

Soot and Sweat on Flesh

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Chapter 2

Her heart beating in excitement and anticipation, Bette Maguire jumped out of her Chevy S-10 into the cool morning air. Trees behind the Webster fire station fluttered their new leaves in the breeze while with a bang and a clash, a small deli across the street opened up the grate on its window. Since it had just turned 7 am, the rush hour traffic had begun to stream down the busy street flanked with three-story houses and small owner-operated shops dating from the 1970s.

The area reminded her a bit of her own neighborhood in Webster, where she'd lived for about a year after meeting her roommate, Rose St. Pierre. Glancing down at her neat blue uniform, Bette smiled and picked off a few strands of cat hair, a friendly reminder of her other roommates. The cats seemed to know exactly which clothes would show off their shed offerings the best.

As Joe helped Bette unload the turnout gear she'd been assigned, she noticed that a lock of his hair had fallen over his forehead, but he didn't brush it back. He yanked her heavy bag from the truck bed with ease, probably due to the rack of muscles in his upper body. *He could be a football player, a jock, but his face is too intelligent for that.*

"What the Lieutenant was saying, Joe...what's there really to be nervous about? We do fight fires sometimes, but that's the job. It's what we signed up for."

Joe paused and looked at her clean, fresh face, with her head of blond hair framing it and those two question mark eyebrows. *I hope she's not a dumb blonde, an airhead. I couldn't handle that. But how could she have gone through training without feeling anxious about doing the job right, about saving lives, about dying?*

"Lots of things," he replied, dropping her bag to the ground and straightening. "You wouldn't be nervous if you found yourself in a fire, alone, and your low air warning bug goes off?"

"No. I'd simply hustle back out and get another canister." She reached behind her seat and grabbed the bag of clean civilian clothes to wear when the shift ended.

"You're trapped, though," he said immediately, shifting the weight of his own bag on his shoulder. "And lost in the building."

Bette chewed on a lip. "I'd radio for help."

"It's broken, lost, gone."

Bette gulped, her imagination briefly considering such an awful situation. *Could all of that happen at once? He's just testing me. There is always an answer to a situation.* Her hands flexed into fists.

"I'd still find my way out — somehow!"

Joe frowned and shook his head. "It's pitch black, you're out of air, and you suffocate."

They stared at each other in an awkward silence. A cool breeze rushed through the small space where they were standing between her truck and the next, rustling the sleeves and pant legs of their identical uniforms. Bette shivered, slammed her door shut, then reached behind Joe to get her large duffle bag.

"All right, I'm dead. Would you at least give me a proper funeral?"

Joe slowly smiled. Bette probably wouldn't admit it, but she had been afraid there for a moment. That was what he had wanted to see.

"Yeah," Joe said. "We'd at least do that for you. But if you want to be good firefighter — and keep alive at the same time — you need a cautious nature."

Her truck unpacked, she balanced the bags on her shoulders and began to move across the parking lot, with Joe following. "But I thought we always rushed in."

"Yeah," Joe replied. "Only after evaluating the scene, though."

Bette frowned. "If a victim is in there needing to be rescued, you've got to get to her fast, don't you?"

"Yes, but sometimes it's too late to do any good. They're already dead, so rushing in doesn't help. You determine that

first — whether anyone is alive. You won't know how to do that yet, but Keane will."

Bette stopped at the side door. She was still confused. "You mean if I see someone hanging out a window, I should stop and ask the Lieutenant whether to put up the ladder and save her?"

Joe knew it was rarely that simple a maneuver. Shit happened. Sometimes, ladders didn't quite reach, water was too far away, or, worst of all, the civilian fell to his death.

"Bette, you're a probie. You've never fought a real fire. Trust me on this. Caution and teamwork will save the day every time. Okay?"

Bette nodded, grumbling, but pulled open the station house door.

Joe held it open while they entered. "Bette, planning your funeral would be a lot of work. We'd prefer it if you stay alert and alive."

Bette stopped short and he bumped into her. "Okay," she said.

"C'mon in," he told her and ushered her in.

The door had opened into a small hallway that led to the equipment bay. Bette followed Joe, her excitement growing, the gear hanging off her seeming light. *Look at the size of this bay.* Deep inside her, she knew it was a small station, but in her heart, it loomed large and exciting.

The high, long room held an engine, a ladder truck, and a red squad car, all ready and waiting for the next call. Even in the low light, the equipment and surroundings gleamed, casting an almost holy glow over the room. *Someone really cares about this place. Now I will, too.*

"What am I riding?" she asked Joe.

"The Lieutenant will try you on both, although you are assigned to our piece."

Joe caressed the end of the engine, a gleaming red beauty only five years old. It had arrived at the station a month after he had. Since then, the engine, full of speed and power, had helped save countless lives. *I'm probably not the only one here who feels this way, this personally connected to the equipment; the others must feel it, too.*

"I'm glad we'll ride together," Bette said, disturbing Joe's thoughts. Then she added in a low voice. "You seem like you're one of the good guys, and I haven't met a lot lately."

Joe locked eyes with her for a moment. He was first of all pleased by what she said, but he was also wary that she was so open with her feelings. That could spell trouble at Fire Station 10, where using personal information to annoy you was a way of life.

"Thanks, Bette, but you don't even know me."

Bette shrugged. "I can tell."

Joe motioned her to a locker-room area, where he showed her where to store her gear. "There are some other good guys here, too. Some have a lot to learn. All in all, an interesting squad."

"More interesting than Lt. Briscoe?" Bette asked.

Joe leaned toward her and lowered his voice. Being that close, he could smell the sweet, clean smell of shampoo in her hair.

"Briscoe is in a category all his own. But there are others. Take Manny Fletcher, chauffeur for the ladder truck. Manny's a decent enough guy, but he never has a good thing to say about anyone. His personal life is a mess."

"And the rest of you have good personal lives?"

Joe smiled. "Well, better than his anyway." *Why am I telling her this stuff? She's easy to talk to, and maybe the more she knows, the less she'll screw up.* Joe pointed out to the bay. "See that inspector's car there?"

"Yeah," Bette said. "You have an arson team here, don't you?"

"Yeah, for this district. Most of the inspectors are great, but our shift is usually assigned Al Ramirez. We're the only ones who can stand working with him. He enjoys causing trouble. Be careful around him. Ramirez hates probies, especially if they *argue* with him."

Bette raised an eyebrow. "You mean..."

Joe added, "I mean, you seem to have a tendency to argue."

"Me?" Bette placed a hand to her chest and gave him a small smile.

Joe raised one eyebrow, but she met his eyes with a confident look. She slapped him on the arm, enjoying the thump she

made against the hard muscle. "Don't worry, Joe, I'll stay cool."

"Good," he said. "At least until the guys get to know you, playing it cool may be the only thing that keeps them from eating you alive."

* * *

Joe Griffin gave Bette Maguire a quick tour of the one-story station house. The main bay was out front facing the street. The lockers and showers were around the back of the building, and the offices, mess, and living quarters were off to the sides. Everything seemed clean and in tiptop shape; she could tell the firehouse was a good place to work.

Joe brought her to the mess hall, where the rest of the squad had gathered to discuss their 24-hour shift. There was a strong smell of coffee and disinfectant in the room. Joe sat Bette down beside him at a long table where Keane, Briscoe, and two other men were waiting. Flanking the table on both sides were sinks, stoves, refrigerators, and large cabinets, all done in white. Their cleanliness matched the eerie silence that confronted them.

When Keane cleared his throat, she turned to look at him sitting near her to her left at one end of the table.

"This is Bette Maguire, our new probationary, here to spend 6 months of her career with us, at least. Please treat her with the same respect you always show probies. Okay?" Keane asked.

Lt. Keane knew he was asking for the minimal level of respect, but she had to get at least that for the team to work properly. She would have to earn any more respect herself.

The men nodded and Keane motioned to the two Bette didn't know. "That's Walter Frost sitting there pretending you don't exist, and this is Emmanuel Fletcher, otherwise known as Manny, nursing his coffee. They both usually man the ladder with Lt. Briscoe."

Frost, a strong-looking black man wearing a neatly pressed uniform, was reading a newspaper laid on the table across from Joe and Bette. He didn't bother to look up when he said good morning at her. He'd seen probies before. This one was no different. And he wanted to find out his stocks' performance before Keane officially began the meeting.

Fletcher, a thin Hispanic man with long, hefty limbs and a lop-sided grin, was sitting on the other side of Joe. He reached over and shook her hand. He squeezed hard and she returned the same pressure. *Let's see how she reacts to a little conflict.*

"I hear you rammed the Lieutenant's car, a nice move on your first shift. Classic, in fact." Fletcher grinned when he saw Bette flinch. "What I need to know is: should we all get more insurance or was this klutzy move a one-time thing?"

"Well, I intended to hit more of the cars, but I lost my concentration," Bette said. *What an asshole.*

"Ooh, she's got a mouth." Fletcher grinned. He realized that Bette was going to be a fun probie to tease. Most of them were too nervous to say anything for the first few weeks. And none of them had been as pleasing to look at as she was. "Anybody want to bet if she makes it 6 months?"

Joe had been holding his tongue, but suddenly he leaned in front of Bette, blocking Fletcher from her view. "You can't afford any betting, Fletcher."

Fletcher focused his attention on Joe, whom he considered a little uptight for his own tastes. "Excuse me, yes, well, I don't have a second home up country like you do."

"It's a cabin in the woods, Manny, and you still owe me for that window you broke two months ago when you were up there with one of your *friends*."

Joe hadn't meant to start this argument, and he didn't really care about the money. Manny's nasty attitude and Bette's argumentative nature, however, seemed to have infected him as well.

"Griffin," Fletcher clapped him on the shoulder, hoping what he said would rile the engine man even more. "You wouldn't realize it since you're a confirmed and lonely bachelor most of the time, but it's difficult having any money left trying to support a wife and two kids."

Fletcher was always making fun of Joe's desire to be with only one woman at a time and someday find *the one who would change his life*. From Joe's viewpoint, however, Fletcher was a playboy who disrespected his wife and family by sleeping around.

"And a girlfriend. Or is it two now?" Joe said, bristling.

Doing a quick survey, Bette saw that Fletcher seemed to be the only one in the group who wore a wedding band.

"All right, that's enough, you two," Keane interrupted, which silenced the two men. "Where are the other members of our happy squad?"

“Shic is going to be late, but he’ll be here,” Briscoe said.

“And West is always late,” Frost said.

Just as Frost finished speaking, a curly-haired man with about two days of growth on his face bounded in. He was small compared to the others, but he was compact and strong. He had a thick, gold chain wrapped around his neck. Thick black chest hair sprang from the between the top folds of his uniform.

“Stu, glad you could make it,” Keane said.

“I know, Lieutenant. Sorry I’m late.” West sat down with a flourish across the table from Bette and next to Frost, who was still reading his paper. “I had to gas up Monica’s car and bring the dog to the vet, god damn it all. What did I miss?”

Keane nodded at Bette. “Bette Maguire, Stuart West. He’s the pump operator. She’s the probie.”

West studied her, noting with satisfaction how muscular she was — for a woman, anyhow. “Well, at least you look like you can carry a hose. I won’t have to worry about that. Do you have any idea what the job is really like or do we have to knock it into you?”

As pump operator and engine driver, West would get her to the fire scene safely, provide her with a steady stream of water, and keep track of her movements in the building. Bette knew he was an important part of the team and she wanted to get on his good side.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I was near the top of my class this year. I have a bachelors degree, too.”

“In what?” West asked.

“Communications.”

There was silence, then West threw his arms up and grimaced. “*Oh*, in that case, we’re *all* set.”

“Especially if we want to do any communicating,” Fletcher said.

“Remember this, probie: when we talk; you listen,” West said.

“It’ll be nice to have someone else around here who knows how to read.” Frost did not look up from his paper, but rubbed an itch on his smooth cheek.

“Are you referring to me, Mr. Frost?” West asked, standing. “You, who does nothing else but read and work overtime?”

“It beats spending all my time either oiling my girlfriend or my car!” Frost finally looked up and around him, folded up the paper, and sipped some coffee from the department mug in front of him.

West’s face was so red Bette thought for sure he was going to launch himself at Frost. But then his stance relaxed and he sat down, shaking his head and chuckling. He slapped Frost on the shoulder, hard.

“At least you’re not too hard up to make a joke,” West said.

Frost rolled his eyes, but the tension went out of the room. Bette felt a sense of relief until she heard footsteps and a hacking cough approaching the mess, and then Keane swearing, “Shit” under his breath.

A middle-aged man in a white shirt and blue pants glided into the room. Surrounding him was a cloud of cigar smoke.

“Al,” Keane greeted, fanning the air.

“Patrick.” The older, almost-bald man poured himself a cup of coffee, grabbed a danish from a box on the counter, and turned to face the room.

As the smoke around the new arrival slowly faded away, Bette could feel Joe tense up beside her. So this was the cantankerous arson inspector.

“Al Ramirez, this is Bette Maguire.” Keane glanced at his watch. “Al, you’re early. You usually don’t get in for another hour.”

Bette noticed how Ramirez’s almost delicate looking hands gripped a large cup of coffee as if it would keep him from falling. It was a big body to hold up, too. Ramirez was tall and massive — a body built to intimidate — although some of it had gone the way of flab.

“I wanted to make sure I met the probie who’s going to be destroying my fire scenes for the next six months,” Ramirez said.

“Bette won’t get in the way of Arson, Al.” Keane’s voice took on a hard edge. *How many times are we going to have this conversation?* “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Yeah, Patrick, you’re good at keeping them out of my path,” Ramirez said as the rest of the men pretended they were

studying their coffee cups. “But some get stuck like a deer in headlights.”

“And then run down,” Lt. Briscoe added.

The mood in the room shot up a notch in tension. Bette felt a little flutter in her stomach, but forced it to go away.

“Harry,” Keane warned. The truck lieutenant had the tenacity of a rottweiler with its teeth sunk in. Combined with Ramirez’s irascibility, they were a dangerous duo. “Now, Al, do you want to join us in a briefing on the tour or do you have your own work to do?”

Ramirez stared at Keane and continued to eat his danish. He didn’t seem angry or in any particular rush to leave.

“I’m usually right about probies,” Ramirez said.

“You’re wrong about me,” Bette said.

Ramirez turned his full gaze on her and she didn’t like what she saw. His eyes were like a hawk’s, assessing her chances of escaping his talons.

“Be careful,” Joe muttered out of the side of his mouth.

“Oh yeah?” Ramirez asked. “Want to make a bet on it, Maguire?”

“How much?” Bette asked.

“Enough, Bette,” Keane interrupted. “There’s no betting on your performance. That’s bad luck. And Al, stop encouraging her.”

Ramirez shrugged, half smiled, and left the room. The men sighed and relaxed in their chairs.

“Al is just Al,” Keane tried to explain to Bette. “He works out of this station, but he’s an independent agent reporting to the Chief. He’s a force of nature all his own.”

“I can see that,” Bette said.

“Anyhow, he won’t be working directly with you, but the rest of us will. So let’s try to put aside our differences and work with each other. Our lives will depend on it.” Keane paused. They all silently listened. “Some of you have been too argumentative lately, a real pain in my ass. So calm down and shape up. Is that understood?”

The men all agreed, but grumpily.

“Okay, Lieutenant,” Joe said. “You’re right.”

“Fine by me,” Bette glanced at Lt. Briscoe and remembered their recent argument in the parking lot.

“Yeah, yeah,” Briscoe muttered.

Keane cleared his throat. “Your probation officially lasts six months, Bette. I put great store in the opinion of everyone you work with. They will help decide your fate, but I’ll make the final call.”

Bette looked at the serious faces around her. “I have to prove to you — to all of you — in 6 months that I’m not a total screw-up, is that it?”

“Or that you’re here because of affirmative action,” Briscoe said.

“I got this job fair and square. I was as good as the rest of them.”

“Yeah, but are you up to the *job*?” Manny Fletcher asked. “If not, you better leave now.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Bette replied, trying to keep the anger from her voice.

“Fletcher, how is she going to know that yet?” Joe asked with a sigh. “She just got here. She doesn’t know what it’s like.”

“Yes,” Keane reminded them as his voice rose in volume. “And it’s our job to teach her that. Okay? Can I continue?”

His voice had a tinge of anger in it, and finally that silenced the rest of them. Keane hardly ever got angry in public, and when he did, that was a warning sign not to piss him off again.

Keane went on to discuss the business for the day. Bette wanted to listen, but she kept replaying what had been said. *How am I going to convince a bunch of men I hardly know — most of whom are not excited I’m here — to support me becoming a firefighter? I’m going to have to kiss some serious butt, and I hate doing that.*

Forgetting where she was, Bette said, “I’m screwed.” She said it in a low voice, but not low enough.

Keane paused and glanced at her. “Bette? You have something to add?”

All eyes turned to her. *Shit.*

Across from her, engineer Stuart West started laughing. “You are screwed, probie, especially if you think with your

mouth!"

The others laughed, too, even Keane and Joe. To her dismay, Bette felt herself flushing. She hardly ever got embarrassed, but right then, she was. She did not know how to respond to so many voices at once. It was a new and awkward feeling. She usually knew exactly what to say.

"Okay, everyone, relax," Keane said. "Bette? What was I just saying?"

She didn't have a clue, but guessed anyhow. "How important it is to listen to you."

Keane shook his head, but his eyes smiled. *She may be a woman, but she definitely has balls.* "That'll do. Now pay attention, okay?"

Bette nodded and prayed the meeting would end before she could screw up again.

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