

c h a p t e r

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*Harbor Street and Eighteenth Avenue
Old Downtown, New Brunswick, Massachusetts*

Box alarm. One-niner-four-seven. Two engines and a ladder from the 499, responding.

Or, put another way, Anne Ashburn's Friday night date had showed up on time and was taking her to a show. Granted, "on time" was the precise moment she had sat down for a meal at the station-house with her crew, and the "show" was a warehouse fire they were going to have to chorus-line for. But if you judged the health of a relationship on its constancy and whether it brought purpose and meaning to your life?

Then this firefighting gig was the best damn partner a woman could ask for.

As Engine Co. 17 turned the corner onto Harbor with siren and lights going, Anne glanced around the shallow seating area of the apparatus. There were four jump seats behind the cab, two forward-facing, two rear-, the pairs separated by an aisle of gear. Emilio "Amy" Chavez and Patrick "Duff" Duffy were on one side. She and Daniel "Dannyboy" Maguire were on the other. Up in front, Deshaun "Doc" Lewis, the engineer, was behind the wheel, and Captain Christopher "Chip" Baker, the incident commander, was shotgun.

Her nickname was “Sister.” Which was what happened when you were the sibling of the great Fire Chief Thomas Ashburn, Jr., and the daughter of the revered—falsely as it turned out—Thomas Ashburn, Sr.

Not everybody called her that, though.

She focused on Danny. He was staring out the open window, the cold November wind blowing his black hair back, his exhausted blue eyes focused on nothing. In their bulky turnouts, their knees brushed every time the engine bumped over sewer-access panels, potholes, manholes, intersections.

Okay, okay, she wanted to say to fate. I know he’s there. You don’t have to keep reminding me.

The hardheaded bastard was a lot of things, most of which carried terms you couldn’t use around your grandmother, but he knew she hated the “Sister” thing, so to him, she was Ashburn.

He’d also called her Anne—once. Late at night about three weeks ago.

Yes, they had been naked at the time. Oh, God . . . had they finally done that?

“I’m gonna beat you at pong,” he said without looking at her. “Soon as we get back.”

“No chance.” She hated that he knew she’d been staring at him. “All talk, Dannyboy.”

“Fine.” He turned to face her. “I’ll let you win, how about that?”

His smile was slow, knowing, evil. And her temper answered the phone on the first ring.

“The hell you will.” Anne leaned forward. “I won’t play with you if you cheat.”

“Even if it benefits you?”

“That’s not winning.”

“Huh. Well, you’ll have to explain to me the ins and outs of it when we’re back at the house. While I’m beating you.”

Anne shook her head and glared out the open window.

The first tap on her leg she ascribed to a bump in the road. The second, third, and fourth were obviously—

She looked back at Danny. “Stop it.”

“What?”

“Are you twelve?” As he started to smile, she knew exactly where his mind had gone. “Not inches. Age.”

“I’m pretty sure I peak more like at sixteen.” He lowered his voice. “What do you think?”

Between the sirens and the open windows, no one else could hear them—and Danny never pulled the double entendre if there was a risk of that. But yes, Anne now knew intimately all of his heavily muscled and tattooed anatomy. Granted, it had been only that once.

Then again, unforgettable only had to happen one time.

“I think you’re out of your mind,” she muttered.

And then they were at the scene. The old 1900s-era warehouse was a shell of its former useful self, sixty-five thousand square feet of broken glass panes, rotting beams, and blown-off roof panels. The outer walls were brick, but based on the age, the floors and any room dividers inside were going to be wood. The blaze was in the northeast corner on the second floor, billowing smoke wafting up into the forty-degree night air before being carried away by a southerly wind.

As Anne’s boots hit the ground, she pulled the top half of her turnouts closed. Her ponytail was up high on the back of her head, and she stripped out the band, reorganized the shoulder length, and cranked things tight at her nape. The brown was still streaked with

blond from the summer, but she needed to get it trimmed—so all that lightness was on the chopping block.

Of course, if she were a woman “who took care of herself,” she’d get it highlighted through the winter months. Or so her mother liked to tell her. But who the hell had time for that?

“Sister, you sweep the place with Amy for addicts,” Captain Baker commanded. “Stay away from that corner. Danny and Duff, run those lines!”

As Captain Baker continued to bark orders out, she turned away. She had her assignment. Until she completed it, or there was an insurmountable obstacle or change of order, she was required to execute that directive and no other.

“Be safe in there, Ashburn.”

The words were soft and low, meant for her ears alone. And as she glanced over her shoulder, Danny’s Irish eyes were not smiling.

A ripple of premonition made her rub the back of her neck. “Yeah, you, too, Maguire.”

“Piece’a cake. We’ll be back at pong before ten.”

They walked away from each other at the same time, Danny going around to the stacks of hoses in the back, her linking up with Chavez. She liked being paired with Emilio. He was a four-year veteran who was built like an SUV and had the brains of a *Jeopardy!* contestant. He also did what he said he was going to do with no drama.

Godsend, really.

The two of them went to a compartment on the outside of the truck, threw up the protective metal panel, and grabbed for their air tanks. After pulling her hood over her head, she Velcro’d and buckled her jacket and loaded her oxygen source onto her back. She let the mask hang loose and put her helmet on.

Moving forward on the truck flank, they opened another com-

partment, and she strapped a hand axe on her hip and added her radio and a box light. When Emilio was ready, the pair of them gloved up and jogged across the frosted scruff grass, hopping over a debris salad of rusted-out car parts, random pieces of building, and weathered trash. The flashing red lights of the trucks made bulky shadows out of their graceless movements, and the clean air going in and out of her throat was the kind of thing she made sure to enjoy.

It was going to be a while before she had it again.

As they came up to a side door, the knob was locked, but the panels were loose as a bad fighter's front teeth.

"I got it," she said.

Turning a shoulder in, she threw her weight into the flimsy barrier, busting it wide open. As splinters fell in a clatter, she triggered the light beam on her helmet and looked inside. Not what she expected—which was the norm. You never knew what a building's interior was going to look like for sure until you got a peek at it, and instead of one cavernous space, she and Emilio were in a makeshift hall. Offices, narrow and short-ceilinged, opened off it, the repurposing transforming the warehouse into a den for administrators of some sort. Or telemarketers. Or day traders.

Of course, whatever it was had been a going concern a good ten years ago. Now, the place was uninhabitable.

She and Emilio took opposite sides, and as they progressed, she checked out a lot of old office equipment from the *Ally McBeal* era. Everything was busted up, water-stained, and covered with grunge, which explained why it hadn't been looted.

No scent of the fire. No heat. But the air was not clear.

The smell of rot, urine, and mold was dense as a solid.

They made quick time, going through the maze. As they went

along, their radios kept them updated, the alternating hiss and talk the kind of thing she took in without being aware of hearing it.

“—wind changing. Northeast.”

“—getting that roof ventilation opened now—”

In the back of her mind, she noted the former, but didn't worry about it. The blaze had been small, the engine was on it with a good water source charging the lines, and they had plenty of ladder access from above. Plus, the place was so big, she and Emilio were a mile away from the hot spot.

As they came up to a staircase, she stopped. “You take the second floor, I'll keep going.”

“That's no protocol.”

“There's no reason to stay together. The fire's all the way over there—it's more efficient.”

“But it's not—”

“Are you suggesting I can't handle myself?”

Emilio shook his head. “I guess I'll take upstairs.”

“I'll join you soon as I'm through down here. There's one more corner to go, that's it.”

As Emilio headed up the tight, jury-rigged steps, she continued on. The farther she went, the more mold compromised the air quality, but she had thirty minutes of oxygen on her back—fifteen if she were exerting herself—and she wasn't going to waste it on a bad smell.

Up ahead, something flashed across the corridor, the figure scrambling in the darkness.

“Stop!” she called out as she took off after the person.

Anne went left, right, hit a straightaway, her lungs working, thighs churning, equipment bouncing on her body. In the helmet's jumping

beam, the man or woman went in and out of phase with the illumination, a ghost dressed in rags.

They ended up in a shallow room with no door, no window, nothing but the archway they both entered through. The vagrant was muddy as a hound, his hair so matted he had tails growing out of his head. His breathing worried her. Very labored. And that flush, too. He was on something, and probably had pneumonia.

She put her gloved hands up. “I’m not the police. I just want you out so you don’t get hurt—”

“I’ll kill you!” he panted. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

Stepping away, she put one hand on her short axe. “I don’t care what you’re on, or why you’re in here. There’s a fire in the building behind us. Do you know where the ways out are?”

The man nodded.

“Go then. I won’t stop you.”

“I’m not going back to jail!”

“That’s cool. I’m fire, not police. But you have to get out of the building—if only because the cops will show up here soon. If you don’t want to be arrested, leave now. I’m not in your way.”

The vagrant took off, streaking past her and running flat out in his mismatched boot-and-shoe combo. If he had been saveable, she would have played a different card. But she was not going to get hurt trying to convince someone they needed help, and she wasn’t going to waste time vouching for rehab and treatment when there might be somebody who was in medical distress two doors farther down.

Three minutes later, she was at the far end of the building. “First floor cleared,” she said into her radio.

As she came back to the stairwell, she got her initial scent of

smoke, that change in wind direction blowing the fire into its source of combustibles instead of away from it—

Bam!

The frontal impact was so quick and hard, she got blown backward off her boots, her body landing on her tank as gravity took her to the ground. With the air punched out of her lungs, her vision flickered, and she heard another of those vagrants disappear at a dead run.

Rolling off her air cylinder, she braced herself on all fours and looked at the wake of what had hit her. All she caught was a black shape disappearing around the corner.

“Sonofabitch.”

With a groan, she got back to vertical and took a couple of deep breathers. Pain was registering on her spine, but other than that case of the owies, she was okay.

No reason to go after that addict. He or she had gotten the GTFO memo.

Pivoting around, her beam flashed along the graffiti'd wall and then penetrated the stairwell. Emilio must have flushed the person down from the second floor—

The explosion was so loud, her ears lacked the capacity to accommodate it as sound. Pain was what registered, and covering her head and going into a crouch was both instinctual and part of training. Her immediate thought was meth lab. They'd had something similar the month before, with the chemicals used to make the drug blowing a two-story duplex sky-high.

She grabbed for her radio. “Emilio. Are you clear? Emilio—”

“Roger that,” he said over the connection. “I’m way off in southwest corner, second floor. What was that?”

Thank God, she thought. She did not want to lose him—

The rumble overhead started as a creak and a rattle. It did not stay that way. The collapse was as unexpected as it was fast, all kinds of heavy and hard landing on top of her, an avalanche of God only knew what raining blows on her body.

And then flames were everywhere.

Crushed under debris, pinned to the concrete floor, and without her air mask on, Anne had only one thought.

All her life, she had been determined to follow in her father's footsteps.

Now it looked as if she might die in the same way he had.