

Excerpt from *MANTIS – Mulhenney & Poole* © 2020 by Steve Zell

September, 1959

This field would be in flames tomorrow.

Alena carried a cloth bag filled with bright red buttons. She dropped one button on every third stride, passing smoothly between the lush rows of monstrously tall sugarcane, stepping with practiced confidence over the tangled net of brown leaves, her bare ankles avoiding their sharp edges. As summer stretched on and the low leaves browned, they released their sweetness into the air and Alena breathed that intoxicating aroma in with every breath.

The coming fire was a necessary curve in the cycle of the cane's life, death and...whatever lay beyond death; a process that would rid the fields of their decaying leaves, making the harvest of the cane that much easier.

A ritual cleansing of sorts.

When she reached her special place, she crouched in the shade and shelter of those blade-like leaves and waited for her lover to arrive.

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Alena blinked. No longer a child, no longer lying in wait on her father's plantation.

The plane was making its final descent. Beyond her window; rooftops, tall buildings, warehouses, hotels, lay in neat asphalt rows. The city of Los Angeles passed beneath her like one more killing field.