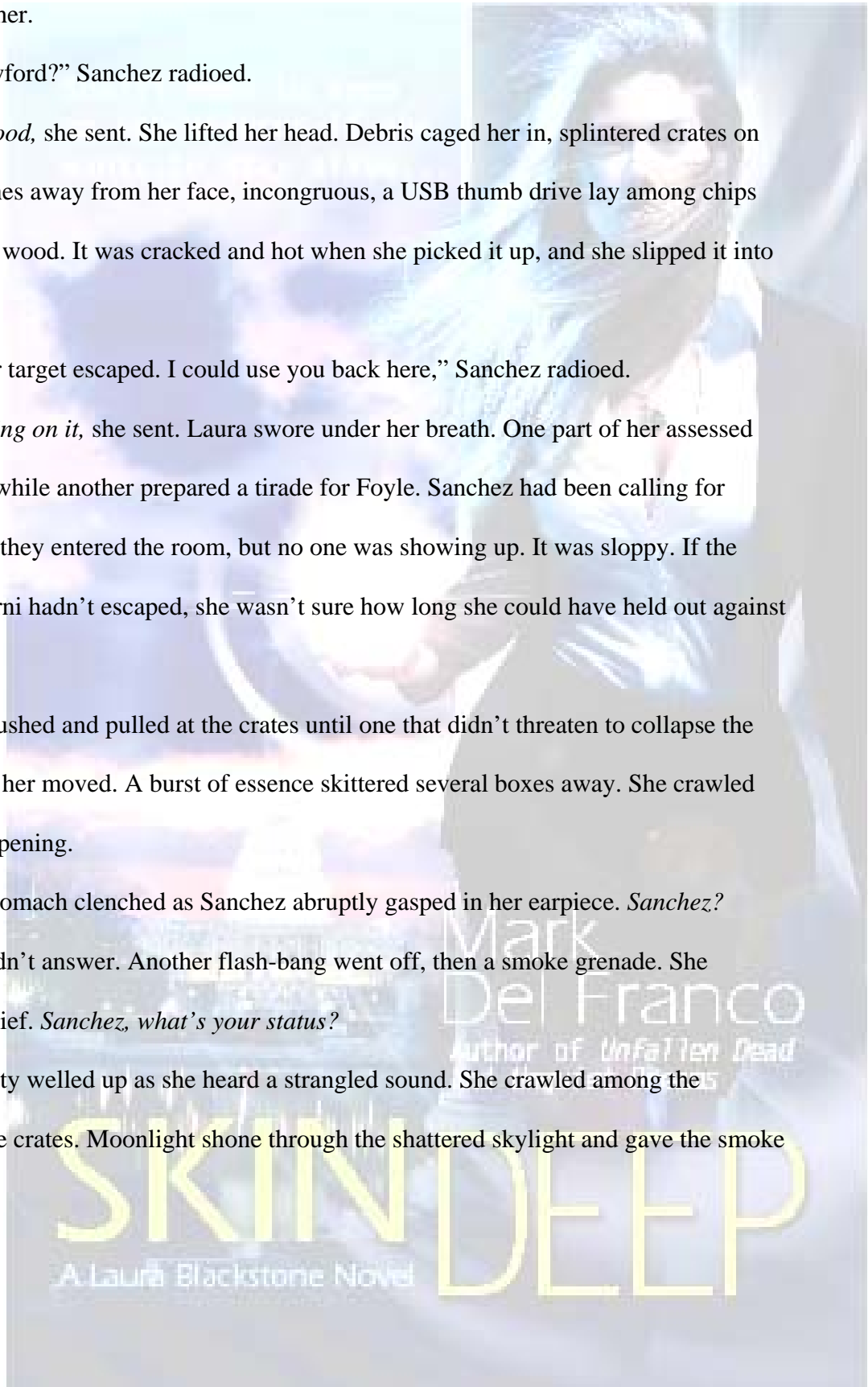
Working on it, she sent. Laura swore under her breath. One part of her assessed the situation while another prepared a tirade for Foyle. Sanchez had been calling for backup since they entered the room, but no one was showing up. It was sloppy. If the damned Inverni hadn't escaped, she wasn't sure how long she could have held out against him.

She pushed and pulled at the crates until one that didn't threaten to collapse the entire pile on her moved. A burst of essence skittered several boxes away. She crawled through the opening.

Her stomach clenched as Sanchez abruptly gasped in her earpiece. *Sanchez?*

He didn't answer. Another flash-bang went off, then a smoke grenade. She exhaled in relief. *Sanchez, what's your status?*

Anxiety welled up as she heard a strangled sound. She crawled among the remains of the crates. Moonlight shone through the shattered skylight and gave the smoke



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in the room an eerie glow. She tried to open her essence-sensing ability, but her head still buzzed from the Inverni's hit.

No shooting sounded. Out in the hall, the firefight was dying down. Running in a crouch back to Sanchez, Laura powered essence into her hands. In the haze, she made out his uniformed body hunched behind the desk. Sanchez sat with his head tucked. His gun lay on the ground next to him. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Sanchez?"

He groaned and rolled to face her, his hands clutched at his neck. Laura sucked in a breath as blood seeped between his fingers. She hit her radio comm. "Man down! Man down! Back hall, first door on the left!"

She tried to pry his fingers away. Sanchez shook his head. He opened his mouth, exposing bright white teeth framed with blood. "Stop."

The rest of his words were lost in a gurgling rasp. "Stop what?" Laura asked.

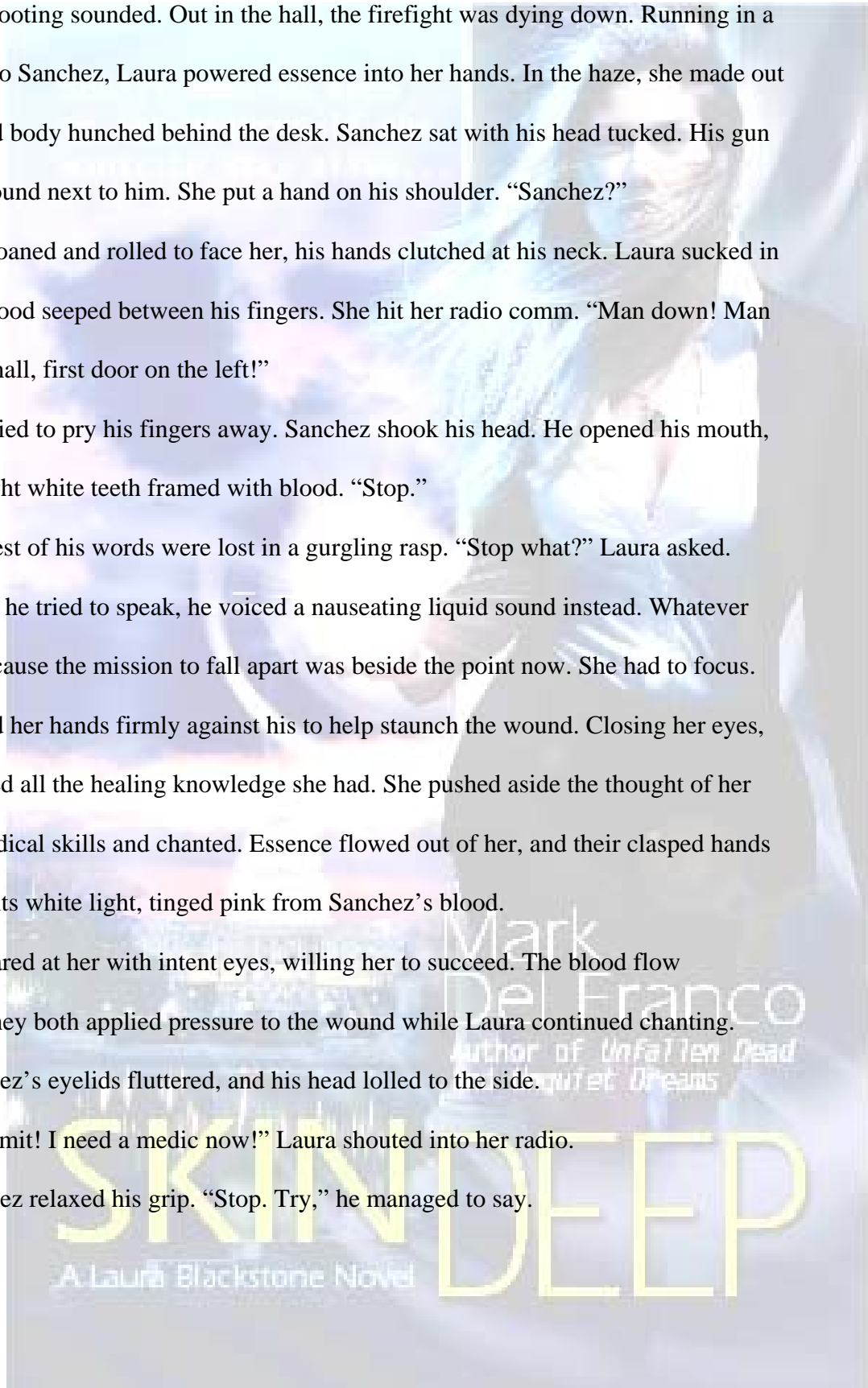
When he tried to speak, he voiced a nauseating liquid sound instead. Whatever happened to cause the mission to fall apart was beside the point now. She had to focus. Laura pressed her hands firmly against his to help staunch the wound. Closing her eyes, she summoned all the healing knowledge she had. She pushed aside the thought of her low-level medical skills and chanted. Essence flowed out of her, and their clasped hands glowed with its white light, tinged pink from Sanchez's blood.

He stared at her with intent eyes, willing her to succeed. The blood flow continued. They both applied pressure to the wound while Laura continued chanting.

Sanchez's eyelids fluttered, and his head lolled to the side.

"Dammit! I need a medic now!" Laura shouted into her radio.

Sanchez relaxed his grip. "Stop. Try," he managed to say.



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Blood pulsed thick and dark from a deep gash. Laura pressed her hands into the wound. “I won’t stop. Come on, Sanchez, hang on. They’re coming. Hang on.”

He grabbed her left wrist and pulled. Laura struggled against him. “No! Stop it. They’re coming. Just a few more minutes.”

Sanchez brought his other hand up and pulled her left arm away. She grappled with him, but his grip steadily pulled her hand away. He forced her arm back and thrust his hand into hers, scratching at her bloody palm. “Stop,” he said.

Laura stared down at the marks he made. “A? What are trying to say? Aaron?”

Sanchez shook his head, the effort feeble. Not Aaron Foyle. He tried again. This time Laura thought it was a number. “Four?”

He started once more, but his head fell back. His eyes closed, and his arms dropped to his sides. Laura stared in horror as his essence faded. A noise from the doorway caught her attention. Everything slowed down again. The smoke receded from her as if the hallway had inhaled. A hazy silhouette appeared. Laura leaned forward, expecting a medic. The muzzle of a gun flashed. Something hit her head with the hardest punch she had ever felt. Red light filled her vision as she fell backward. Her head slammed against the floor, then everything went dark.

A moment—an eon—later she opened her eyes and heard shouting and confused voices chattering on her earpiece. Three men stood over her.

“Is she dead?” one asked.

Someone knelt. She recognized Sinclair, smelled rich, burnt gunpowder on him.

“She’s alive.”

Mark
Del Franco
Author of *Unfallen Dead*
SKIN DEEP
A Laura Blackstone Novel

SKIN DEEP by Mark Del Franco

Darkness and silence descended, sounds receding first, then her vision becoming narrower and narrower. Foyle leaned in next to Sinclair. Laura fought against a faint. She dragged her right hand across her body, trailing a clumsy hand along her biceps. Under the sleeve of her uniform, she found the small, flat sending stone embedded under her flesh. She pressed it firmly before blacking out.

The stone pulsed with an emergency sending.

