

## Chapter 1

“Hey kid, loosen up.” Jack O’Dwyer gave Douglas Hanlon a chuck on the shoulder. “Your first kick-ass fire’s always scary.”

Hanlon stared out the window as the truck turned onto West Thirteenth Street in lower Manhattan. A brick warehouse, two stories high, stood in the shadows of a railway bridge. Gray smoke pulsed out of the seams of a cellar hatch. There were no flames, but it didn’t matter. Even a firefighter as green as Hanlon knew that something big was going on below.

“‘Bout time you stopped being a white cloud,” Tony Fuentes ribbed good-naturedly over the squeal of the siren. A “white cloud” was firehouse slang for a firefighter who never saw much action. In the three months since Hanlon had been assigned to Ladder Seventeen, he’d handled nothing bigger than a couple of car fires and food-on-the-stoves. “I’ve pissed out bigger jobs,” O’Dwyer liked to say.

Fuentes gathered up his ax and halligan, a firefighter’s prying tool. Hanlon slipped on the shoulder straps of his grimy yellow air tank and grabbed his six-foot hook. He could feel the throaty bray of the air horn through the soles of his boots. The truck was pulling up to what had once been a meatpacker’s loading dock. Strands of silver garland wreathed the corrugated-tin awning, glowing peach in the early morning sun. Christmas decorations. On a squat, nearly windowless building where bloody carcasses used to dangle from rusty hooks. A copper sign above the front doors wafted in and out of the smoke. *Cafe Treize* it read.

“What the hell is Café Trees?” asked O’Dwyer.

“Not *Trees*—*Treize*. Rhymes with ‘says,’” Fuentes corrected. “French for thirteen, as in Thirteenth Street. Don’t you read the papers, man? This restaurant’s so hot, Beyoncé has to wait for reservations.”

“Maybe she can’t pronounce that French shit neither,” O’Dwyer grunted. After twenty-three years of fighting fires, there wasn’t much that impressed Jack O’Dwyer.

“At least it’ll be empty at six-thirty in the morning,” Hanlon offered.

“Kid,” said O’Dwyer, running two meaty hands down his broad, grizzled face. “First thing you gotta learn about fighting fires in New York: there ain’t no such thing as a bona fide vacant building.”

The air brakes hissed as the truck rumbled to a halt on the cobblestoned street. In the cab, Captain Joseph Russo cut the siren. Fuentes jabbed a finger at the front of Hanlon’s bulky black turnout coat with its horizontal stripes of fluorescent yellow and reflective gray. It wasn’t until he took his hand away that Hanlon realized Fuentes had snapped up the coat’s top metal clasp.

“Don’t know what we’ll find down there, Dougie,” said Fuentes with a wink. “You ain’t toastin’ that lily-white Irish skin on *my* shift.”

Hanlon nodded. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Adrenaline flowed freely through his veins and he both loved and feared the sensation. Ever since he was a little boy, sliding the pole at his dad’s firehouse, he’d hungered for this sense of belonging and purpose. It was a feeling he could never quite put into words. Sometimes he tried to, late at night when he and Kerry were snuggled in bed, his arm wrapped around her widening belly, gently thumping as the baby kicked inside. He told Kerry it was excitement, which it was in a way. A heart-pounding rush that made him feel like Rambo in turnout gear. Made him love every firefighter he worked beside, even if he’d just told them to go screw themselves ten minutes earlier. The blood in his veins, the breath in his lungs never felt quite so pure, so focused, so above reproach as that moment when he and his brothers beat back the fire. He felt—for one shining moment—like a hero.

But as Doug Hanlon looked over at the billowing smoke—so thick that it blotted out the faded, hand-lettered sign on the railway trestle advertising oxtails and lamb shanks—he knew there was another emotion inside of him, too. And this one felt just as powerful as the excitement. Maybe more so. It churned his stomach, parched his throat and brought a tingling to his limbs. It made him feel small and brittle. He never admitted these feelings to Kerry or his dad; it would worry them too much. But he couldn't hide them from his daughter, Jenna. The little girl seemed to grasp them with the intuitive purity that only a four-year-old could.

“Everybody’s afraid of something, right Daddy?” she asked him one night after a bad dream. “Even monsters. They’re afraid of bigger monsters. Even you. You’re scared sometimes, right Daddy?”

*Even you.*

Fuentes and O’Dwyer jumped off the rig while the chauffeur, Dave Jansky, was still maneuvering it into position. O’Dwyer headed to the roof to break open the skylights and vent the heat. Fuentes and Captain Russo hustled over to the cellar hatch. Hanlon stumbled to a compartment on the outside of the truck and grabbed the portable fire extinguisher—the men’s only source of water until the engine’s hose could be put into operation. As the junior man, Hanlon had to lug the twenty-five pound extinguisher, “the can,” as they called it. Already, it was slowing him down and he pushed himself to keep up. His thirty-pound air tank shifted uncomfortably on his shoulders. He remembered too late that he’d forgotten to buckle the tank’s waist strap, which would have distributed some of the weight to his hips. He cursed his ineptness. He couldn’t put down his tools to buckle it now.

Fuentes used his halligan to pry off the padlock on the cellar doors. Then he swung them open. A torrent of hot, dark gray smoke flew at their faces. Hanlon coughed violently,

embarrassed and panicked by how easily he had succumbed to the fumes while Russo and Fuentes barely coughed at all.

“Catch your breath, son,” Russo told him. The captain had a calm, clear baritone that always sounded gentle and patient, even in the worst emergencies. It’s what Hanlon liked about him. Russo surveyed the basement interior from the top of the stairs, then got on his handy talkie to the chief.

“I need a firefighter from Ladder Two-nine to stand at the base of the stairs with a flashlight,” he told the chief. Then the captain turned to Fuentes. “Get the life rope.”

Fuentes pulled a face. “It’s a warehouse, Cap. The basement’s gonna be wide open. Eighty feet, front-to-back, tops. We can search it without a life rope.”

“We got a probie with us, Fuentes,” said Russo. “Don’t try to be a cowboy.”

Fuentes fetched the rope. A firefighter from Ladder Twenty-nine hustled over with a flashlight. Captain Russo handed him the rope and told him to remain at the foot of the stairs and feed them the line. “Masks on,” the captain ordered.

Hanlon put on his mask, then secured it in place with his fire retardant hood. The mask smelled of smoke and plastic. The whoosh of his breathing sounded mechanical and rigid—a good imitation of Darth Vader in *Star Wars*.

It was twelve long steps into the cellar. The light faded quickly. The heat slammed up against them with almost physical force. Sounds took on a detached quality—magnified in some cases, muffled in others. The clink of their air tanks seemed to echo off the dank walls while the crunch of their boots across wooden pallets had the soft, dreamlike quality of tree branches snapping under heavy snow.

Hanlon kept his right hand on the life rope as he followed the captain. Fifteen feet inside the cellar, the smoke billowed at them in a black, mushroom cloud of gases. The darkness was absolute. Even the men's flashlights couldn't penetrate it. The beams just shone back on them like headlights in heavy fog. They moved forward, single file, Captain Russo rolling out the life rope and leading the way. Hanlon's eyes were useless, his sense of touch diminished by heavy gloves. There were so many noises—from the whoosh of his mask to the crackle of voices over the captain's handy talkie—that his ears felt overwhelmed. Yet over the din, Hanlon felt certain he could hear a far-off roar punctuated by the occasional pop and hiss of what sounded like exploding cans. Above him, he could hear a faint sound of air rushing through the ceiling.

Yet he still hadn't seen a single flame. Hanlon recalled the movies his dad used to take him to when he was little. The flames would dance about on the screen like butane torches. There was never a wisp of smoke in sight.

"Is that what fighting a fire's like?" Hanlon once asked his father.

"Not even close," the old man laughed. "You take a camera into a *real* fire, all you'll come back with is a lot of black film and an X-rated sound track."

"But what about all those flames the actors are running through?"

Hanlon could still remember his father's solemn reply: "In a real fire, Dougie, no one who runs through that much flame *ever* gets to tell about it."

They were maybe forty feet inside the warehouse basement when the heat began to rise sharply. Hanlon could clearly hear a rumbling and crackling in the distance. His fire extinguisher was useless. Two and a half gallons of water wasn't going to be any help in this situation. The excitement he'd felt earlier had turned into something that seemed to burn white-hot inside of him. His breathing accelerated. His heart pounded in his chest. Fear seized hold of his muscles

and made them quake against his will. He tried to take a deep breath. He was relieved that he was nearly invisible to the captain and Fuentes. He didn't want them to see how frightened he was.

"We're turning around," Captain Russo shouted through his mask. This time, Fuentes didn't argue. They reversed direction with Fuentes now in front, and felt their way backward along the life rope. Russo yelled into his handy talkie to relay his decision to the deputy chief now on the scene. The chief brooked no argument. Hanlon felt relieved—that is, until Fuentes stopped in his tracks. Hanlon could hear him poking around.

"Cap," Fuentes shouted through his mask. "Some kind of shelving's fallen on the rope. I can't lift it off."

Hanlon and the captain crawled forward and crouched beside Fuentes. They tried to maneuver their gloves underneath the heavy brackets of shelves. Hanlon was certain he could do it. He was only twenty-six years old, and at six-foot-three and two hundred and twenty pounds, there was very little he couldn't lift. It felt good to put his twitching muscles and panicked thoughts to something concrete. But in the darkness, it was impossible to get even a handhold on the shelving, never mind move it off the rope. None of them had any idea how big the unit was or whether the rope underneath would even be intact. After several tries, the captain tapped his shoulder.

"No way we're gonna move this. We'll have to try to pick up the rope beyond the shelves."

They moved cautiously forward, trying to feel their way back to the line. Overhead in the ceiling, Hanlon noted a wisp of orange through a crack in the tiles. It wasn't air above them in those ceiling ducts. It was fire.

Fuentes stopped again. "There's a wall here, Cap. We're gonna have to turn around."

*We're trapped.* Hanlon's breathing, already rapid and shallow, began to accelerate. He knew he was gulping too much air. Fuentes seemed to sense his panic. He put a hand on the probie's shoulder. "Relax, Dougie," he yelled through his mask. "Slow down your breathing. You're with the best—okay? Ain't nothing gonna happen to you."

They reversed direction. They moved left, then right. Each turn brought them to another dead-end. The captain felt for the speaker of his handy talkie. It was clipped to his shoulder strap. He lifted it to his face. "Mayday, mayday," he said calmly. "Ladder One-seven. We've lost our rope. Need assistance." His voice bore no hint of fear but his words were unmistakable. A mayday was always serious business. Instantly, the chief came on the line.

"Russo—we're sending in other companies. How far inside the building are you?"

"Fifty feet maybe, Chief."

"There's a back entrance to the cellar. O'Dwyer's holding a flashlight at it. Can you see him?"

Russo tried to stand, but Hanlon could tell that he saw nothing. And now, they had a new worry. In the darkness, they could hear a high-pitched whirring sound. It was coming from the air tank on Hanlon's back. He had about six minutes of air left in his tank—maybe less, given how fast he was breathing.

"Just relax, son," shouted the captain. "We'll get you out of here."

Above them, the ceiling was cooking. Some of the acoustical tiles had already burned away revealing sinews of orange that pulsated like a living organism. The heat radiated down on them, pressing them into a tight crouch, their bellies almost touching the floor. Hanlon crawled behind the captain, amazed that the heat could turn his hulking body into a meek and tentative shadow of its former self.

Captain Russo told the chief he couldn't see O'Dwyer. There were companies scrambling to find them. Hanlon could hear them picking their way through the debris behind them, the water from their hoses turning to steam on the falling debris. But he couldn't see any of those men. And now the captain's and Fuentes's low-air alarms began to go off, too. Hanlon didn't have to be told that they were in deep trouble. It seemed as if they were crawling between little cubicles like rats in a maze. They no longer knew whether they were nearer the front of the building or the back.

Then suddenly, Hanlon saw it—a firefighter's flashlight, cutting in and out of the smoke. The firefighter was maybe forty feet away. He couldn't see them, but they saw him. The three men crawled toward the beam. But something yanked Hanlon back by the straps of his air tank. He called out. Russo and Fuentes scrambled to his side. Fuentes examined Hanlon's back. "Shit," said Fuentes. "He's tangled up on a goddamned bicycle."

Hanlon's low-air alarm rang wildly now. Sucking on his mouthpiece felt like trying to breathe inside a plastic bag. In panic, he ripped off his mask. His nose and cheeks began to burn. His airways felt like he'd inhaled pepper. He thrashed about, coughing violently. But he was still tangled in his straps, still joined to the bicycle. Fuentes pushed his own mask on the probie's face.

"Breathe, Dougie. C'mon, man. You're gonna make it."

Hanlon took a couple of breaths until his coughing died down, then pushed the mouthpiece from his lips. "No. I can't take your mask..."

"—Shut up," Fuentes told him between hacking coughs. "Just fuckin' breathe, okay?"



The flames above them were an open river now. The heat was unbearable. They would all die if they stayed here much longer. Hanlon knew that. Survival was in reach for Fuentes and Captain Russo. They were still inside because of him.

Hanlon shared Fuentes' mask while the captain tried to cut Hanlon from his tank straps.

"Got it," Captain Russo shouted. "Now get out."

*Get out. Run away.* Hanlon heard the words in a part of his brain so instinctive he didn't question it. And so he scrambled. Toward the flashlight beam. Toward air. Toward life. When the ceiling collapsed behind him, when the burning debris tumbled down, he kept on going until he felt the reassurance of two strong hands yank him out by his collar and drag him up the basement stairs.

"Relax, kid. I gotcha. You're gonna be okay." It was Jack O'Dwyer. His gravel-choked voice seemed to move in and out of frequency. "Where's the Cap? Where's Fuentes?" O'Dwyer asked.

The probie's blistered lips moved but no sound came out. He blinked back tears as he glanced behind him at the flaming pile of debris. And the realization hit him.

Doug Hanlon thought he'd finished running. Now with a jolt, he understood: the running had just begun.

## **Chapter 2**

"...Battalion Two to dispatch. Alert EMS. We've got firefighters down..."

The words stopped Fire Marshal Georgia Skeehan cold. She leaned over the department radio that straddled the space between the Chevy Caprice's two front seats. The battalion aide's voice was flat and emotionless, colored only by a heavy New York accent. He gave no specifics over

the public airwaves about the nature of the injuries. Then again, when it came to firefighters, no one ever did.

Georgia flipped the light bar switch and turned on the siren. “Can’t you drive any faster?” she snapped at her partner, Randy Carter. Normally, she chided him for speeding.

Carter stepped on the accelerator and zoomed through a light on Hudson Street that had just turned red. Georgia shivered, not sure if it was the bitter early December air seeping through the Caprice’s vents that brought on her chill or the sound of those bleak words across the airwaves. Carter’s lean, dark face seemed to pale at the wheel. She could tell he was thinking the same thing: *Not again. Dear God, not again.*

“I wish I’d stayed on vacation,” Georgia mumbled, tossing an empty Styrofoam coffee cup in back. Not that it was much of a vacation. The weather stank. Richie was in school. Mac couldn’t finagle any time off. The most Georgia had managed was a long weekend out in Montauk, on the eastern tip of Long Island, but it had rained most of the time they were there. Richie ended up glued to his Game Boy. Georgia ended up glued to her iPad, watching movies she’d had the good sense not to pay fourteen bucks for when they were first released.

Carter’s vacation on the other hand appeared to have been quite good. Three weeks in sunny Florida had caused his skin to take on a rich chocolate color. His face had filled out from good food and regular sleep. And, up until the radio transmission a few minutes earlier, he’d seemed quite happy.

“A couple of our guys probably took too much smoke—that’s all,” said Carter, laying on his soft, southern drawl the way he always did in stressful situations. “I reckon we’re just imagining the worst. Like the time Sal Giordano forgot to take his car off the Staten Island Ferry.”

Georgia allowed a faint smile at the memory of Giordano lumbering into Manhattan base one evening while the Coast Guard was out dredging the waters for his body. Everyone worried that he'd slipped or jumped. For months after that, Giordano couldn't come to work without finding tuna fish on his desk or in his drawers. Sometimes, the marshals were nice enough to leave it in an unopened can.

The battalion aide's voice came over the radio again, jarring Georgia back to the present. "Battalion Two to dispatch, I need the mixer off."

*Mixer off* meant the conversation would not be broadcast over the airwaves. It was private—between the chief and the dispatcher—and private conversations were always bad news. A cold wad of bile gathered in Georgia's stomach.

"It feels like my father all over again," she said softly.

"Maybe it's not as bad as all that," said Carter, but he took the corner sharply. The Caprice's wheels squealed on the pavement.

"One hell of a Christmas present for the family if it is," said Georgia.

"Your dad died in the autumn, right?"

"October twenty-fifth," said Georgia. "The kid who set the fire didn't even miss Halloween."

"They ever punish him?"

"I don't know. Counseling, I guess. He was only six at the time—too young to charge. I don't think he even spoke English."

Carter turned onto a wide V-shaped swath of cobble-stoned streets that formed the southeastern end of the city's former meatpacking district. In a storefront window once used as a butcher's shop, several garishly bright oil colors competed for space. Carter took them in and shook his head.

“I remember when there was nothing down here but gay bars, cross-dressing prostitutes and guys in bloody aprons with meat cleavers. Some of my best informants came from this neighborhood.”

“Things sure have changed,” said Georgia taking in two art galleries, a dance club and a couple of upscale restaurants all within a block of one another. The graffiti on the rolldown security gates had largely disappeared, as had the piles of trash and rusted oil drums that the homeless once used for outdoor fires.

They turned onto West Thirteenth Street. Fire trucks, ambulances and police cruisers were lined up beside a two-story red brick warehouse. Smoke the color of spoiled milk rose from an open cellar hatch. The fire was out, and it didn’t look like it had extended beyond the basement. Silver tinsel fluttered from a canopy above a former loading dock, and the mullioned window that had replaced a garage door still sported sheer white curtains.

“Café Treize,” Carter mumbled, reading the sign. “This place used to be Weingarten’s Wholesale Meats. And then it was a gay bar called the Meat Market.”

“It’s a really hot French restaurant now,” said Georgia. “Lady Gaga eats here. So does Angelina Jolie. I read it in *People Magazine*.”

Carter gave Georgia a bored look. Celebrity talk never impressed him. “They should’ve been here when it was a gay bar,” he said. “Down in the basement, they used to have all these little cubicles where the guys used to um...” Carter shrugged and looked away, embarrassed. He was old enough to be Georgia’s father. Still, she loved to break his chops.

“And how would *you* know about that?” she teased.

“I hear stories,” he said indignantly. “You didn’t have to ever go down there to know about it. The Meat Market’s owner secretly wired up all these cameras in the cubicles. Sleazeball used to sell the videos to private collectors.”

Carter parked the car down the block from the building so as not to block the rescue vehicles. A cold wind whipped off the choppy waters of the Hudson River as they got out. They grabbed their turnout coats, helmets and toolbox from the trunk.

“How bad do you think it is?” Georgia asked. Carter didn’t answer, but all the Florida sunshine had left his face. Georgia followed his line of vision to a dark blue van marked, *Medical Examiner*. Somebody was dead, and, judging from the somber looks on firefighters’ faces, Georgia had a sinking feeling it was one of their own.

They found the deputy chief at the back of the warehouse, in an alleyway littered with broken bottles that glittered in the sharp morning sun. Broward was his name. He’d been a high-ranking chief longer than Georgia had been on the job. He gave them the faintest nod of his head as they walked over. He knew they had a job to do, but his men were hurting and that was all he cared about right now. Georgia would have felt the same way.

“Two of our guys from Ladder Seventeen didn’t make it,” he said through lips that barely moved. He squinted down a set of concrete steps to the warehouse’s back door. It was wreathed in black soot. “The probie got out. He’s being treated by EMS for minor burns and smoke inhalation.”

“What happened?” asked Georgia. She and Carter took turns leading investigations. This fire was hers. *Oh joy.*

“Rubbish fire in the basement,” said Broward. “Captain and two firefighters got separated from their life rope and couldn’t find their way out. The basement’s heavily partitioned. No one could find them.”

“Any evidence of a break-in?” asked Georgia.

“The back door had been forced before we got here. The lock was broken.”

Georgia frowned in the direction of the cellar. There was still a lot of smoke. She could only see a short way, but even in that distance, she noted the unmistakable oxidized heads of sprinklers in the ceiling.

“The sprinklers weren’t working?”

“We had a busted water main in the neighborhood two weeks ago,” grunted Broward. “City turned the water off. The landlord may never have turned the sprinkler line back on.” The chief shook his head in disgust. He knew as well as Georgia that a working sprinkler probably would have been able to put out that fire in minutes and save the men’s lives.

“Surely there was a valve in the basement somewhere,” said Georgia. “The landlord would’ve known the sprinkler wasn’t operational.”

Broward gave Georgia an irritated look. Carter stepped in.

“A lot of these owners, they’re afraid that the water damage from a nuisance fire will end up being more expensive to repair than the fire itself, so if the city forgets to tell them to turn their sprinkler system back on, they don’t argue.”

Broward nodded. “Owner probably figured that the most he’d lose would be a few crates of vegetables.” He shook his head sadly. “Instead, we lost two of our finest men.”

“The men who died,” said Georgia. “Are they still in the basement?”

“I’ve got companies digging them out.”

Georgia peered down the open basement door into the dim, soggy interior. The smoke had cleared. Firefighters were everywhere. They all had a downcast tilt to their eyes and a grayness to their faces. No one was smoking or conversing. An aide came over to ask the chief a question and he excused himself. Georgia went to descend the stairs. Carter put a hand on her shoulder.

“Go easy, Skeehan,” he warned her. “Give the men space, okay? Emotions are running high down there. You know as well as I do that no one here gives a hoot and a holler about our investigation. Far as they’re concerned, nothing we do is gonna bring their brothers back.”

### **Chapter 3**

They looked like they were sleeping. True, their faces were slightly swollen from the heat and black with soot. The backs of their turnout coats had a ragged coarseness to them from the burning debris. But otherwise, Captain Joseph Russo and Firefighter Tony Fuentes looked like they should have been able to get up, dust off their gear and walk out of the basement of Café Treize. There was still the glow of life in those grimy, handsome faces, a glow that made it impossible to comprehend that they would never go home to their families again. It was a hell of a piece of news to have to deliver three weeks before Christmas.

Georgia heard some of the firefighters speak about Russo and Fuentes in traded whispers as they hauled debris off them. Both were husbands and fathers. Both were veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Russo’s son had just received a football scholarship to Notre Dame. Fuentes’s oldest daughter was dancing in a school production of *The Nutcracker* this weekend. His wife was expecting their fourth child in May. He had three girls. He’d been hoping for a boy.

Georgia kept her distance, as Carter had cautioned. Like every fire marshal in New York City, she had once been a firefighter. But the dividing line between investigator and rescuer was keenly felt at a time like this, especially when the investigator was a woman.

The men had nearly finished unearthing Russo and Fuentes when Carter exchanged nods with a hulking figure in a helmet and turnout coat. He had a thick mustache and a broad, grizzled face smeared with grime. The dirty white leather patch on the front of his black helmet had a “17” on it. He was either the truck’s roof man or the rig’s chauffeur.

“O’Dwyer,” Carter mumbled softly, inching toward him. “How you holding up?”

“Three hundred and forty three men died in this job on one fucking day,” said the old veteran, “and you think you can’t grieve for two more. But if it’s one man or a hundred—a year or decades later—it feels just the same.” For the FDNY, 9-11 would never be history, no matter how many years went by. Every firefighter’s death seemed to bring it back.

“I know,” said Carter. He put a hand on O’Dwyer’s turnout coat,

O’Dwyer sighed. “It’s not me I’m worried about. It’s the kid—the probie.”

“Where is he?” Georgia asked, joining the conversation carefully. She was heartened when O’Dwyer made eye contact with her. Carter, with thirty-one years in the FDNY, knew everyone on this job. He could go places that Georgia, a woman and a relative rookie with only eight years in the fire department, could not.

“With EMS,” O’Dwyer told her. Then he leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Already, there’s a chill in the air, if you know what I’m sayin’.”

Georgia frowned. “Why is that?”

“It was the kid’s first real fire. Russo and Fuentes were pros. There’s a feeling that maybe the kid...maybe he held ‘em back.” O’Dwyer massaged the back of his neck. His eyes locked on



Carter's. Georgia sensed that the old veteran might have worked with Carter when he was a firefighter. He trusted Carter not to traumatize the young firefighter further.

"We'll go easy on him, Jack," Carter promised.

"What's his name?" asked Georgia.

"Hanlon. Dougie Hanlon. His father's a fire captain in Queens."

"Seamus." Georgia whispered the name. The lining of her gut felt like someone had just carved a set of initials in it. The last shred of Florida sunshine left Randy Carter's face.

"You know him?" asked O'Dwyer, bouncing a look from Georgia to Carter.

"A family friend," Georgia replied. She wished she knew Captain Seamus Hanlon less well—wished she hadn't walked around his empty kitchen only this past summer and felt the palpable loneliness of a man who'd lost both his wife and his best friend in the space of a year. She was glad he hadn't lost his son as well, though it was too soon to know whether the young man who came out of that building would ever be the same as the young man who went into it.

The firefighters were getting ready to carry their brothers out. Carter touched O'Dwyer's sleeve.

"Do me a favor, Jack? Tell them we just need to take a quick look at Russo and Fuentes before you move 'em."

"No pictures," O'Dwyer growled. Georgia looked at Carter. They always took pictures of fire victims. It was an essential part of reconstructing an arson scene. But Carter simply nodded. This was not the time to push.

"No pictures, Jack. Of course," he said.

Georgia and Carter didn't speak again until Russo and Fuentes had been carried out of the basement. They were by themselves in a storage cubicle ten feet from the back door, surrounded

by charred shelves and exploded canned goods. They'd been in about a dozen identical cubicles in the space of ten minutes. Café Treize's owner had obviously never taken down the partitions from the days when the warehouse was a gay bar. In the smoke and heat, those flimsy sheetrock dividers had become a fatal maze of dead ends.

"Did you notice that neither Russo nor Fuentes was wearing his mask?" asked Georgia.

Carter shined his flashlight at a soggy, blackened piece of cardboard on the concrete floor. It was the bottom of a carton of paper towels.

"Their air tanks were empty," said Carter. "Burning debris blocked their escape. They had a choice: die from the heat and flames banking down on them, or take a couple of quick breaths of smoke and get it over with. I'd have done the same thing."

Georgia moved her flashlight beam up the charred paneling and across the concrete subflooring from the main floor above. The dropped ceiling that hid the ductwork had burned away entirely.

"This place was like a pizza oven," said Carter. "Concrete on the bottom. Concrete on top. Brick walls all around. You won't see any fire damage upstairs. The concrete contained it. But it killed our brothers. Baked them alive."

Georgia peered into the ductwork. "There's a lot of wiring up there for a warehouse basement. Maybe a circuit got overloaded."

Carter examined the wires. They were burned at multiple points along a continuous cable, rather than in one spot. "The blowouts are more consistent with fire damage," he said. "I don't think an electrical overload was the cause of the fire."

Georgia studied the burned cardboard box of paper towels. She shone her flashlight on the concrete ceiling directly above. A section of the ceiling about the size of a manhole cover had

turned flaky and white—a condition known as spalling, which occurs at prolonged high temperatures. “The fire seems to have been at its most intense in this room,” said Georgia. “In fact, right above this box of paper towels.”

Carter took in the box, then slammed a gloved hand against the wall. “Dang,” he said. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“These things never are.” Georgia thought he was talking about Russo and Fuentes.

“No,” he said. “I mean literally. Look at this place. There’s nothing in this room that would spontaneously ignite. No shorted-out wires. No solvents. No evidence of a smoking accident. The back door was forced. Everything points to an arson.”

“I agree,” said Georgia.

“Yeah, but you saw those cubicles back there, Skeehan. There were cleaning solvents and cooking oils and linens stacked a foot high. Anybody looking to torch this place had his pick of highly combustible materials not ten feet from where we’re standing. Yet he didn’t use them—why?”

“Cause this was fast,” said Georgia. “Force the back door, drop a match in the paper towels and leave.”

“But if the sprinklers had been working, what would that have accomplished? Heck, the fire would’ve probably gone out before it had even finished consuming the box of paper towels.”

Georgia nodded. “Then the torch knew the sprinklers had been shut down. It’s an inside job.”

“Yeah, but if it *was* an inside job, then the torch also would have known about the solvents ten feet in. He could’ve taken the whole place out with just a few more minutes of effort.”

“You think maybe he just wanted to send a message?” asked Georgia.

“It makes sense,” said Carter. “The torch forces his way in, drops a match into the paper towels, then splits,” said Carter. “Only he doesn’t know the sprinklers have been shut down.”

“And a misdemeanor nuisance fire turns into a double homicide,” said Georgia. “The press is going to be all over this one. We’ve got to get to Seamus’s son before those vultures do.”

## **Chapter 4**

They found Doug Hanlon in a corner of the back alley. He looked impossibly young, even with the blisters and soot that marked his sad-eyed face. For most of the last half hour, Jack O’Dwyer had been hovering over him protectively, but he’d been called away to help on the roof, so Hanlon was alone. Georgia caught some of the firefighters giving him quick, curious glances. Innocent looks, most likely. But she knew how accusatory they must’ve felt to Doug Hanlon. God, how she knew.

“I think you should handle this one alone,” said Carter.

“You do, huh?” Her tone was defensive. Carter stumbled about for a reply.

“You know his dad better than I do...And...you’re a woman. Hanlon will be more likely to open up to you than to me. If I’m there, he might feel like we’re ganging up on him.”

Georgia gave Carter a long, penetrating stare. “Those aren’t the only reasons you want me to talk to him.”

His face betrayed him. “I think maybe...you sort of know what he’s going through,” he said softly. “You can talk to him. Tell him what it’s like...”

“—This is a police interview, Randy. Not a therapy session.”

Carter placed a hand on her arm. “Okay. Calm down. Forget I asked. Just get his statement, okay?”

“Where will you be?”

“Trying to get hold of Café Treize’s owner.” Carter gave her a reassuring nod. “Go easy on him, all right? Yourself, too.”

They split up and Georgia walked over to the young firefighter. He was a big man, well built, with soft, pale gray eyes that seemed too young to be set in such a grief-stricken face. His nose and cheeks were red and speckled with heat blisters—second-degree burns. The burns had to be painful, but he seemed unaware of them.

“Doug?” Georgia forced a smile and extended a hand.

He blinked at her as if she’d woken him up from a deep sleep. His grasp was tentative. He didn’t seem to want anyone to touch him.

“I’m Georgia Skeehan. I’m a fire marshal. I know your dad, Seamus. My dad used to serve in the same firehouse in Queens where your dad’s a captain.” Connections were important in the FDNY. To a firefighter, everyone was either family or an outsider. Georgia wanted to offer up as many connections as she could going in.

“Sure,” he muttered in a way that suggested he hadn’t really heard.

“You have some facial burns. Do you want to go to the hospital for treatment?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“I need to ask you what happened in the basement, Doug. Can you tell me what went on down there?”

He turned away from her and hung his head. Georgia thought he was trying to compose his thoughts. But then she saw him put a hand up to his eyes. His shoulders started to quake.

Georgia’s stomach dropped into her shoes. She’d had people break down on her before in

interviews. But she'd never had to do this with a firefighter. She loathed herself for having to put him through this.

"Doug," she said softly.

He wiped his nose along the sleeve of his turnout coat. What came out was black. He'd taken quite a feed of smoke down there. It was a wonder any of them made it out alive. She sensed the other firefighters eavesdropping. She shot them murderous looks. They dropped their gazes.

"Doug," she said again. The site was crawling with firefighters—inside *and* outside the building. She couldn't get him into her department car, either. That would've meant walking the gauntlet of reporters in the street. The most private place they were going to find to talk was a corner of the alley. She beckoned him there now. They leaned against a rusted chain link fence. He kicked a broken bottle at his feet to avoid her scrutiny. Green glass sparkled in the sun. The bright cold morning mocked their mood.

"All you have to do is tell me what happened down there as honestly and thoroughly as you can," Georgia coaxed. "This isn't an interrogation. No one's blaming you."

He turned away from her and grabbed the chain link fence. He seemed too ashamed even to meet her gaze. Georgia realized in an instant why: the word "blame." She had given voice to his deepest fear. Georgia opened her mouth to try to tell him she understood, but nothing came out. She could not comfort him. After all this time, she still had trouble comforting herself.

"I don't know what happened," Hanlon said softly into the fence. His voice was raspy from the smoke. "We went in with the life rope, got turned around and couldn't find our way out."

Georgia eased a notebook from the pocket of her turnout coat. "Tell me what you remember from the moment you got down there until the time you came out."

In a hoarse and halting voice, Hanlon poured out his twenty-two minutes of hell in the cellar of Café Treize. Georgia interrupted only to prompt him to the next memory. But she noticed there was one thing he omitted.

“It’s okay, you know, that you were sharing masks,” she told him.

Hanlon stared at her with bloodshot eyes, but said nothing.

“Look, Doug, I understand. You ran out of air. You had no choice.”

“But the rules,” Hanlon stammered. “The rules say you’re not supposed to…”

“—The rules were written by a bunch of pencil-pushing staff chiefs sitting on their fat asses down in headquarters, Doug. You’re a probie, for chrissake. You’d never gotten turned around in smoke like that before. You were breathing hard, you used up your air and somebody gave you some of theirs.” She nodded to his face. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just that, I can see the burns on your face and I need to know.”

Hanlon touched his face. He was in such deep shock, he probably didn’t even feel them. He gave her a defeated nod.

“I panicked,” he said softly. “And Tony, he…he gave me his mask. I told him he wasn’t supposed to do that.” Hanlon shook his head. “Tony and the cap…they saved my life. That should’ve been *me* down there. Not them.”

“It’s not your fault,” Georgia tried to reassure him. “It’s the nature of firefighting. You never know what fate is going to bring you.”

Two firefighters hefted a black body bag from the basement. Everyone stood at attention. A shudder traveled through Hanlon’s large frame and he hung his head.

“Yeah, well fate took the wrong guy.”

Georgia waited until O'Dwyer returned to stay with him before she went to find Carter. She didn't see Randy outside, so she entered the restaurant through a fire exit that had been propped open. The cement ceiling of the basement that had baked Russo and Fuentes had also stopped the fire from spreading upward. The result, Georgia realized, was that the restaurant looked remarkably intact. The exposed brick walls showed no signs of soot damage, nor did the modern oil paintings that hung on them. There was no oily residue on the colorful hand-blown glass vases or the white linens on the tables. About the only damage Georgia could see was some broken glass scattered across the wide-board oak floors. It came from the skylights that the firefighters had broken on the roof two stories above.

With a guilty glance, Georgia picked up a menu at the M'aître D's station and scanned the offerings, all in French, though, thankfully, there were descriptions following each dish. This being a former beef wholesaler, they were heavy on French-style meat selections: sweet breads and calf's liver and patés. But there were also dishes Georgia wouldn't have minded trying: andouille sausage with dried cherries, truffles and sage, escargot in a garlic cream sauce with vermouth, steak tartare on Parmesan-crust bread with caramelized onions and capers. Georgia thought the prices were high, but not as bad as she'd expected. Then she realized with a jolt that she was reading off the appetizers.

She put the menu down and walked up the open-air metal staircase to the second floor. She followed the sound of voices to a thick oak door that was heavily scarred—probably one of the original doors in the building. She could hear two men's voices behind the door. One was Carter's. The other belonged to a man with a nasal, sing-song way of speaking. He sounded agitated.

“I'm telling you officer...”



“—Marshal,” Carter corrected.

“Whatever,” said the man. “The facts are the same. Business couldn’t be better. I’m booked solid for the next five months. Overbooked, as a matter of fact. I don’t know how I’m going to find tables for all these people. I’ve got no enemies. You should be out canvassing the neighborhood for the crazy person who fell asleep in my doorway and almost cost me my business. That’s who you should be looking for.”

Georgia knocked and called out to Carter. He opened the door to a plush office done in sleek black leather. The walls were lined with photographs of celebrities wrapping their arms around a short, balding man with hungry eyes and a pinched smile. That man was in a chair behind a messy desk, rocking back and forth nervously and checking his watch. He wore dark gray slacks and a thick knit sweater with a geometric design on the front. Casual clothes, but they looked expensive. He narrowed his gaze at Georgia as she walked in, but made no move to shake her hand, so she didn’t offer it.

“Barry Glickstein, this is Fire Marshal Georgia Skeeahan,” said Carter. “Georgia, Mr. Glickstein is the owner of Café Treize.”

Glickstein held his hands up to his face like he was speaking a language no one could understand. Georgia had the sense he used this same gesture to recalcitrant employees and suppliers.

“I’m trying to tell your partner here that I don’t have any enemies. This fire...It’s some lunatic homeless person’s doing. I’ve got the personal cell phone numbers of nearly every A-list celebrity in Manhattan. Does that sound like a man with enemies to you?”

“I’m asking Mr. Glickstein to open his books and show us his profit margin. I just want to see if his profits are in line with our perceptions.”

“You think I’d burn my own restaurant? Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? You’re the crazy one, detective...”

“—Marshal,” Carter said through clenched teeth.

“Same thing.” Glickstein shrugged. He turned to Georgia. He would play one off the other if he had to. “Darling, you look like a smart girl to me. Look around this place. It’s a gold mine. Why would I burn it? I can fix that basement up in a matter of days. I won’t even be out of commission for more than a day or two. Does that sound like someone trying to get out from under a business to you?”

“Then open your books, Mr. Glickstein,” said Georgia.

“Not without a court order.”

“Fair enough.” Georgia rose from her chair.

“Where are you going?” Glickstein demanded.

“I have subpoena forms in the car. You want a court order, it can be arranged. Right here. Right now.”

“Whoa,” Glickstein put his palms on his desk. “You can do that?”

“We’re fire marshals, Mr. Glickstein, not police detectives. We don’t have to get a court order to subpoena your documents. We have the power to do that ourselves.” Georgia neglected to mention that Glickstein had a forty-eight-hour grace period to produce those records—even with her subpoena. She was banking on panic over reason. Cops do it all the time.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing to me? I’m no criminal. I’m a law-abiding citizen. Last year, I gave five thousand dollars to the firefighters’ widows and orphans fund.”

Carter’s handy talkie began to crackle. It was Chief Broward’s aide. “Is the owner in there with you?” the aide asked Carter.

“Affirmative,” said Carter in a cool, collected voice. Somehow, he always managed to remain calm, even in the most trying of situations. “Does the chief need him?”

“Negative,” said the aide. “But we’ve got an angry liquor supplier out here. The cops are restraining him now. He says Glickstein owes him eighty-five grand on his account, it’s overdue and he’s afraid that with the fire, he’ll try to skip.”

Glickstein got up from his chair, cursed and paced the floor. Carter bit back a smile.

“Tell him to stay cool,” said Carter. “We’ll be out in a moment.”

He slipped the handy talkie back onto his duty holster and they both stared at Barry Glickstein like two jackals moving in for the kill. “Care to explain that one?” asked Carter.

“It’s not eighty-five thousand,” said Glickstein. “It’s sixty-eight thousand...”

“—It’s a lot of money,” said Georgia. “You’re booked solid for months, but you can’t pay your liquor bill? I saw your menu, Mr. Glickstein. A dinner for two people without alcohol must run three hundred easily here. What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. You don’t think this happens twenty times a day in New York? I’ve got hundreds of suppliers and they’re always kvetching about not getting paid. *Always*. Whether I pay them or not.”

Glickstein turned on his answering machine. The red light was flashing. He had messages.

“You don’t believe me? Listen up.”

He pushed play. An oily voice came on.

*Hey...Barry. It's Jeff. Listen, Mariah's absolutely got to have a table for eight this Saturday. Do me this favor amigo, okay? Ciao, baby. I owe you... ”*

“Mariah Carey’s publicist,” said Glickstein, rolling his eyes. “Man thinks I’m a table fairy. What does he want me to do? Book her on the ceiling?” There was a beep, then the next message started.

*Barry...I'm sending Fred down today. Pay something on that cleaning bill. Five Gs...ten. You're going to get a lot of people very pissed off if Fred comes back empty-handed.*

Georgia frowned. “Who’s Fred?”

“He’s with my linen-cleaning service,” Glickstein explained. “It’s like I told you, darling. Everybody wants money.”

“Seems like you owe a lot of people a lot of money,” said Carter.

“And they don’t want me out of business because then they don’t get paid,” Glickstein shot back. “None of these jokers set any fires.”

There was a pause on the next message, as if the caller wanted an uncomfortable silence before he spoke.

*Barry, my boy...You should really clear out that rear stockroom, ya know? All those paper towels and shit—they're sooo combustible...I'd really hate to see a fire take down my favorite watering hole...*

Glickstein reached out to erase the message but Carter was faster. He grabbed Glickstein’s hand in mid-air. “Erase that sucker, and I’ll lock you up right now for tampering with evidence.” Glickstein withdrew his hand. The message continued.

*So...how 'bout I come by for the money you owe me Friday night? Just put me in the reservation book—say eight-thirty? Freezer’s the name, but you knew that already, didn’t you?*

There were no more messages. Carter walked over to the wall and disconnected the answering machine. “We’ll take this.” He paused. “Unless you feel the *need* for a formal subpoena.”

“No,” said Glickstein sullenly. “Just take it. You’re going to anyway.”

“Who’s Freezer?” Georgia asked Glickstein.

“How should I know?” asked Glickstein. “I didn’t even listen to that message until just now.”

Carter leaned forward and held the man’s gaze. “How much is McLaughlin shaking you down for?” Glickstein said nothing, so he continued. “That’s why you can’t meet your bills no matter how much you rake in, isn’t it? Big Mike’s putting the squeeze on you.”

Glickstein dropped his head into his hands. He was sweating across his bald spot.

“Come on, Glickstein,” said Carter. “I used to work this neighborhood back when men in pink hot pants and blond wigs walked these streets. Freezer’s been in this racket so long, he could collect a pension by now.”

“I want to talk to my attorney.” Glickstein pulled out his cell phone.

Carter turned to Georgia. “What do you think, Marshal? Should we read him his rights?”

Georgia could see the bluff in Carter’s eyes, but Glickstein couldn’t. She pulled a set of handcuffs off her duty holster and jingled them. “You have the right to remain silent...” she began. Glickstein cut her off.

“—You can’t take me out of here in handcuffs,” he pleaded.

Georgia pretended not to hear as she discussed the evidence with Carter. “The grand jury case should be a piece of cake,” she said. “We’ve got a taped confession from a man who set a fire that killed two firefighters. And he’s calling Mr. Glickstein for money. Sounds like an arson-for-profit scheme to me.” She turned to Glickstein. “You’ll be a real hero to your A-list friends now when they find out you’ve been charged with the murders of two of New York’s Bravest.

They’re going to *love* you.”

“Please,” he begged. “I had nothing to do with this fire. Why would I burn my own restaurant? It was McLaughlin. Michael McLaughlin. He did it because I’m behind in my payments.” Glickstein turned to Carter. “You *know* Freezer. You know how ruthless he can be. This guy...when I owned my burger joint uptown? He chopped the pinky finger off one of my suppliers because the man was two weeks late with the money he owed.”

Glickstein couldn’t read Carter’s passive expression, so he turned to Georgia. “I was scared. Wouldn’t you be? I tried to make the payments, I admit it. But I’m no murderer.”

“Seems to me, Mr. Glickstein, it’s either him or you,” said Georgia. “You talk. You walk. What’s it gonna be?”

“All right, all right.” Glickstein sighed. “I’ll give you a formal statement.”

“And you allow us access to your cell phone,” said Carter.

“Yeah. Okay. And my cell phone. Whatever you want to know. But you’re the fools if you think anyone can put the finger on Mike McLaughlin. On the streets, they say Freezer is Teflon-coated. Nothing sticks to him.”

“It will this time,” said Georgia.

## **Chapter 5**

“So, who’s Michael McLaughlin?” Georgia asked Carter. They were back in their car, heading north on the West Side Drive. The Hudson River rippled with the stark, clear light of a bright winter day as barges and tugboats plowed the waters. Carter was wearing a small, satisfied grin that hadn’t left his face since securing that digital answering machine from Barry Glickstein’s office. The machine was already in a sealed evidence bag, ready to deliver to the

lab. But just to be sure he didn't lose the recording, Carter had made sure that McLaughlin's voice had been recorded on both his and Georgia's cell phones as well.

"McLaughlin's Teflon, all right," said Carter. "But this time, he's stepped in it. I'll bet he had no idea the sprinklers at Café Treize had been turned off. If we get to him quickly, he may not realize what's happened. Once he knows, he'll lawyer up—maybe split town."

"You sound like you know a lot about him," said Georgia.

"He's an extortionist from way back," said Carter. "He used to run with the Westies. You remember the Westies, don't you?"

"The Irish street gang based in Hell's Kitchen," said Georgia.

"*Based* in Hell's Kitchen, yes. But they operated all over the city. They were subcontractors—they offered muscle to just about anybody who was paying—the Mafia, the Colombians, the Tong down in Chinatown. And they were ruthless. You found an abandoned refrigerator in Hell's Kitchen, the contents were always the same: body parts, courtesy of Big Mike. That's why they call him Freezer. That's where his victims always ended up."

"But I thought the Westies were finished," said Georgia. "Aren't most of those guys dead or in prison?"

"Uh-huh," said Carter. "I put a couple of them there myself—ruthless brutes, all of 'em. But Freezer was different. Smarter. Calmer. More polished. The only time in the joint he ever did was for a nickel-and-dime robbery when he was maybe nineteen. Man was like a polecat in the woods. You could smell him but you couldn't catch him."

Georgia smiled. The guys at Manhattan base were always razzing Carter for his down-home expressions. Georgia thought they were charming, and a whole lot more creative than the steady diet of four-letter words she heard the rest of the time.

“Do you know where to find him?”

“I know where to look,” said Carter. “These Irish guys never go far from the neighborhood.”

Traffic crawled north along the West Side Drive as it followed the contours of the Hudson River. At Eighteenth Street, Georgia noticed a group of about fifty protesters in front of a chain link fence by one of the piers. They were holding up posters with skulls and crossbones on them. *Stop the Dalcor Plant*, read one poster. Another read, *Butadiene will kill our children*. Georgia squinted past them to a spanking new two-story glass building with some kind of storage tank in front.

“I haven’t been following the papers on this one,” she admitted. “What are they protesting? The building looks a hell of a lot better than that abandoned marine terminal it replaced.”

“It’s not the building, it’s what’s in it,” said Carter. “Dalcor is a big chemical manufacturer. The city paid a lot of money to lure them here. There are so few manufacturing jobs left in New York.

“I would think people would be in favor of jobs and some development on the waterfront.”

“Problem is,” said Carter. “Dalcor uses some pretty toxic chemicals. The one those posters are referring to, butadiene, is not only flammable, it’s supposed to be cancerous. This stuff gets into the air or the water, it could stick around for a long time.”

Georgia looked around at the neighborhood. A new fifteen-story apartment building had just gone up across the street. Down the block, she could see the long, flat roof of a three-story public elementary school.

“I wouldn’t want this so close to my home or Richie’s school, either,” said Georgia. “But it’s here now.”

Carter nodded to the protesters. “I guess no one told them the battle’s over.”



At Fiftieth Street, Carter turned off the West Side Drive into an area of mid-Manhattan formally known as “Clinton,” but better known as “Hell’s Kitchen.” Though Times Square, to the southeast, had undergone a major facelift over the last decade, Hell’s Kitchen was still primarily a drab stretch of tenements, Laundromats, garages and convenience stores. Georgia had gotten to know the neighborhood well over the past eight months.

“Mac lives two blocks north of here,” she said brightly.

“It’s a dump,” said Carter. Georgia gave him a sharp look but he didn’t back down. “I worked ‘round here when our old fire marshal’s base was in the neighborhood. Believe me, I know. It’s a dump, even if the rents are sky-high.”

“Would you like Mac any better if he lived on Park Avenue?”

“Did I say anything about Marenko?” he shot back. “I’m talking about the neighborhood.”

Georgia gave him a sour look and stared out the window. Though Carter never came right out and said it, he didn’t like Supervising Fire Marshal Mac Marenko—and he especially didn’t like him dating Georgia. Most days, she consoled herself that Carter’s fatherly disapproval of Mac was sort of touching, given that her own father had never lived to see her to womanhood. But not today. Today, he was hitting a little too close to the bone.

“The man’s technically our boss,” Carter continued. “He earns maybe twenty grand more than we do a year. He could do better.”

“Mac’s got child support to pay,” said Georgia. “And a mortgage on Long Island. He’s working two jobs right now just to have a little spare cash for the holidays.”

“Exactly,” said Carter. He turned his face from the wheel and looked at her. “So where do you figure into all of this?”

Georgia hunkered down in her seat without looking at him. “I figure in just fine.”

Carter turned onto Ninth Avenue and parked in front of a narrow, three-story building with a fire escape running down the front and a bar named “Kelly’s” on the first floor. There was a shamrock between the *y* and the *s* instead of an apostrophe. The windows were dark and the door looked scuffed and unwelcoming. Georgia put a hand on Carter’s arm.

“Randy, maybe you shouldn’t go in there. I mean, I know you worked in the area, but these places—they’re very rough and shanty Irish, and you’re...well...”

He smiled. “—I’m black. And they don’t take to black folk—is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah.”

“Relax, girl. Bobby and I go way back. I used to buy lunch here every day when I worked around the corner. I even broke up a fight in here once.” He nodded to the windows. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but they’ve got the best corned beef and cabbage in the city. And talk about cheap? I think the whole plate with coffee and home fries set me back maybe three-fifty.”

It was only ten-thirty in the morning, and from the looks of it, Kelly’s hadn’t yet officially opened up. Even inside, the place wasn’t much to look at: a faded oak bar, a few booths with ripped red PVC cushions, an aging pool table in the back long overdue to be re-felted. On the wall over the bar were black-and-white photos of men with prizefighters’ faces—all broken noses and scars. Some of the pictures had silver frames. Most had black.

“Those guys don’t look like celebrities,” said Georgia.

“They’re celebrities, all right—inside the neighborhood,” said Carter. “All those guys are Westies. The ones in the black frames are dead.”

An enormous woman in a dirty white apron came out of the kitchen. Her hard, lined face broke into a smile when she saw Carter.

“I don’t believe my eyes,” she said in a thick, Irish brogue. When she smiled, one of her front teeth gleamed with gold. “They can’t kill us old-timers off, can they, Carter? We just keep going ‘till the good Lord tell us it’s time.”

“Ah, maybe you, Bobby, but I’m getting a creak in these old bones.”

Georgia shot Carter a dirty look. She didn’t like it when he talked about retiring, however obliquely.

“This here’s Roberta Kelly,” said Carter. “Best cook in all of New York, and that includes all those high-falutin’ joints downtown.”

“Ach.” The woman punched Carter playfully in the arm and he beamed. Georgia frowned. Two years she’d worked with the man, and she wouldn’t have felt comfortable chucking him like that.

“I know why you’re sweet talkin’ me, Randy Carter. ‘Cause you want me to fix you my famous shepherd’s pie even though it ain’t on the menu. My old fingers can’t do the crust no more.”

“We’ll eat anything you care to make us, Roberta.”

“How ‘bout two corned beef sandwiches?”

“My favorite.”

Bobby brought out two white bread rolls and butter. The rolls looked soft and doughy—too doughy for corned beef. Bobby went to slap some butter on Georgia’s roll. Georgia stopped her.

“No butter on mine, please. Mustard’s all I need.” Corned beef, to Georgia’s way of thinking, should be served up in a kosher deli on Jewish rye bread with plenty of mustard. She might have been born Irish, but somewhere along the line her stomach converted.

Bobby frowned at Georgia. She had a smoker's face—deep lines and leathery skin. Her hair, gray at the roots, was the color of red cedar mulch at the tips. She'd probably been a red head when she was young.

“What did you say your name was again?”

“Georgia. Georgia Skeehan.”

“Skeehan, eh?” Bobby narrowed her gaze at Georgia. It was not a friendly look at all.

“Unusual Irish name.”

“People always mistake it for ‘Sheehan,’” Georgia told her, trying to be friendly. *I should've kept my friggin' mouth shut and lived with the butter*, she thought. “When my dad joined the FDNY, there was a Sheehan in his probie class and...”

“—Your father was a firefighter?”

“Uh-huh.” Georgia shot a puzzled look at Carter. He seemed equally perplexed. Firefighting was often a family calling. It wasn't uncommon for firefighters to have had fathers—even grandfathers—on the job. Bobby turned her scrutiny to Carter.

“You ever talk to Sully these days?” she asked him.

“Not since he retired,” said Carter. “How's he doing?”

“Still lives in the neighborhood. Comes in for a pint at least twice a week,” said Bobby. “You should talk to him.”

“Who's Sully?” asked Georgia.

“Jamie Sullivan,” said Carter. “Luckiest sonofagun ever to walk the face of the earth. Went to Vietnam and took a thimbleful of buckshot, so they sent him home. Rest of his platoon got wiped out. Joined the fire department, learned to drive the engine and took a wrong turn one night on his way to a gas leak at an empty warehouse. The Captain was ready to give him charges. Turns

out those five extra minutes spared the entire company. The warehouse blew up before they arrived.”

“Was he ever a fire marshal?” asked Georgia.

“For a couple of years,” said Carter. “Out in Queens with my old partner, Paul Brophy before Broph transferred to Manhattan. But Sully went back to firefighting after that. He didn’t like wearing a tie and carrying a gun.”

“Where is he now?”

“Retired,” said Bobby. She laughed. “Bought his first lottery ticket the day he retired and hit the jackpot. A cool million. I don’t know what he did with the money ‘cause he still lives on West Forty-eighth off Eleventh Avenue. But he goes to Florida every January. I’m always telling Sully to rub some of that luck on me.”

“How y’all holding up here?” Carter asked her.

“Ach, can’t complain,” said Bobby. “Terry, my son, helps out now and then, but I been thinkin’ of selling the place, truth be told. Marty’s been gone three years now, God rest his soul.”

“Seems like only yesterday,” said Carter.

“No truer words were spoke,” said Bobby. “It’s not the same ‘round here no more. Too many ghosts. More than a body can take.”

“Most of the old gang are dead now, I guess,” said Carter.

“Aye,” said Bobby. “And the yuppies don’t come by except on Saint Patrick’s. And they can’t hold their liquor like the regulars.”

“But the back room—y’all still use it, right? I mean, some of the old gang’s still around.”

Bobby sliced the corned beef sandwiches in half without answering. Georgia thought perhaps she hadn't heard the question. Then she noticed that the woman's hands seemed a little less steady with the knife.

"I won't have 'em no more," she said finally. "Not since Cullen..." Her voice trailed off.

"I understand," said Carter. "But you know where we can find 'em, right? None of them could live long without your corned beef."

Bobby stopped cutting and wagged her knife at him. "You're a charmer, Carter. You've got blarney somewhere inside that black skin of yours. But you can't play me like a fiddle. I've been in business as long as I have because I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"Roberta, please—help us." Carter's voice was soft and serious now. Even Bobby recognized the difference. "We've got a bad situation here and we need to talk to Freezer..."

"—Don't say that name." She wiped her knife on her dirty apron without meeting his gaze. "The last time I heard that name was the day Cullen died."

Carter leaned across the counter as if to comfort her. His hand hovered in mid-air, then dropped to the scarred oak countertop. Bobby lifted her gaze now and a look passed between them. Georgia could see something intensely painful in that look.

"I'm sorry," Carter said softly. "I've got no right..." He nodded to Georgia. "I think we should go."

They slid off their stools. The only sound in the empty bar was the rip of two sheets of waxed paper being torn from a roll. Bobby wrapped up the sandwiches, then slapped them on the bar counter.

"He keeps a place near your old stomping ground..."

“—The old Manhattan base?” asked Carter. “On Fifty-second Street, off the West Side Drive? I thought the city converted it into a stable for carriage horses.”

“They did. Freezer’s got a place right next door. Owns the whole building. Not much to look at from the outside, but I hear it’s right fancy on the in.”

Bobby stuffed the sandwiches in a paper bag and handed them to Carter. “No charge.”

He took out his wallet and slapped a twenty-dollar bill on the counter anyway. “Now you stop that Bobby, or my partner’s gonna think you’ve been bribing me all these years.”

Bobby smiled, but it was a sad smile this time—the lips never parted. “Take care of yourself, Carter. There ain’t a lot of us old bodies around anymore.”

##### END OF SAMPLE #####

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