

## **Author's Note**

Shortly after midnight on January 17, 1984, firefighters in Seattle, Washington responded to an all-hands call for a fire in an unoccupied warehouse. The twenty-five-thousand-square-foot Carpet Exchange had concrete walls and flooring and a steel truss roof. Yet it collapsed in nineteen minutes in a conflagration so extreme that it melted the building's steel supports and severely damaged the concrete floors. Worse, attempts to extinguish the flames only served to *increase* their intensity.

A postfire examination revealed that an arsonist had used some sort of flammable mixture (an accelerant) to start the blaze, yet no identifying residue could be found. Tests later confirmed that given the fire's superheated temperatures—in excess of 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit—even state-of-the-art safety gear would have offered emergency workers less than three minutes of protection, dooming anyone trapped inside. Neither the accelerant nor the arsonist was ever identified.

Since 1984, as many as twenty such fires have been reported in the U.S. and Canada. They can't be readily extinguished. All rescue attempts are futile. All traces of arson evidence are destroyed. The deadly infernos have claimed the lives of at least two firefighters and completely destroyed every building. Fire investigators call them HTA (high temperature accelerant) fires. All remain unsolved, and the accelerant a mystery.

## **Prologue**

*Every fire starts with a spark—a small, innocuous burst of heat and light. It craves seclusion, laying low at first, quietly sucking up oxygen, exhaling carbon monoxide. Its lethal breath slips unnoticed through the cracks of doors and vents, slowly choking off air and light.*

*Minutes or hours later, the first plume of bright orange flame erupts. It climbs on quivering tentacles, following predictable paths—up walls, across ceilings, through open doors, and out windows. Upward, ever upward, it climbs, consuming everything it touches. Then, when it has grown so large that no one person can destroy it, the fire turns bold, roaring like a brawny drunk, smashing windows and setting whole rooms alight in an instant of fury. Anyone unfortunate enough to look upon it at that moment would believe he was staring into the gates of hell.*

## Chapter 1

It was the eerie insistence of the sound that first caught the young woman's attention. A shrill bleat, remote yet unremitting, began when she turned on the ladies' room faucet. It reverberated through the drain and up the white-tiled walls, a haunting counterpoint to the party chatter and samba rhythms wafting in from the magazine's sixth-floor lobby. Air in the water pipes, the woman told herself. Old New York buildings have a lot of strange noises.

She bent over the sink and splashed cold water along the caramel contours of her face, trying to stave off another bout of morning sickness—a misnomer, she decided, given that it was already eleven on a Monday night. An amulet jingled from a silver-plated chain around her neck, three rose-colored quartz crystals in a filigree cage. A gift from her father when she was a little girl, and the only part of him that stuck around. Men leave, her mother had always told her. The young woman stared down at her champagne-colored chemise, stretched tightly across the small, telltale bulge of her belly, and shook her head. She was learning that herself now.

She turned off the spoke-wheel faucet, but the sound continued, breaking into two distinct noises: one whistling like steam, the other buzzing like an alarm clock. She stiffened, finally allowing herself to hear the naked urgency in the tones. The flat, ceaseless warning.

*Fire.*

A smoke detector outside the bathroom joined in the jarring squeal. In the magazine's lobby, the music stopped. Footsteps scrambled in all directions, punctuated by gasps and garbled words. But what scared the woman most as she headed for the bathroom door was the peculiarity of the voices. They were high-pitched and monosyllabic—even the men's.

The lights flickered once, then went out, turning the windowless bathroom into a tomb. She pounded the walls until she felt a slide bolt. Less than five minutes ago, it had slid across with ease. Now the bolt refused to budge.

"Come on," she cried, panic lacing her soft southern drawl. Strange odors, like copper pots left too long on a stove and burned bacon, assaulted her. A pepperiness crawled into her windpipe. She knew the old caveat about escaping a smoke-filled room—get down low and crawl. But the bolt could only be reached from a standing position, so she alternately stood and yanked, then sat and coughed until her larynx ached. Finally, on her fifth try, the bolt gave way and she flung herself out of the bathroom.

A wave of heat and dense smoke rolled over her, sucking the air from her lungs, making her arms and back feel as if they'd been stung by a swarm of bees. Quick shallow breaths were all she could manage, but each one felt as if she were inhaling through a cocktail straw. Her hand brushed against the sandpapery stubble of a beard and she recoiled, falling back against the hem of a dress, the sharp edge of a pair of glasses, a cascade of braided hair. The dead and dying were everywhere.

Far-off, anguished voices cried out. But they were increasingly drowned out by a rumble like an elevated train. A slimy casing now covered the woman's toffee-colored legs. Suddenly, the realization hit her: that casing was all that was left of her skin. She was burning alive.

The pain bit deep into her. She scrambled over shards of glass without feeling them. Through the veil of black smoke, she made out the dim shape of one of the loft's fourteen-foot windows. She was sixty feet in the air—a jump meant almost certain death—but she didn't care anymore. She'd die quickly. That's all she wanted now.

With seared fingers, she crawled nearer the ledge. The roar was getting closer. Small, bright orange flames rolled across the high, pressed-tin ceilings like waves upon the ocean, each one bigger than the one before. The monster on her back was ripping huge chunks of flesh off her now. From somewhere far away, she thought she heard a siren. She turned.

A flash of white light exploded out of the elevator vestibule. As loud as a blast of napalm, it ignited for only a second. But when it was over, for the young woman, there would be no more pain and suffering.

There wouldn't even be a recognizable corpse.

## **Chapter 2**

No one tells you the basics about being a woman in the New York City Fire Department. Sure, it's the usual stuff. Proving you've got guts. Not getting bent out of shape over some *Penthouse* pinup in the locker room or the water-filled condom tucked into the pocket of your turnout coat. But it takes a woman to truly understand the most fundamental problem with being female in the FDNY.

There's no place to pee.

Not in the firehouses with their flimsy locks on the bathrooms. Not at a fire scene where you can stand for hours, kidneys burning, while the guys sneak around the corner and do it against a wall. And God knows, not when you're a fire marshal speeding to an eight-alarm blaze right after downing two large mugs of coffee.

It wasn't like Georgia Skeeahan had a choice in the matter. The big guns would be at a fire this size—Frank Greco, the chief of department, William Lynch, the commissioner. Her partner, Randy Carter, wasn't about to hang around the Dunkin' Donuts while she lined up for the bathroom (is there ever *not* a line in a ladies' room?).

Carter drove, leaning on the horn of their dark blue, department-issued Chevy Caprice as it barreled south down Ninth Avenue, sirens wailing. Through the windshield, Georgia made out the cloud of dense gray smoke rising above Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood. A static of

dialogue crackled across the department radio. Dispatch confirmed a 10-45, Code One. Then another. And another. There were bodies in this fire, and it sounded as if no one knew how many.

“Did you see the progression on this thing?” Georgia asked Carter, studying a rough chronology she’d scribbled from dispatch reports. “The fire went from a second alarm to an eighth in under ten minutes.”

Carter nodded, tugging at the sleeve of his gray pinstriped suit. He was the only marshal Georgia knew who wore anything better than a Sears sports jacket to work.

“Body count’s up to eighteen already.” He frowned, deep lines etched into dark skin.

Georgia could deal with the carnage. It was the smells she never got used to. Rancid human smells. The sickly-sweet stench of charred flesh. The bitter, coppery odor of burned hair and coagulated blood. She popped a peppermint Tic Tac in her mouth and offered one to Carter. He waved it away.

"Artificial flavors and sweeteners," he explained in a voice still tinged with the rural North Carolina of his boyhood.

“You’re going to be getting a mouthful of carbon monoxide and God knows what else in a moment, anyway. What’s the difference?”

"You choose the way you want to die. I’ll choose mine." Carter floored the accelerator through a red light, narrowly missing a yellow cab. Georgia braced herself against the broken glove compartment.

"I don’t have a choice about the way I die," she reminded him. "You’re driving."

He allowed the faintest grin to cross his lean, craggy features, which pleased her. They’d been partners for nearly a year now. Georgia never asked, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that somewhere in this ex-Marine drill sergeant’s seemingly spotless thirty-year career with the FDNY, he must have ticked off some well-connected chief. Anybody that senior who got stuck with a female rookie partner had to be on someone’s shit list. Of course, it also didn’t help that he was black.

“At least I don’t ride some Hells Angels motorcycle,” he ribbed her. “Next thing I know, you’ll be getting a tattoo.”

“If I do, it’ll be in a place you’ll never see.”

One-thirty-one Spring Street was cordoned off for two blocks in every direction. Trucks, engines, and rescue rigs jammed the pavements, their ruby flashers throbbing with almost physical force against the low, darkened buildings. An early-April drizzle pearly across the Chevy’s windshield, refracting the red lights like spatters of blood. Georgia shivered. Easter was less than two weeks away, but it didn’t feel warm enough yet to be spring.

"Better put your gear on," Carter cautioned. "This one’s gonna be a doozy."

“Doozy, right.” Georgia watched Ladder Nine’s tower ladder rain high-pressure water on the smoldering ruins. Her bladder felt like Niagara Falls behind a dam of Popsicle sticks.

"Randy," she ventured hesitantly. "I gotta go."

"Go where?" His gaze narrowed as it sank in. "Man, Skeehan. I'm gonna start calling you the faucet. Seems every time we get a run, so do you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Start wearing Depends."

“Not helpful.”

Georgia stared at the men in fire helmets and black bunker gear swarming the pavement. Each thickly padded turnout coat boasted three stripes of gray reflective tape across the torso sandwiched between fluorescent yellow bands, plus two more on each sleeve. The tape gleamed in the spotlights of hovering camera crews. So much for privacy. Georgia relieved herself behind a foul-smelling Dumpster as a television chopper whirred overhead. Her son could probably pick her out on tomorrow’s news.

Carter was fumbling around in the Chevy’s trunk for the PET—physical examination tools—kit when Georgia returned. The kit contained tape measures, hammers, claw tools, and screwdrivers, everything needed to pull apart the wreckage to determine how and where the fire started. Determining a fire’s cause and origin, or C&O, is the first step in any investigation.

“While you were, uh, you know...” Carter stammered. “Relieving yourself...”

“What?”

He shrugged on his turnout coat without meeting her gaze. His deep-set eyes had the sorry look of a basset hound’s. “Word’s gone around. One of our guys didn’t make it.”

She would always be twelve when she heard that phrase. "Who?" she asked softly.

Carter slipped his gold marshal’s shield on a chain around his neck. "A brother named Terry Quinn. From Fifty-seven Truck. Twelve years on the job. You didn’t know him, did you?"

“No, but that’s Jimmy’s company. You know, Jimmy Gallagher? My mother’s...” Georgia hesitated. She always felt funny saying, “boyfriend.” “My mother’s companion.”

Carter nodded. “Humdinger, this is. Some kind of fancy party was going on on the top floor. A lot of important people were inside, including this Chinese dude—Wong or Wing or something—”

“Wang? Rubi Wang? Holy—The founder of *Nuance*?” Only a man over fifty like Carter wouldn’t instantly recognize the fashion designer’s name or his magazine.

“Yeah.”

They finished suiting up. At the police barricade, they flashed their badges and picked their way across the spongy ash, past firefighters packing up hose lines. Shattered glass crunched underfoot like saltine crackers. On a charred side wall were small mounds of what appeared to be human body parts—some of them black with burns, some greasy and grayish-white.

In order to uncover the fire's point of origin, Georgia and Carter knew they would have to trace the blaze's V-pattern—its widest path of destruction back down to its narrowest and lowest—in this case, the basement.

The basement, or what was left of it, was as filthy as a coalmine. Charred and melted debris. Ankle-deep puddles of black water. Air gauzy with smoke and oily with the residue of burning plastics. Carter squatted before a cast-iron radiator, grimacing at a newly acquired stain on his pants.

"We're doing the grunt work so those Arson and Explosion guys over at the NYPD can waltz in here tomorrow and grab all the headlines," he complained. Only marshals were allowed to examine physical evidence at a fire. If an arson included a homicide, however, jurisdiction could often turn into a political slugfest between cops and firefighters. "If A and E takes this, they're buying me a new pair of pants."

"Hey, they have extras," Georgia noted dryly. "You can't go on TV as much as they do in the same suit."

Carter grinned as he pulled on a pair of latex gloves and brushed a hand across the radiator. His smile abruptly vanished. One of the coils was encrusted with white ash, as fine and brittle as chalk. Two others were partially fused together.

"What kind of fire melts cast iron?" Georgia had meant the question to be rhetorical. She forgot Carter was the only marshal who could recite the flashpoint of almost any substance.

"A fire with a core temp of at least twenty-eight hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit," he said without meeting her gaze. Georgia started. Fires that level whole buildings average no more than about 1,500 degrees. This blaze was nearly double that. *Mother of God, what are we dealing with here?*

Carter swept water off a patch of concrete and shone his flashlight across it. Georgia noticed an irregular black stain, darker at the edges and clear in the center, like a dye that had bled outward.

"That looks like a pour pattern," she told him excitedly. Pour patterns are stains left when an arsonist uses a flammable liquid to start a fire. The liquid—typically gasoline or kerosene—tends to protect the surface beneath when it burns, charring mostly at the edges.

"Something burned here," Carter agreed. "But it's not a pour pattern." To prove his point, he directed his flashlight to a grouping of identical stains on another part of the floor, then to a similar drip down a brick wall burned clean from the intense heat. "Pretty clever torch to get a fire started halfway up a wall, I'd say."

“If it’s not a pour pattern, what is it?”

“Probably tar stains from when the roof melted. We’ll get it tested, but I’ll buy you lunch if it’s anything else.”

Georgia looked up through what had once been the rafters to the halogen-lit night. *Roofing tar*. She wondered if she’d ever get good at this job.

A thick Brooklyn accent crackled over Carter’s handy talkie. “Carter, Skeeahan, come in.”

Carter rolled his eyes and mouthed the words, “Man of Action.” Frank Greco’s nickname. Georgia grinned. In five years as chief of department, Greco’s most notable accomplishment was changing the shade of blue in the officers’ dress uniforms.

Carter depressed his speaker button. “Here, Chief.”

“The commissioner needs a COA for the cameras. So does Mr. Michaels. What can you pull together in fifteen minutes?”

“What’s a COA?” whispered Georgia. She thought she knew all the department jargon.

“Condensed overview analysis,” said Carter, shaking his head. “Greco-speak. Gives the chief something to do at headquarters all day besides play with himself. Rest of us peons call it a briefing.”

“Oh. Who’s Mr. Michaels?”

“Beats me.” He shrugged, then depressed the speaker button. “Chief? This *Mr. Michaels*? Does he own the building?”

“*And* the Knickerbocker Plaza Hotel. *And* half of New York, besides. That’s *Sloane Michaels*. You copy, Carter?”

“Ten-four. We’ll get right on it.” Carter clicked off the speaker button, then added, “You bald-headed, butt-kissing, can’t-decide-your-way-out-of-a-paper-bag bureaucrat.”

Georgia laughed. “So that’s how you ended up with me, huh? Forgot to turn off the speaker first?”

“Something like that.”

They split up to look around. Georgia shone her flashlight across a pile of rubbish where one of the building’s timber support beams should have been. Hundred-and-twenty-year-old lofts typically boast beams thirty to forty feet long and a foot thick. Even in the worst fires, the wood does little more than become blackened and segmented on the surface—a condition known as alligatoring. Yet here all she could find was a huge mound of charred splinters, none more than six inches in length.

“Randy, this is incredible,” Georgia called out, sloshing over. “I think the fire disintegrated the timber supports.”

Carter had his back to her. He was staring at something in his hand. She was nearly on top of him before he looked up, startled. He slipped whatever he was looking at into his coat pocket.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm trying to do my goddamned job here. How 'bout doing yours for a change?"

Georgia froze. Not once in all their time working together had Randy Carter ever lost his temper—not the tour when he took a shot to the jaw from a drug dealer. Not the night some bozo firefighter started peeing on crime-scene evidence. Not even when the other marshals ribbed him about having a rookie girl for a partner.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

He tipped back his black fire helmet and ran a hand from the top of his receding hairline to the bottom of his graying mustache. "Yeah." He exhaled. "I'm sorry. I'm just having a bad tour. Look, maybe you'd better handle the briefing."

"Me? Brief the commissioner?" In the eighteen months since she'd been promoted from firefighter to marshal, Georgia had investigated nothing bigger than a few tenement torchings. Though on paper they were equal partners, in practice she almost always let Carter take the lead. "What do I say?"

"As little as possible."

"We don't even know if it's arson."

"Yeah, we do. *I* do." The statement stopped Georgia cold. Carter never made definitive judgments this early in a case. He must have read the shock on her face, because he beckoned her over to a swirling bluish-green depression on the basement floor, about fifty feet from the stains they'd noted earlier. It was shiny and sleek, almost like glass. And it was etched deep into the concrete, as permanently as a tattoo.

"You see this pretty burn?" He ran his gloved fingers across the mark. "Something very bad and very deliberate caused it."

"Nothing burns concrete," Georgia insisted. "That's why they call concrete buildings fireproof."

"Fireproof," Carter mumbled. "Well, maybe they're gonna have to change the term." He straightened with the groan of a man who suddenly seemed too old to be crawling around burned buildings on his hands and knees. "Go to the command post and talk to the brass for me, will you? I'm going to get some air, see if I can round up any witnesses."

As Carter hoisted himself out of the basement, something fell from his turnout coat pocket. A tiny piece of blackened metal melted around a pinkish stone. Georgia picked it up and called to him, but he was already out of earshot.

Georgia frowned at the stone flickering lazily in her palm. Randy Carter could tell the difference between accelerant and roofing tar from ten feet away, yet he hadn't bothered to bag evidence even a rookie would know how to handle. She couldn't read him tonight.

The command post was like a war zone. Cigarette butts and Styrofoam coffee cups littered the ground. High-ranking chiefs and aides conferred on handy talkies and cell phones. Big men in helmets and turnout coats pushed past Georgia, their faces granite masks of concentration.

*What am I doing here?* she wondered. No one in the upper echelons of the FDNY knew her, least of all the commissioner. And all she knew about William Lynch was what she'd heard from other firefighters—namely that Lynch, a lawyer by trade, had never come within fifty feet of a speck of ash. That's why his white helmet stayed so shiny.

He was talking to Frank Greco, the chief of department, when she came upon him. Georgia introduced herself to both men and saluted. Lynch gave her a puzzled look. The chief of department, a head taller, frowned.

"Where's Carter?" Greco asked, squinting into the crowd on the assumption that a gray-haired black man would be easy to spot in a sea of Irish and Italian faces.

"Talking to witnesses, Chief. He asked me to brief you, but I can radio him, if you'd prefer."

Greco's enormous black handlebar mustache twitched nervously. The Man of Action hated decisions.

"Oh, for Chrissake," Lynch said finally. "Look, young lady, just tell me what you know. I'm doing the goddamned press conference in five minutes."

Georgia launched into a brief description of the melted cast iron and burned concrete found at the scene, and the 3,000-degree temperatures the evidence suggested.

"A gas leak?" the commissioner interrupted.

"There's too much destruction—"

"So you're thinking arson?"

"At this point, yes," said Georgia. Greco shot her a murderous look. She hadn't realized she wasn't supposed to offer opinions. The chief quickly stepped in.

"What the marshal is trying to say is that the department will need a specialized task force to assess the impact of the damage and prioritize the various scenarios—"

"Put a lid on it, Frank," the commissioner growled. Georgia stifled a grin. She was beginning to like Bill Lynch, lawyer or not. He turned to her now.

"Arson, you say... Then what's the motive, Marshal?"

"Motive, sir...?" Georgia stammered.

“Wouldn’t the building have been just as much of an insurance loss at fifteen hundred degrees as three thousand?”

“I suppose,” said Georgia.

“And wouldn’t everyone inside have been killed from carbon monoxide in a fire with a core temp of only eight or nine hundred?”

“That’s true...” She’d forgotten that Lynch, a former DA, had probably prosecuted a fair number of arson cases in his day. Motive would’ve been one of his first considerations.

“So how do you explain a three-thousand degree inferno? It’s like using ten bullets to kill a man you could’ve killed with two.”

A cloud of stinging smoke drifted overhead. Georgia stared at the pavement where body bags were being stacked like carpet remnants. The death toll was now up to forty-three.

“Maybe,” she ventured softly, “someone really liked pulling the trigger.”

### **Chapter 3**

“Yo, Chief! You goin’ to work?”

“I sure am, squirt.” The blond man hoisted two large spackling buckets and a couple of paint cans into the back of his beige, graffiti-covered Ford Econoline van and smiled at the six-year-old boy. Scabby knuckles, two front baby teeth missing, but at least no black eyes or bruises. Ramon’s mother had finally found a boyfriend who didn’t use her and her kids as punching bags.

“How come you’re not in school?” It was a Tuesday morning in early April. No holiday he was aware of.

“Teacher conferences, Chief.” Everyone called the blond man Chief up here in Washington Heights—even the drug dealers. Thirty-nine years of age, with a boyishly round, smooth face, sawdust-colored hair, and pale blue eyes, he was one of only a handful of white people left in this upper Manhattan neighborhood. Almost everyone else was Dominican.

The chief wiped his hands down the sides of his white, paint-spattered carpenter’s pants and checked his watch. “I’ve got an hour before I have to be at a job in TriBeCa. You get Luis and Bobby and I’ll take you hotshots for ice cream.”

“All right!” said Ramon. He disappeared into the dim recesses of the building and came bobbing back down the stairs with his obese seven-year old cousin, Bobby, and Luis, Ramon’s tall, gangly eight-year-old half brother. Luis was trying to maneuver his black-and-chrome dirt bike down the stoop.

“Hey, little man, let me get that for you,” the chief said, grabbing the bike with one hand and balancing it for the child on the cracked sidewalk. He knew the bike well. A BMX All-Terrain

he'd bought the boy last year when his shabby hand-me-down got stolen. He'd bought a sturdy combination lock as well so this bike would never stray.

"Me and Bobby'll walk with you," said Ramon. "Luis is gonna bike."

"That's cool," said the chief.

There were no trees along this block in Washington Heights, not even any weeds to signal the onset of spring. The dilapidated tenements and low brick apartment buildings were bathed in shadow on even the sunniest of days. Luis, normally a talkative child, biked silently alongside the trio. He had been acting strange lately. The chief was worried about him.

"How's that bike holding up, Luis?"

"Okay," the boy mumbled.

"He won't give me no rides," complained Ramon.

"Hey, Luis." The chief frowned. "You gotta look out for your little brother. Loyalty. Fraternity. All that stuff we talked about. You wanna be a fireman one day, don't you?"

Luis shrugged. That stopped the chief cold. The boy had wanted to be a fireman since they'd first met, three years ago. That was all he ever talked about.

"What's going on, son? Is Orlando doing something to you he shouldn't?"

He'd threatened the boy's mother, Celia Maldonado, once before with calling child welfare, after her last boyfriend beat the kids. The chief didn't do it, of course. Celia's taste in men had always been poor, but she was basically a good mother. And besides, if the city really did take her boys, Celia would probably go off the deep end. The children would most likely be split up, and God only knew what hellhole of a foster home they'd end up in.

"Luis," the chief said softly. "You know what touching is, don't you?"

The boy frowned. "Orlando ain't doin' nothin'..."

"You'd tell me the truth, wouldn't you?"

"No one's hassling me, okay?" The child got on his bicycle and pedaled ahead. The chief gave the other two boys quizzical looks. Bobby shrugged. Ramon looked at his sneakers. "Orlando told Ma you weren't really a fireman," the child blurted. "And Ma told Luis."

The chief's easy, handsome smile flickered for only for a moment. Then he took off down the street. He was a good runner, despite having been asthmatic as a child. Twice, he had completed the New York City Marathon in just over three and a half hours.

He planted himself in front of Luis's bike, then put two strong arms between the handlebars, forcing the child to stop.

"You lied," Luis muttered. "Orlando says you didn't leave the fire department because you got hurt rescuing somebody. He says you weren't even a firefighter."

The chief squatted in front of the bike and gently pulled at the boy's chin until their eyes met. Luis was crying.

"Son, I'd never lie to you." He pulled out a bandanna from his back pocket and wiped the boy's tears. "Didn't I buy you this bike?"

Luis nodded.

"And when your ma gets short of cash, don't I always take you guys to Mickey D's?" Again the child nodded.

"So why would I lie to you? Why would I hurt you?"

The boy thought a moment. Then he sniffed back tears and braved a smile.

In the cramped bodega, the chief bought three ice-cream sandwiches for the children and a copy of the *Daily News* for himself. *Hellfire!* screamed the front-page headline. Beneath, a full-page photo showed a giant hole in SoHo where a building had stood until eleven p.m. last night. Fifty-four people were dead.

"I gotta go to work," said the chief, squeezing Luis's shoulder. "Don't worry about anything son, you hear me?" The boy smiled warmly at the man.

The chief tucked the newspaper under his arm and left the store. Outside, he bent down beside Luis's bike to retie the laces of his paint-spattered work boots. He fingered the bike's combination lock idly. 35-62-27. He'd bought that lock. He'd protected Luis. He'd always protected Luis. In this neighborhood, the bike would be gone in a heartbeat without it. 35-62-27. He turned the dial and felt the familiar click as the lock gave way.

*The chief can giveth, yes. But the chief can also taketh away.*

## **Chapter 4**

The bagpipes wailed on a gathering breeze. "Amazing Grace" floated in a high, reedy tenor above the sea of midnight-blue uniforms and white caps that lined the hilly Yonkers boulevards Terry Quinn once called home.

Georgia Skeehan and Randy Carter gathered their somber dress blues around them as a sharp gust lifted off the Hudson River, past the tumbledown row frames, gray factories and bars with neon-green shamrocks blinking in the windows. They were both dog-tired from having been up all night, but a firefighter's death wasn't something you shrugged off.

"Was it like this for your dad?" Carter asked softly, taking in the carpet of dark blue extending a half-mile in every direction.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s sort of a blur to me,” Georgia admitted. “I saw the whole thing through a twelve-year-old’s eyes.”

She looked up to the steps of the dull red brick Roman Catholic Church where Quinn’s widow and two little girls were standing. The older girl had to be about six. She was crying. Her sister, three, looked blissfully unaware as a gleaming red fire truck, bearing the flag-draped casket of her father, rolled toward the packed congregation.

“I still miss him a lot,” Georgia confessed. “It’s crazy, you know, but for years, his death felt like a kind of abandonment to me. Like he’d just up and left me to grow into a woman without him. I really needed him growing up. I guess every girl does.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Georgia thought she saw Carter fighting back tears. She turned and touched his sleeve. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” His voice was hoarse and labored. She studied him now. His basset-hound eyes seemed sunken and glassy, and there was a slight stoop to his normally ramrod-straight posture. His chin bore two small scabs from a hasty shave. And Carter, the neat freak, had dirt under his nails.

“What’s wrong, Randy? Something’s eating you, I know it. C’mon, tell me. You’ve heard every goddamned inch of my life.”

“I’m fine. Really.” He waved her off. “I’m tired from last night, that’s all. I just need to walk around, get some air.”

Before Georgia could argue with him, she felt a meaty hand on her shoulder. She turned. A burly man with hair the color of spent charcoal gave her a bear hug. “Hello, love,” said Jimmy Gallagher. For a man of fifty-six, he was still surprisingly strong.

Georgia gave him a peck on the cheek, then turned back to Carter. “You want me to come with you, Randy...?”

“No. I’ll catch up to y’all later. Jimmy...” He tipped the brim of his white dress cap at Gallagher, who returned the gesture, then frowned as Carter disappeared into the crowd.

“Did I interrupt something, love?” he asked, fumbling for a cigarette in the pocket of his uniform jacket.

“Does Randy look different to you? He’s been very subdued since the fire.”

“*Everybody’s* subdued today. You think the guys at Ladder Fifty-seven look any better? Quinn was from our house.”

“Did you know him well?”

Gallagher sneaked a few puffs of his cigarette and nodded. “Yeah. We were friends. Worked with him last night. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. Good, God-fearing family man. Born in the old sod, like me.” Gallagher’s parents had left Ireland when he was seven. He

didn't have a brogue, but his voice still carried all the Irish inflections. He wore them like a badge of honor, which, in the FDNY, they sort of were.

"Quinn's name's familiar to me from somewhere," Georgia mused.

"You're probably thinking of that court fight here in Yonkers about a year ago. The county wanted to build a halfway house for sex offenders in his neighborhood. Quinn headed a citizen's committee to stop them. They got a lot of television coverage."

"I recall the headlines, but not the outcome."

"Place burned down before it could open."

Georgia raised an eyebrow.

"I know what you're thinking, love. And no, the fire was ruled accidental."

"So he saves his neighborhood and dies of carbon monoxide poisoning a year later—with half a tank of air still strapped to his back."

"Fire didn't get him at least. His widow was able to have an open casket at the wake this morning." Gallagher nodded at this small blessing. "He looked good."

"How could he look good?" groaned Georgia. "He's dead."

"I've seen it the other way. Trust me, it makes a difference to the loved ones, it does."

Gallagher stubbed out his cigarette with the heel of a polished black uniform shoe and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I gotta go inside now."

"You're too late to get a seat."

"Don't want one. I'm standing in back. The sight of all that brass gives me a headache."

Georgia smiled. Jimmy Gallagher was a great firefighter, smart enough to have made chief by now, had he studied his way up the ranks. He never wanted to. Being a firefighter—doing the tough, dirty, brutal work himself—was in his blood. He was never one to put much stock in titles. She touched his arm.

"Why don't you come over for dinner tonight? Ma's only ever really happy when you're around. And Richie wants to finish that slot car you guys are building."

"Ah, no," he stammered. "Another night." Georgia pursed her lips.

"You're going drinking with some of the firefighters after the funeral, aren't you?"

"You make it sound like a party."

"That's what it is."

"No, love, it's not. It's a chance to honor the dead and celebrate the living—"

"Did you drink after my father died?"

Silence.

“I’m sorry,” Georgia apologized. “That came out wrong.”

Gallagher took a minute with it, then looked at her squarely. “If I *did* drink, and that was eighteen years ago, then it was to commit to my heart one of the bravest men I ever knew. I pray to the heavenly Father that one day, *half* as many firefighters lift a glass in my memory as did for George Skeehan.”

“Pray it’s not for many years.”

He winked at her and grinned. “That’s for God to decide.” He checked his watch. “I have to go. Tell your mother I’ll call her tomorrow. And tell Richie we’ll get that slot car done before the memorial mass, I promise.”

“But that’s only six days away,” Georgia called after him.

“I promise.” He snaked through the crowd, glad-handing half a dozen firefighters along the way. Then Georgia saw him bend down extra low and gesture in her direction. She gave him a confused look until she caught the glint of Walter Frankel’s wheelchair. Frankel was the department’s forensic chemist. He was also a close friend. She maneuvered through the crowd to greet him.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“I go to department functions,” he said indignantly, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Functions, yes. Funerals, no.”

“I’m not into the Irish style of grieving. Can’t tell the difference between their funerals and their keg parties.”

A few organ notes resonated from the church. Voices hushed. Men removed their caps and bowed their heads. The funeral mass was beginning.

“You want the scuttlebutt I’m hearing?” Frankel whispered.

Georgia bent over and put a finger to her lips. “Not now.”

He plunged ahead anyway. “You’ve seen the autopsy report on Quinn, right?”

“Walter,” she chided. “We’re at the man’s funeral.”

“And what better time to talk about how he died? He had a cheater in his pocket and no facepiece.” Cheaters were illegal tubes fashioned by firefighters to get air from their tanks without having to wear the bulky facepiece.

“I know about the cheater. I was there last night, remember?” said Georgia. “And I know—surprise, surprise—that he didn’t turn on his PASS alarm, either.” A personal alert safety system—or PASS alarm—is a yellow beeper that fastens onto the straps of an air tank and goes

off if a firefighter remains motionless for thirty seconds. Georgia had yet to meet a firefighter who routinely turned his on.

“Okay, okay,” said Frankel with a trace of annoyance. “But I’ll bet you didn’t know this: Quinn didn’t smoke—”

“So?”

“He apparently always wore a seatbelt. He was a goddamned Irishman—accent and everything—and he didn’t drink.”

“You know, Walter, that’s an ethnic slur. Not every Irish person drinks.”

“You’re right. Some are in AA. Look, you can edit me for PC later. What I’m saying is, don’t you find it strange that a man this cautious about his health would use a cheater instead of a facepiece?”

“This isn’t the place,” she said disapprovingly. “Or the time.” Snippets of the mass swirled overhead in the blustery cold. “The commissioner’s delivering his funeral address.”

“This is the part where he says that an ordinary fireman is an extraordinary man.”

Georgia made a face and straightened, just in time to hear Lynch speak the same words. Frankel shrugged.

"I've heard his speeches before. They're all canned, you know."

"You're a cynic."

"I'm a realist. Lynch is killing time in this job until he can get appointed to something better. He wants a few headlines for his scrapbook. When he gets them, he'll move on."

They remained at attention until the doors of the church were finally opened wide, and the gleaming mahogany casket of Terry Quinn was borne through them. A lone trumpeter played taps. Then the bagpipes started up again, their plaintive chorus echoing down the long blue corridor of men.

The fire engine bearing Quinn's casket, with its crown of white lilies, proceeded slowly up the boulevard. A phalanx of uniforms snapped their white gloves in salute. Georgia lifted her hand as well. Frankel, she noticed, did not seem as moved by the display. He was a civilian. As much as she cared for him, that would always be the difference between them. He could distance himself from the tragedy. She couldn't.

The crowd soon began dispersing. Georgia and Frankel tried to find Carter but couldn't, so Georgia wheeled Frankel to his van.

“These funerals...they must be especially hard for you,” he said softly.

Georgia smiled sadly and nodded. It was one of the things she liked best about her relationship with Walter Frankel. They knew each other so well, all the big stuff could be pared down to a sentence or less.

“Terry Quinn was only thirty-five—four years younger than my dad when he died,” Georgia noted.

Frankel shook his head. “Such a senseless loss.”

“It’s a loss,” said Georgia sharply. “But never senseless. He was a firefighter. He died doing his job. Maybe he didn’t save anybody, and maybe he was too cavalier with his safety, but he had a purpose in being there.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Frankel sensed he’d touched a nerve, so he said nothing as he aligned his wheelchair with the van. A ramp from underneath the carriage slowly lifted him into position. “Are you still on this investigation?”

“There’s no official word, but I doubt it,” said Georgia.

“I’ve got some material you might want to take a look at. When you see it, you’ll know why I said Quinn’s death was senseless, why it didn’t have to happen. Not for him—not for any of those people.”

“Better send it to headquarters,” said Georgia. “The NYPD’s already jockeying for the case. And even if our people get to keep it, Chief Brennan’s going to put someone higher up the food chain on this.”

“Mac Marenko?”

Georgia made a face. “Hard to think of him as higher up in anything.”

Frankel laughed. “Georgia, do me a favor? Bring that new motorcycle of yours over to the lab tonight and take a look at my stuff. I send it to Marenko, he’ll bury it—the way the department’s buried all the others.”

The wind had picked up. Georgia was certain she’d misunderstood him. “Others?”

Frankel fixed a dark, sad gaze on her. “You didn’t see the first blaze of this kind in New York. And God help us, you may not have seen the last.”

## **Chapter 5**

Georgia had planned to grab a short nap after the funeral, then help her son, Richie, hang Easter eggs on the lilac bush out front. But by the time she awoke, the sun was melting into a filmy butterscotch light, and a scattering of garishly colored eggs already weighed down the lilac’s bare branches. She’d have just enough time to eat and meet Frankel at the lab.

She found Richie downstairs, sprawled out on the living room couch, tossing a basketball in the air with a steady, rhythmic motion. He didn't stop, even after his hazel eyes registered her presence.

"The eggs are hung," he said flatly.

Seeing his profile—the smooth, creamy cheeks, the perfect bow of his lips—still brought to mind the chubby toddler who used to melt into her arms at the first crack of thunder, the bark of a dog, or the gaze of a stranger. Now, at nine, he seemed more concerned with the pedestrian aspects of their relationship—her physical, mute presence at “mom” functions, her willingness to be a chauffeur on demand.

"You did a great job, honey," said Georgia. "Sorry I overslept."

He propped himself up and gazed out the window. "Those eggs always look so dorky. I'm not hanging them next year."

Georgia wasn't sure if he wanted her to agree with him or protest his indifference. Only last year, he was kid enough to cry when he got the flu and had to miss the school's egg hunt. It wasn't that many years ago he had believed a six-foot rabbit actually hopped through his window. Georgia looked down, searching for something neutral to say, and noticed his feet, still clad in sneakers, perched on the armrests of the couch.

"Richie, this isn't a locker room. Please take your shoes off the furniture."

"Grandma doesn't mind."

"But I do."

The boy rolled his eyes and made an elaborate show of shifting his feet to the floor. "You slept all afternoon, and you're still cranky."

"I was up all night. I slept for two hours. Two hours isn't all afternoon."

He propped the basketball on his finger and attempted to spin it. It wobbled around once before careening across the floor, barely missing the laminated-oak coffee table and a glass hutch full of her mother's Hummel figures. Georgia grabbed the ball.

"Does this look like a gym?"

The kitchen door swung open.

"For heaven's sake, Georgia. He's just a boy."

Georgia pursed her lips at the short, shapely woman with auburn hair, standing in the doorway, wiping a paring knife on a towel. The knife was part of a twenty-piece cutlery set her mother had won in an online sweepstakes last year. Margaret Skeeahan was always winning things. Everything from a George Foreman Grill to a vibrating back massager. Useless stuff, mostly. It was the winning her mother liked, that sense that fate was on her side for one shining moment.

“Ma, basketballs don’t belong in the living room. I don’t recall you letting me bring so much as a softball glove in here when I was a kid.”

“You would’ve broken something,”

“How would you know? You never let me do it.” Georgia flinched at how easily she and her mother fell into old patterns. Living in the house she’d grown up in created an uneasy alliance. Margaret Skeehan was a woman with fierce green eyes and the kind of Gaelic determination that shows its love through loyalty and stubborn faith more often than words or touch. Georgia had always been more drawn to her father’s warm, easygoing nature. He would’ve understood why, four months ago, she’d bought that fire-engine-red Harley Davidson motorcycle with its raked front end and polished chrome handlebars. He would’ve understood that sometimes being a mom isn’t enough. Sometimes you just have to escape.

Richie sat up straight now and put the basketball between his legs. “Do you want me to play outside?” The question was addressed to Margaret. He didn’t even look at his mother.

“Would you, on the driveway? There’s a good boy,” she cooed. “Practice for that big game Thursday night.”

Richie gave his mother a dirty look, stuffed the basketball under his arm, and disappeared out the front door. Minutes later, Georgia heard the thump-thump on the blacktop. Might as well have been a hammer to her heart.

“He never listens anymore,” she said softly, watching him from the kitchen window.

“Do you listen to him?”

“Of course I do. He’s got a three-subject range: basketball, video games, and the Mets.”

Margaret sighed. “If you really believe that, then you’re not listening. It’s just like shooting pool. It’s all in the approach.”

Margaret Skeehan was a champion pool player, a fact that seemed entirely at odds with her petite frame and reserved nature. Her father, Jack Reilly, had owned a pool hall when she was a kid, and she still competed occasionally in local tournaments. Georgia and Gallagher always got a kick out of watching some swaggering, tattooed hulk being roundly defeated by a five-foot-two-inch, fifty-five-year-old grandmother.

“I’ve got enough problems figuring out how to talk to *guys*,” moaned Georgia. “Now I have to figure out how to talk to my son?”

Margaret took a cucumber out of the refrigerator and began to slice it. “Sometimes I think you’re too hard on Richie. Too hard on men in general. You don’t trust them.”

“I trust men—”

“And that’s why you show *all* your first dates your gun?”

Georgia shrugged. “Some men have trouble dating a woman who packs firepower. Might as well get it out on the table, so to speak.” Georgia took the cucumber from her mother. “Here, let me do that.”

Margaret gave her the knife and Georgia noticed, as always, how beautiful her mother’s hands were—manicured nails, soft skin smelling of Ponds cold cream and Yardley’s lavender soap. Georgia’s nails were ragged and colorless, her skin a tapestry of scrapes and bruises.

“Georgia, it’s not about *you* anymore. It’s about Richie. He needs a father. It’s not like Rick’s ever...” Margaret let her voice trail off.

“Ever what? Coming back? You don’t think I know that? Ma, he walked away seven years ago. He’s married with another kid now.”

“But you don’t try very hard to find a replacement.”

“I don’t see Prince Charming knocking. If he did, it’d probably be to do his laundry.”

“See? There you go again.” Margaret cleared a stack of online contest entry forms from the kitchen table. She was always entered in at least twenty. “Maybe you need to be Princess Charming first.”

“Okay,” said Georgia. “Let me practice.” She pitched her voice an octave higher:

“‘Can I get you another six-pack for your fourth football game of the day, dear?’ Or maybe this: ‘Tell me more about all the things your smart phone can do. It’s soooo fascinating.’ And let’s not forget the all-time winner: ‘What a thoughtful gift. I always wanted a muffler for my birthday. And a surprise too, since my birthday was last month.’”

Margaret laughed and shook her head. “I wish you’d joke less and date more.”

“Hey, I do both. I date the jokes—it kills two birds with one stone.”

“Seriously, dear,” her mother insisted. “There *are* nice guys out there. Maybe if you did more traditional things, like coming with Jimmy and me to the memorial mass.”

Georgia rolled her eyes. “We’re not going to start that again, are we?”

“My goodness, Georgia, I don’t understand why, every year, you refuse to go. They’re honoring dead firefighters—men like your father.”

“I honor Dad in my own way. And I don’t need the Catholic Church, the Emerald Society, or the Ancient Order of Hibernians to do it.” The Emerald Society was the fire department’s Irish fraternity; the Ancient Order of Hibernians was a national Irish-heritage organization. The annual memorial mass was less about mourning and remembrance than about posturing and politics. “Every one of those groups is a bunch of self-important men. And besides, I’m not looking to meet a firefighter. I deal with enough of them already.” Georgia nodded to her mother’s stack of contest entry forms. “Hey, maybe you can win me somebody decent. No purchase required, void where prohibited and all that...”

“You forgot the most important condition: you must be present to win. With a man. With your son.”

Through the window, Georgia watched Richie shooting hoops. His sneaker laces were undone. She fought the urge to run out and tie them.

“If you’re referring to my not hanging the eggs, I already apologized. And, not for nothing, Easter’s still almost two weeks away—”

"I'm talking about Thursday night," Margaret interrupted.

"Richie's basketball team's season finale," Georgia droned, as if by rote. "I haven't forgotten. Eight-thirty p.m. Saint Aloysius Auditorium."

"Good. Because if you don't make that game, you'll break your little boy's heart."

\*\*\*\*\*End of sample\*\*\*\*\*

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