

AN ALL-RIGHT TOWN

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ABSTRACT

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An All-Right Town examines the Hoboken arson fires and the gentrification of Hoboken in the 1980s through the genre of fiction. Hoboken is caught between big city ideas and small town ideals, with stories and characters all their own. The novel has the feel of a folktale while maintaining its historical accuracy. It examines the themes of comraderie and friendship as well as the morality of change. Change itself is the central theme of the book, the characters both reacting to change and fighting change within themselves. At the core of the book is the role that tradition, by any definition of that word, plays in the lives of people. In the story, these characters seem bound by traditions, some of which make very little sense to others. Encompassed in these traditions are the family and friendship bonds that Edward Fitzgerald and other characters test.

For Jack, who reminds me daily

that the best of me

is always possible.

Acknowledgements:

Dear Reader,

This book may be fiction, but the devastation to Hoboken families during the 1980s was as real as the paper you hold in your hands. With each page that you turn, you become a part of the history of that time and are therefore responsible to keep watch. An *All-Right Town* is for the people, *Por La Gente*, of Hoboken past and present.

Sincerely,

A Hobokenite

Introduction

And the sky has got so cloudy

When it used to be so clear

And the summer went so quickly this year

Yes, there used to be a ballpark right here

-Frank Sinatra "There Used to Be a Ballpark"

I was born in 1983, in the middle of what many news headlines dubbed the “Hoboken Renaissance.” The word renaissance itself means the rekindling of an interest in what was once forgotten, a period of unprecedented growth and development. The term was appropriate for the Mile Square City during the 1980s as real estate development drove the city’s property owners toward extraordinary financial gain. I can distinctly remember the changes the town underwent during my childhood. I played little league baseball on the field while it was still dirt, before the stands were converted from metal benches to stadium seating. The piers were run down floating pieces of rotten wood that we would hit home runs onto. Now those home runs are hit onto another turfed field, used exclusively for soccer.

Today, many in Hoboken are trying to beautify the town, as they realize that gigantic condos are not so appealing to the masses. The same condos were what made Hoboken attractive back in the 1980s when most of the “Yuppies” were either single or dating; very few were married and even fewer had children. Most of the Born and Breds thought the “Yuppie Epidemic” would just die off by way of the suburbs. Interesting enough, today’s Hoboken is very family friendly, as developers noted the need for more greenery and playgrounds. There are

many more parks in town than there were when I was growing up. In the 1980s, ballfields were replaced with condos. Today, empty lots where condos have undoubtedly ascended stand turf fields for a variety of uses.

I remember practicing in a dirt parking lot located on Second and Hudson Streets, between the two Marine View Plazas. We would constantly find beer bottles and the ends of marijuana roaches strewn throughout the lot. The field, two blocks from the Path station is now, like many of the other empty lots of my childhood, a high-rise condominium. The city was changing at such a rapid rate that, as a child, I could not fully comprehend. Nor could I grasp the factors that precipitated change. As an adult, I appreciate that my children will not have to field ground balls while avoiding cans of Bud Light. Still, these changes have robbed them of a true urban experience.

My family has owned a liquor store in Hoboken since 1975, and I grew up delivering a variety of alcoholic beverages to the residents. I still work some nights for extra money, but the delivery experience is markedly different. Today I see the projects, squished between two monstrous “Luxury Loft” buildings, and I am reminded that the process of gentrification, at least in Hoboken’s case, never ends. On one block, African American and Hispanic teens sit out on the concrete wall barricading their affordable housing complex, while across the street, two white couples play pool in the foyer of their building, watching television on the condo association approved 60-inch televisions. Even today, the gap between the haves and have nots grows and the color line between these two groups remains as black and white as it did in the 1980s.

This dissertation defines Hoboken’s gentrification process as more than just a few new fancy restaurants, antique shops, and luxury condos. The Hoboken that residents and visitors see

today is due in part to political and real estate collusion. There was a literal purge that took place in the 1970s and 1980s through probable arson fires. This introduction and the novel that follows, shed light on those tumultuous years and offer a fictional insight into the fires that allowed a gentrified oasis to rise out of the ashes of the poor.

During the nineteenth century, Hoboken was a thriving seaport and cultural melting pot. Not until the latter part of the twentieth century were the economic lines drawn so specifically. In his comical yet poignant letter compilation detailing the economic and cultural divide between the Born and Bred Hobokenites and the Yuppies, *Yuppies Invade My House at Dinnertime*, Joseph Barry points out that “By 1910, some 70,000 people lived in this mile-square municipality, cramming into block after block of sturdy brick and stone dwellings” (xvi). Castle Point Terrace, a cobble stoned section of Hoboken high on the bluffs overlooking the Manhattan skyline, became the Newport for New Jersey’s wealthy shipping tycoons who built massive mansions overlooking the Hudson River. For nearly four decades, Hoboken was the quintessential working- class community, with its abundance of factories and sturdy longshoremen made famous by the movie *On the Waterfront*.

As World War II came to a close, many of the big time factories relocated to sprawling campuses in southern and western New Jersey. Most of the buildings they had inhabited remained abandoned, and the growth of the previous century finally caught up with the Mile Square City: more space was needed to load shipping containers onto the docks, and that was space Hoboken did not have (Barry xxvii). Shipping companies found other cargo ports in Bayonne and Staten Island. Hoboken’s pier workers eventually dwindled in number, and the once vibrant pier community became an empty section of town that was prime for crime and underage drinking. Rotting piers floated in the waters of the Hudson.

By the 1970s, “the thriving port had dwindled to a single cargo pier” (Barry xvii). The working population went from 100,000 to 15,000 in 1975; the unemployment rate was twice the national average. The 1970s were a time of great poverty in Hoboken; the racial demographic of the town was mostly blacks and Hispanics. The Mile Square City was the Mile Square Slum.

Drugs, crime, and disease ran rampant in Hoboken as the dark ages of the 1970s continued. As Barry notes, “State statistics claimed there were 1000 active heroin addicts in Hoboken,” and most residents readily accepted this statistic as truth (xvii). Hoboken of this time was very different from the antique shops and restaurant lined streets it would eventually become.

The housing situation was controversial during this time. Many buildings were deteriorating and most were low-income housing. Property owners failed to make repairs, or even supply the tenants with hot water at times, due to the lack of profit. The black and Hispanic populations fought the squalid living conditions. During the early 70s, they became violent in what many called the Hoboken Riots.

The decrepit housing situation and tension between Born and Raised Hobokenites of several races and ethnicities and the newcomers led to the revitalization that took place in the early 1980s. The fabric of the community was frail, but the run down brownstones soon caught the eyes of wealthy developers who saw Hoboken as the “new frontier” (Barry xx). According to Miriam Axel Lutte, “A brownstone revival was beginning, and for-profit developers, using state funds for affordable housing, were renovating tenement buildings for affordable housing” (National Housing Institute 2001). These developers applied for state monies under the guise of building affordable housing but used the funds to renovate the brownstones and turn profits two or three times greater than the normal market would usually allow. The ruse helped begin the

forced exodus of low income, mostly minority families. This did not stop the local government and news outlets to paint a very different picture of Hoboken. By the start of the decade, articles began to appear in news outlets such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* that proclaimed Hoboken “The Mile Square Miracle.”

In truth, nothing drastic had happened. The town was still the dangerous, drug ridden, mile square city it was at the start of the decade. But a new breed of inhabitant was making their way into the rent controlled apartments. Rents that were substantially lower than Manhattan looked cheap to these young urban professionals. As landlords tried to raise rents on their properties, minorities fought to keep the rents low. The “yuppies” that sought to colonize the new frontier looked at the slowly rising prices as a bargain and were happy to pay the fee.

Tension between the newcomers and the original Hoboken residents began to surface. While minorities bore the brunt of blame for this tension from developers and politicians, the Italian and Irish population soon became targets as well. Barry captures the essence of the feud in his letters. In a letter to an ex-landlord, one writer who has been forced out of his apartment so the landlord can establish residency and then sell the building states:

Unfortunately, I can’t just fade away like lots of my neighbors who found themselves in the same predicament—I’m too young to go to an old people’s home, too old to go back to my parents; I can’t afford to buy a house—and I have Pets. (My neighbor told me I should get rid of my cats, start dealing in cocaine, and then I’d be sure to pass muster and land the best condo in town.) I wonder what ever became of that old man who owned the butcher shop around the corner for about 40 years who had to get out to make way for another antique shop? I’m told he died a few months after he gave up the store. I often wonder what he really died of—but no matter, he really wasn’t the Hoboken image—his hair wasn’t designer cut; he never owned an attaché case, three-piece suit, or Walkman head set. Besides that, he didn’t even “act Hoboken”—he probably never consulted a

lawyer in his entire life, never built an extension on his house, bought a croissant or even evicted a tenant. (Barry 3-4)

This “Repentant Ex-Hobokenite” captures the sarcasm and stereotypical view that all native Hobokenites had of these newcomers. Not every New York transplant used a Walkman or wore sneakers to work, but they were all lumped in together as being foreign. Sneakers and a briefcase in 1980s Hoboken is a Burqa or Hijab today; that is how on edge the Yuppie stereotype caused Hoboken natives to feel and fear the different.

The letters in Barry’s book are the basis for many of the attitudes in this novel. As a native of Hoboken, I found many of the letters written by other natives to be comical, since most of the “authors” were high-school dropouts and other town characters who made constant grammatical errors but wrote the Hoboken they spoke. Others I found downright nasty (the insults usually showed the nasty in person as well).

Words were not the only negative outlet for many native Hobokenites. I distinctly remember friends of mine going out on the night before Halloween, Mischief Night it was called, and throwing eggs at Yuppies as they walked to and from Halloween parties. During the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, kids played “Drop the Yuppie” and sucker punched drunk Yuppies as they stumbled down any and all streets. One “Out-of-Towner” wrote to the Hoboken Reporter to complain about the lack of parking in town, especially with three adults with cars in the apartment. She also expressed her fears of parking far from her apartment at night, as Hoboken still had that insidious reputation after a rape that took place weeks earlier. In response to this woman, a “Hoboken Resident all her life” responded with the headline “There’s no parking because you out-of-towners took all the spaces.” The author goes on to say:

First of all, why the hell is there three people living in one apartment, all with cars. That is one of the reasons there is no parking in Hoboken. Second, as far as

the rape goes, you are right. The girl should not have been walking home alone, and for another thing, the man that raped the girl is in jail, not that it can't happen again, but women should learn how to protect themselves. Also, if you don't like the way it is in Hoboken, go back where you came from...you are also an out-of-towner. (Barry 13)

That last line, "go back where you came from" is timeless. That phrase was said by Americans when Irish and Italian immigrants came to America at the turn of the century and is said today when tension between current Americans and whatever ethnic group is the enemy that day. Even on a small scale in 1980s Hoboken, the cultural divide remained and continues today.

Yet, there was a real fear of the unknown for many native Hobokenites. People lost their livelihoods to some of the New York transplants who wanted to start a small business in New Jersey. Landlords of commercial buildings or buildings that were mixed with apartments and a storefront also used the loopholes in the rent control laws as an opportunity to raise the rent. Commercial properties had no rent control, so old butcher shops and barbershops that were run by long-time Hoboken natives now became antique shops and coffee shops run by strangers.

My family felt the scare first hand.

We own a small liquor store on Seventh and Park in town. At the time of all this "renaissance," rumors would swirl that Tony, the landlord of the building and owner of the law firm across the street, was going to sell his building, and a new deli with a liquor license was going to open up. I was a kid at the time and never recognized the stress everyone was under, but my mother told me how they thought about selling our liquor license and opening a new store in the Jersey City Heights. This would have been a terrible mistake and luckily we kept the business, but I always wondered about other people who got caught up in the rumors and the scares and actually sold their businesses rather than waiting it out and losing everything.

As the rents climbed, more and more Born and Raised residents were forced to leave. Hoboken was on the cusp of change during the late 1970s and early 1980s as residents began to feel the heat from development pressure. The gentrification of Hoboken was underway. But while other areas of the country gentrified at a slower pace, Hoboken laid the blueprint for the forcible rapid displacement of poor residents and hometown business owners.

Longtime Hoboken residents like to tell stories. If you sit for lunch in a place like Piccolo's or Leo's restaurant, odds are you will probably get a colorful story about the waitresses' family or perhaps even the person who ordered food right before you. They like to tell football or baseball glory day tales. Most of the stories are positive. If they are sad, there is always a joke at the end to take the edge off. I could walk into any of these old haunts and mention the Hoboken Elks little league team and a furious debate over the greatest season in little league history would take place, often with a condiment thrown in the face of those who disagree. But in the end, everyone would laugh at the realization that they were arguing over 12 year olds.

With social media so engrained in the fabric of society today, it makes sense that there is



Firefighters salvage what is left of 131 Clinton Street. Photo Credit Ron Jeffers

a Facebook page dedicated to those who consider themselves "Old Hoboken." I rarely post anything.

Instead, I enjoy reading the posts and comments that flutter through my news feed about the changes that have taken place or, my favorite cliché, "the way things used to be." People talk of their great grandparents on this page, share pictures, tell jokes, and even argue over the most insignificant of things. But at the mention of the fires that

burned through Hoboken in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the tone of just about every old Hobokenite morphs into somber reminiscence. No jokes are told. When it comes to the fires, “the way things used to be” is a sad reminder of the way things are.

In total, 54 people died, 30 of whom were children, from arson fires during a four-year stretch from 1979-1982. These fires were set in the poorer sections of town, some near the projects, and others in an area known as the “Yellow Flats.” Nearly all of the arson fires in Hoboken were set in apartment buildings. There were never any legitimate investigations into buildings being set ablaze, but if a fire occurred in the projects during this time, everyone feared the worst. The deaths were disturbing, but the fact that not one single arrest was made led many to believe that a conspiracy was in the works. The fiction that follows attempts to answer the questions that many Hobokenites wondered during this tumultuous time. Specifically, who was responsible for the fires, and why were they never brought to justice?

John J. O’Connor, *Practical Fire and Arson Investigation*, states that “arson for profit is responsible for about half of the fire related damage in America” (12). Although many of the victims in Hoboken themselves were suspected of starting the fires, the common assumption is that landlords paid to have their buildings burned in order to collect from their insurance companies and then sell the vacant lot to developers. The arson fires and lack of arrests in Hoboken were actually common place throughout the country at the time as “only 9 percent of all arson cases are cleared by an arrest, and only 2 percent result in convictions” (O’Connor 12).

The first and deadliest Hoboken fire took place on January 20th 1979 at 131 Clinton Streets. This section of Hoboken was filled with single room occupancy rentals as well as tenements. 131 Clinton was a five-story building that housed roughly twenty apartments (today there are ten apartments in total). The building was packed and the hallways were narrow. In

total, 21 people died during this fire, several of these casualties being young children. The frigid weather, coupled with the destruction of the building itself and the power lines outside left many on the block without power. Like many of the arson fires that came after 131 Clinton, the blaze started in the early morning hours while most people in the building were sleeping. No one was brought to trial for this fire.

The Fire Chief at the time, Edward McDonald, was quoted as saying that the fire was started by one of the children in the building who died in the fire. Teenagers and children were often blamed for the fires, shifting the blame away from the landlord and also away from the adult courts. O'Connor states: "Juveniles may be hired as incendiaries or 'torches' by people who are unable to contact a professional torch or who are afraid to start the fire themselves. A juvenile hired to set a fire will generally work for much less than an experienced or professional torch" (11). Sadly, assigning blame to a juvenile or a child for the arson also fit with the fact that "because of their lack of experience and their reliance on whatever supplies are available (e.g., gasoline)... these young incendiaries are likely to be trapped and die in a fire they might set" (O'Connor 11). With no suspect on the horizon, it was convenient for investigators to consider the 131 Clinton fire "suspicious" but never follow through with a thorough investigation.

The fire at 131 Clinton (and many other smaller fires that did not cause as much damage) instilled fear in the poor minority population of Hoboken. Many of them felt as if the town was literally trying to burn them out. The fear was realized on October 24, 1981 when a blaze engulfed a tenement building at 1202 Twelfth street. Just like previous fires, this fire started around 4 A.M. and burned for nearly two hours, killing eleven people, seven of them children.

Sister Norberta Hunnewinkel, an administrator at the homeless shelter during this time and an organizer of a neighborhood watch group called *Por La Gente* (For the People)

commented on the fire, saying, “People are frightened. They’re still in mourning now, but the fear will return soon” (Laura, 1981). *Por La Gente* was formed in 1980 as a tenant union attempting to stop the soaring rents in town. They became a quasi-neighborhood watch group that kept tabs on landlords, developers, and possible locations for future arson fires. Sister Norberta was the voice of this group. She led the call for investigation into fraudulent landlord hardship applications and sought to have tenants comprise a majority of the rent leveling board. According to Hunnewinkel:

Entire rows of homes were quickly bought up by eager developers, who used the federal grants to redevelop the apartment that once housed an immigrant family, into a space designed for one or two people. The large families, frequently including extended family members, were finding it increasingly difficult to find housing.

Entire families found themselves living at her homeless shelter on Bloomfield Avenue while the developers maximized the number of apartments in the buildings. My family owns one of the older rent controlled buildings in Hoboken and it has only three apartments. There are apartment buildings with the same structural layout as our building that contain six to nine extremely small apartments.

The *Encyclopedia of Housing* defines gentrification as “the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestment and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well off, middle and upper-middle-class population” (Kirkland 19). This definition is strictly based on economics, essentially saying that gentrification results from an influx of wealth into a community. Ideally, a person is considered a “gentrifier” regardless of race or ethnicity. In theory, this makes gentrification a positive change. Theory, however, only paints a portion of the picture. Hoboken’s gentrification process led to a rise in homelessness and a substantial change in the racial demographic of the

town. In Hoboken, all public debate reflects “the threat of gentrification; that since the stakes are so high for so many, and the threat so imminent, fear and loathing of yuppies intrudes into every discussion” (Barry 44). Today, the attitudes towards “yuppies” has died down but the constant building of apartment complexes continues. The natives concede the day-to-day running of the town to the last two mayors, Dawn Zimmer, and the newly elected Ravi Bhalla, both transplants from other states.

Kirkland suggests that the process of gentrification is inherently racist because the process “holds that the people moving in to a gentrifying area are usually white, and the residents who move out are typically people of color” (19). This racial aspect is compelling when we look at Hoboken’s gentrification. Most of the residents forced out were people of color, but poor white families were ousted as well. The majority of these white families were able to find a way to remain in town due to their slightly more stable financial situations, albeit in residences that were less developed than their previous homes. White city workers, police and firemen, as well as longshoremen found their enclaves in the rent-controlled Church Tower and Clock Tower buildings. Italian and Irish families dominated the apartments in these buildings while the blacks and Hispanics were forced not only to move out of their apartments in Hoboken, but out of Hoboken altogether to Jersey City or Bayonne.

Other areas of similar gentrification-- such as Brooklyn Heights and the West Town section of Chicago—also saw a “white out” of predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods. In these areas, racial discrimination allowed banks to steer rich white buyers into certain areas while denying mortgages to black buyers:

Finally, in the realm of property insurance, it is posited that insurers will be encouraged by gentrification that creates white upper middle class enclaves and

thus reluctant to insure people of color or lower-income households that try to buy into those enclaves. (Kirkland 27)

Developers deny affluent minorities because whites are stereotypically considered more stable and more insurable. Many insurance companies see minorities as unstable with little job security. This takes gentrification to a new, more insidious level.

In the West Town section of Chicago (an area that one could compare to Hoboken because of both the racial and criminal aspect of displacement), Kirkland states that, “property owners were intimidated to sell; in some cases, agents would secure a signed offer for real estate that was not for sale and then pressure the owner to accept the offer” (23). Here, wealthy developers preyed upon poor landlords or land-owners who barely scraped by on a day-to-day basis. However, the offers were usually far less than market value and someone who was manipulated to sell his property for \$100,000 usually jumped at the opportunity regardless of the fact that the property was worth substantially more. Quick paydays were usually the first way most areas initiated the gentrification process.

Minorities were not the only targets of the gentrification process. Senior citizens and older landowners approaching retirement “were targeted with repeated visits and phone calls, graffiti, gang harassment, and unsolicited offers” (Kirkland 23). Developers and real estate agents in the West Town section of Chicago targeted minority populated neighborhoods in a cohesive attempt to drive these people out.

Many of these tactics were used in Hoboken during the 1970s and 1980s. Failing to provide heat during the winter months was one of the most basic methods most landlords used to force low paying tenants out of their apartments. In January of 1981, Michael Spano, landlord of a tenement building at 214 Park Avenue, left his tenants without heat for an entire winter, claiming the boiler was faulty. He was actually punished in a court hearing and forced to pay a

\$500 fine as well as serve jail time if the heat was not turned on. Eventually the heat was restored but his point was made. Residents were forced to keep ovens and stoves on for the entire winter and often slept in jackets. The most egregious aspect of this example is that Spano's son, Louis, was a licensed plumber who could have fixed the boiler at a fraction of the cost. It was obvious that Spano, like many other landlords, were trying to force their residents out by any means necessary (Barry 27).

Another example of landlord and tenant tension was found in the Little India section of Hoboken during this time. Murray Connell, an Australian developer who wished to make a block long section of 8th and Park into luxury condominiums faced push back from the mostly Indian tenant population. Connell enticed them with buyouts, but was turned down. He made living conditions terrible: "For more than eight years, they [tenants] had complained about poor conditions in the rundown buildings" (Murphy 1). Plumbing was never fixed in a timely manner, if at all, and tenants went months without hot water, continually filing their complaints with the rent control board. Connell, sensing he was losing the battle, sent a letter with Anti-Indian slurs to the building's tenant committee, escalating the tenant/developer tension even more.

Connell is an example of the corruption that plagued Hoboken. He was one of hundreds of developers who tried to push poor minorities out of the community. These developers used the poor financial status to put pressure on both poor landlords who owned cheap housing and tenants who refused to leave their apartments. In many cases, developers pitted the poor landlords against their tenants in order to have the property empty at the time of purchase. Eventually, these landlords and developers took drastic methods in their attempts to force their tenants out of the buildings, the most vile being arson for hire. The burning out of tenants led to the rapid reconstruction of buildings and the new tenant population in town, changing the ethnic

and economic makeup of Hoboken and driving out some of the longest standing Hoboken residents.

Mile Square Personalities

Today, few colorful characters roam the streets of Hoboken. When I was a kid, we gave funny names to these people. On any given day, one could see Jesus the Bum standing outside the General Store on Fifth and Willow. Bum Jesus, Jesus the Bum-- every name pointed to his homelessness and passersby always put coins in his cup, a guilt-ridden faux penance, you know, just in case. Somehow, he kept his beard and hair the same length over the years. I'm sure he saw the profitability in his appearance. My uncle, who was an usher at Our Lady of Grace Church every Sunday, *always* put money in his cup. Sometimes he would sit on the corner of Newark and Washington in front of the CVS. His background was mysterious and most of the kids in town knew the stories. The best tale always revolved around his being a former Yuppie whose wife ran off with the kids after he lost his money in bad stocks. I think this was more wishful thinking and jealousy manifesting itself on the part of most Born and Raised.

Sometimes Crazy Marie and Ronnie with the two Rottweilers would sit by him, sometimes fighting but always sharing their scraps with the dogs and with Jesus. I remember being a little older and walking into CVS on Washington street one day. Marie and Ronnie were outside with Animal Control. Apparently, from what I heard as I walked inside, someone called because they thought the dogs were being mistreated. The dogs ate better than both Ronnie and Marie (who looked as if they were the malnourished ones). Everyone thought it was a Yuppie who called and ratted on them. They got their dogs back a few days later.

Carmine Bacala found his way into every Friday night football game, and would pitch sports agent offers at local athletes who showed promise. I was a pretty good baseball player, and

my high school team had five players who later played at Division I colleges or professionally. Bacala was at EVERY practice and every game trying to “sign” us. Bacala, like most of these characters, was homeless or bounced around Section 8 housing.

During the 1980s, the homeless population in Hoboken was at an all-time high, as more and more members of the community were pushed out of their homes with no place to go. A.D. Emhas, in a letter to the Hoboken Reporter in 1986 writes, “Where do I and these others like me go when you take over my new home?” (Barry xi).

Emhas’ sentiment was felt by the majority of Born and Raised Hoboken residents of the time. Barry’s book details many of these issues but the feeling of inadequacy on the part of the native Hobokenites was often a topic at nearly every establishment. I couldn’t go into Fiore’s and order a sandwich without seeing the workers openly gossip about a yuppie who ordered just ahead of me. My family did not talk about the situation often. We all basically absorbed the information from others and became very good listeners. The only option for most of the poor residents was to pack their belongings and hope to find housing in neighboring towns.

The displacement of these people led to a rise in the homeless population and overcrowding in the homeless shelter. Kirkland writes, “Displacement is the most notable consequence of gentrification, and is generally understood as the process whereby current residents are forced to move because they can no longer afford to reside in the gentrifying neighborhoods” (20). On a national level, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of great transition:

Studies of the displacement effect of gentrification that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s include the following: one national study estimated that between 1.7 and 2.4 million people were displaced by private redevelopment in 1979, consisting primarily of tenants, the poor and female-headed families; a study of New York City estimated that between 10,000 and 40,000 households were displaced annually by gentrification in the late 1970s; another study of nine revitalizing

neighborhoods in five cities found that 23 percent of tenants had been displaced over a two-year period. (Kirkland 20)

The catalyst for this increase in displacement in Hoboken during the same time was the change in municipal code, as Alan Skontra, a reporter for the Hoboken Patch, writes: “to render single room occupancy buildings illegal. Think of a boardinghouse where several people would each rent a room in a building and share a kitchen” (Skontra). These buildings were usually the most decrepit and rundown, with landlords refusing to upgrade amenities. The mostly male-rented rooms were flophouses. Rather than forcing landlords to upgrade their buildings or update the municipal code, “politicians and land developers acted together to eliminate the SROs” (Skontra). In other urban enclaves, SRO regulation was kept in place. In Chicago during the early 1980s, the city passed an ordinance making it illegal to tear down SROs. Hoboken eliminated the single occupancy code altogether.

With the absence of SRO codes, many dock and railroad workers were pushed out of their meager rooms and forced to look for housing elsewhere after their landlords raised the price. Sadly, there was no affordable housing for these people and they found themselves living on the streets. Geoff Curtiss, the Episcopal Reverend who ran the homeless shelter in Hoboken during this time said:



A graffiti artist tags the sentiments of many Hoboken residents. Photo Credit: Nora Jacobsen

“They would wander from church to church asking for help. It became clear that there was a tremendous need to respond to these persons who were living in Hoboken and were now being displaced” (Skontra).

The homeless shelter was a welcome respite for these newly homeless men and women. Even so, the city pushed back and attacked the shelter as an illegal hotel. Displacing the low

income minorities was not enough for Hoboken politicians and developers. They wanted to fully eradicate these people, and the shelter posed a problem in accomplishing this goal. Skontra writes. “Then Mayor Steve Cappiello said the clergy coalition was operating the shelter as an illegal hotel that was breaking residential zoning laws. Using the same law that rendered SROs illegal, the city sued the coalition to close the shelter” (Skontra). The shelter proved to be a contentious battle ground that saw the developers and politicians abuse their power and money to attack long-time Hoboken residents.

The church eventually won the lawsuit, but the lines were clearly drawn by developers who wanted to make Hoboken an upwardly mobile community akin to the thriving neighborhoods across the Hudson in Manhattan. What many did not realize at the time was that the long-time Born and Raised members of the community, both residential and businesses, banded together, surprising the political powers. Many residents of Hoboken saw friends or even relatives forced to live on the streets or in the parks. Most saw the practice of arresting the homeless and dropping them outside city limits in Jersey City or Weehawken as inhumane: “Many businesses on Washington Street realized this was a much better way of taking care of people who were down and out than just putting them in the back of a police cruiser, and driving them to the border and saying don’t ever walk in Hoboken again, which is what the police were doing” (Skontra). The homeless were now given a chance to stay in Hoboken at the shelter rather than being forced to the city limits by the police.

There was an obvious concerted effort on the Cappiello administration to marginalize the homeless and minority population. After all, it was much easier to get developers to invest in a Hoboken that was devoid of crime. That is how they spun it. But they also made sure to get rid of the poor, regardless of their supposed criminal activities. Hunnewinkel adds:

The city administration was very much on the other side of our efforts. The city officials saw opportunity when the Federal Government offered money to rejuvenate inner cities. Perhaps, once the gentrification began, it was hard to control. There was a lot of money to be made in those days. The City Administration was very unhappy with our efforts. We had numerous meetings with them but really nothing changed. The City lacked the will or determination to demand more from the land owners and developers.

Hunnewinkel says that the administration “lacked the will,” however, I believe that they made a concerted effort to avoid any and all confrontations with the developers. Why would they bite the hand that is literally giving them millions of dollars? The fires were a means to a lucrative end.

The tragedy of the whole arson fire epidemic in Hoboken during the 1980s is the loss of life, mainly child life, but it is also the fact that not a single person was brought to justice for these crimes. Giving a voice to these victims is one of the main goals of this dissertation.

Morrie, McCarthy and the Inspiration in Between

An All-Right Town is the culmination of my fascination with Hoboken folklore as much as it is a culmination of my studies at Drew. In this creative dissertation, I took many of the authors I came across in my coursework and tried to emulate and integrate their styles in my own prose.

My biggest inspiration, and an author whom I wish I could even remotely come close to emulating, is Cormac McCarthy. I took Bob Ready’s “Blood America” class and was tasked with presenting the first half of *Blood Meridian* to the class. When I started the book, I read probably five pages, set it down on my nightstand and cried myself to sleep at the thought of getting through the book, let alone presenting it. The language was difficult, it had a western setting, and

the main character did not even have a damn name! There was nothing about those first five pages that spoke to me, a city boy from Hoboken who had never ventured toward the western part of this country. I said a few prayers, had dictionary.com permanently on my cell phone, and started to meander my way through the book.

As I became accustomed to McCarthy's lack of punctuation and sophisticated vocabulary, I began to realize just how brilliant he was. I realized that the lack of punctuation actually forced me, the reader, into a sort of breathless state. When I was trying to create the fire scenes in *An All-Right Town*, my affinity for McCarthy's lack of punctuation became evident. One scene in *Blood Meridian* epitomizes his style. In it, the Kid witnesses a group of Comanche Indians descending a hill to attack the scalpers:

A legion of horrors, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained wedding veil and some in headgear or crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (McCarthy 59)

This *one* sentence encapsulates the view from below and shows both the fear and awe that the Kid has of these Indians as they drive down that hill. McCarthy peppers these sentences throughout *Blood Meridian* as well as his other novels such as *No Country for Old Men* and *All the Pretty Horses*.

I fell in love with his style as soon as I was able to understand it. As readers, we know there should be punctuation marks in this sentence. But McCarthy leaves them out. Given a sentence this long, the reader is unable to pause or catch his breath. By the time we get to “jerks and drools,” we sense the racing heartbeat of the men who witness these warriors descending the hill. I used this technique in the fire scenes in the novel. I want the readers to feel breathless, almost as if they themselves are breathing in the smoke that Fitzzy and the other men breathe. McCarthy’s writing style inspired me to at least attempt this.

What I found most interesting during the writing process was that a novel about scalp hunters in 1850s Texas and Mexico served as the biggest inspiration for a novel about Hoboken, New Jersey in the 1980s. I found many similarities between the Glanton Gang and the firemen crew. In the end, they are all trying to find their place in the world and are often overwhelmed by where they fit. The Kid, in *Blood Meridian*, never finds his place and ends up engulfed in Holden’s clutches.

In *An All-Right Town*, Fitzzy ends without truly finding his place and losing the one place he thought he belonged. The characters struggle to find home was the common thread in both books.

When I first wrote the beginnings of this story, I struggled with deciding whether or not to write it in first or third person point of view. I found that my narrative voice as Fitzzy in first person seemed forced and writing his thoughts down limited me. I could not find the voice I was

searching for at all. When I rewrote the story in third-person perspective, I realized that I was speaking for Hoboken itself, almost as if the town were the narrator, dispensing its anecdotes on Jesus the Bum and Carmine Bacala. Fitzy, although my protagonist, was a small part of the whole that made up Hoboken. The problem was that I am more comfortable writing in first-person point of view in general. In many of the short stories that I wrote in my time at Drew, my first person narratives always had what I considered a “bite” to them. I attribute this to the influence writers such as Junot Diaz had on me as a reader. His short story collection *Drown*, and his full-length work *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, had a huge impact on my writing. Even though his stories were of Hispanic neighborhoods and culture, the way he described certain events (such as a family barbecue or Quinceanera) made them familiar to me even though my only experiences with Spanish culture were through friends. When Diaz says,

You must learn her.
 You must know the reason why she is silent. You must trace her weakest spots.
 You must write to her. You must remind her that you are there. You must know
 how long it takes for her to give up. You must be there to hold her when she is
 about to. You must love her because many have tried and failed. And she wants to
 know that she is worthy to be loved, that she is worthy to be kept.
 And, this is how you keep her.” (Diaz, *This is How You Lose Her*)

I see Fitzy looking at Marie this way, describing her eyes in detail and the way her mouth and eyebrows` move based on her moods. I avoided making their relationship a big deal in the book because I thought it took away from the main plot lines but it was important to me to establish the fact that Fitzy loves and appreciates his wife. As the story progressed, I realized it was more than just a story of gentrification and money. At its core, this story is one of family relationships, tragedy, and a modicum of triumph.

In addition to Diaz and McCarthy, another author who influenced my writing is Mitch Albom. I first came into contact with Albom the author through the memoir *Tuesdays with*

Morrie. I watched Albom on the Sports Reporters every Sunday on ESPN yet had no idea he was a best-selling author of books unrelated to sports. I used Albom's relationship with Morrie Schwartz, as well as my own life experiences with my grandfather, to create the relationship between Fitzy and his grandfather. "Grandpar" in the book is a much rougher version of Morrie but the advice and love that he has for Fitzy is similar to what Morrie displays for Mitch and pretty much anyone else he comes in contact with. In one scene in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie is trying to eat tomatoes and an egg salad sandwich. Here, Albom says, "I watched him struggle with his form, picking at a piece of tomato, missing it the first two times-a pathetic scene, and yet I could not deny that sitting in his presence was almost magically serene" (*Tuesdays With Morrie* 112). I wanted to capture the same comedy and pity that this scene elicited for me when I described the Fitzgerald family eating and Grandpar losing his eggs at the end of the fork repeatedly.

A later work of Albom's, *For One More Day*, holds a special place in my personal, professional, and educational life. This piece of fiction is about a failed baseball player whose near death experience allows him to spend one more day with the ghost of his deceased mother. The story itself is full of regret and unfulfilled potential but Chick Benetto, the protagonist, finds peace in the end. His father walked out on him when he was a child and his mother raised him until he was drafted into Major League Baseball. His father returns to serve as his agent, and he distances himself from his mother. I grew up without my father, and my mother served both roles. My mom actually gave me *For One More Day* as a birthday present and wrote on the inside of the jacket as her card. There are times in this book when Chick is speaking to his mother with the same words I said to my mom. I tried to convey some of this struggle in the relationship between Fitzy and Lori. There is conflict between Fitzy, Lori and Marie in that Fitzy

is sometimes caught in the middle, especially when he dreams about living in one of the developer's condos. When Benetto says, "Sticking with your family is what *makes* it a family" (*For One More Day* 183), I think of the Fitzgerald family and what I put them through during the novel. In the end, they remain together.

The arson aspect of my book was also something that needed extensive research. John Finucane's fiction, *When the Bronx Burned* gave me perspective on what the firemen faced during an actual fire as well as life in the company. Finucane's story centers around an arson-for-profit scheme during the 70s in the South Bronx in which developers paid local gangs to set fire to buildings on Charlotte Street. Finucane's protagonist, Jackie Mulligan helped me shape Fitzy into his own original character. George Hall's *Ring of Fire*, a fictional portrayal of arsonists in San Francisco, helped give me perspective on the arsonists thought process, especially the materials used.

On one of my many visits to the Hoboken Fire Museum, I came across a *Practical Fire and Arson Investigation* by John O'Connor and David Redsicker. This book became my go-to reference for understanding and explaining how to recognize an arson fire.

This text is a clinical textbook for most Fire Science classes. Many aspects of this book inspired my writing of the actual fire scenes. Eddie Rivera's death is mainly caused by what O'Connor describes as the "chimney effect":

Since there is a natural tendency for flame and heated gases to rise, any structural element that enhances this upward movement serves as a natural chimney. Such enhancement is called the "chimney effect" (see "Building Components" in Chapter 3). Because they intensify the fire's upward movement, these areas are often deeply charred and exhibit flame and burn damage many times in excess of that at the point of origin. (22)

The apartment building has a center hall staircase, I used the chimney effect to show how fast, and hot the fire ascended to Rivera's location. Fitzzy, who is standing at the bottom of the staircase is actually in a relatively safe area, while the accelerant helped the fire move upwards at such a rapid pace that Eddie is beyond saving.

The clinical definitions of fire temperature, and, more important, fire and smoke color were also beneficial in the descriptions of the flames and smoke that engulfed the buildings.

Table 4.1 from the text breaks down the smoke and flame color based on the particular accelerant:

Table 4.1 Smoke and Flame Colors for Certain Fuels		
Smoke	Color Flame	Color Fuel
Gray to brown	Red to yellow	Wood/paper/cloth
Black	Red to white	Gasoline
White to gray	Yellow to white	Benzine
Black to brown	Yellow to white	Turpentine
Black	Dark red to orange-yellow	Kerosene
Black	Blue white to white	Naphtha
<i>Note:</i> Overall the lighter the color of the flame, the higher the temperature. The significance of the color of smoke and flames in a fire should be considered with the time at which they were observed.		

I tried to incorporate the dark red to orange yellow coloring of the smoke and flames for a majority of the fires because kerosene was cheap to purchase and burned hotter and faster than gasoline. Plus, multiple cans of kerosene were found at many of the actual fires. When I first started writing about the fires, all smoke was black. It never occurred to me that there could be white or even brown colored smoke. At night when a fire burns, the smoke looks the same. I have witnessed a few large fires in my life, and the smoke and flames usually blended together as my breathing was hindered. Fireman, however, are trained to recognize the colors of the smoke and of the flames because as quick clues to where they should look for the origin of the fire and whether or not there is an accelerant in place. Smoke is not always black and flames are not

always yellow. I really wanted to try to incorporate the blue and white flames somehow, but small town landlords and arsonists in Hoboken at the time probably did not have the funds to purchase Naphtha.

I basically took a crash course in Fire Science as well as the physicality of being a fireman. I was able to participate in two experiences that gave me great perspective on the job. The first was training in the test course for the physical portion of the fireman's exam in Hoboken. The department rents out a warehouse and creates an obstacle course designed to test the strength of its participants.

I started the course by sprinting to the first obstacle, which was to fit a hose to a fire hydrant. As soon as I started sprinting, a horn went off and I was instructed to start over. Apparently, running is not allowed on the course and I was told by one of the instructors that most fireman will *never* sprint into a building. Only a brisk walk is allowed because it gives a fireman time to think and assess the situation. It made no sense to me at the time, but as I researched more and watched films of firefights, I saw that, of everyone present, the firemen appeared the least panicked.

I speed-walked to the hydrant and connected the hose--not so bad. I then had to walk over to a pulley system and pull down a rope that was connected to a 150-pound body dummy. Again, I go to the gym--not so bad. After a few more obstacles of varying difficulty (dragging the body 100 feet) I then came to what was by far the most grueling portion of the test. I had to carry the 150-pound dummy over my shoulders, and walk up three steps, and down three steps. The task was to do this 12 times. It was horrible. By the seventh round, I was spent. But I managed to finish this part and head to the last section, which was a crawl through a blackened out tunnel of roughly 200 feet.

I ended with a respectable time and most of my buddies who were also training at the time for the actual test gave me a good ribbing about almost passing out on the steps. But I knew I could not write a fire scene with fireman sprinting, or jumping or any other movement that would be nearly impossible with over 45 pounds of gear on. I knew that even a veteran fireman would feel some exhaustion from the physicality of the job, and I felt that physicality first hand.

The second experience was an actual stay in one of the firehouses and a ride-a-long on one of the calls. I was able to stay at the firehouse on 14th Street in Hoboken, the main firehouse in the novel. I watched as men I grew up with hung out with each other by sitting in lawn chairs outside the garage. I sat out there with my friends Joe Radigan, Josh “Chupa” Pinero, and Louie Turso for a while and the conversations went from the benign (“These t-shirts Ralph got us are too tight”), to the dirty (“I fucked her in her bathroom while her kids were sleeping on the couch”) to the political (“Zimmer [the mayor of Hoboken] is a fucking cunt trying to cut our numbers down”). I really liked the banter and wanted to make it a main stay of the novel.

I ate dinner with them. We ordered Biggies and I had to go pick up the order because I was the “Rookie.” Some guys worked out, some napped and it was not until around 11:30 at night that we got the actual call. This was the only time I ever saw them run the entire night. It was organized chaos. I was disappointed that there was not a fireman’s pole (not that I would have slid down it; I hate heights). But they were jogging down the stairs and got dressed in what seemed like an instant. We climbed on the truck and Chupa drove (I played baseball with Chupa and Joe in high school, and Chupa is one of the inspirations for Eddie Rivera in the novel).

Everyone was pretty loose on the ride. The call was not anything serious: a small electrical fire in the projects that was extinguished by the time we got there. I wondered if their attitudes or demeanors would have been different if it was a serious fire that they were going to. I

asked Joe and Chupa about this and they both gave me similar answers. They would probably be joking on that type of ride as well. No sense in moping around before there is anything to mope about they said. What was interesting though was the way they described the ride home sometimes.

On tough calls, and both have not been fireman all that long (two years for Joe, six for Chupa) the ride is silent as they listen to the siren wail. They say they blare the siren on the ride home so they get back faster and can decompress from what they just went through.

“Why don’t you talk about it on the ride, when it’s fresh?” I asked.

“It’s kinda like when we played baseball remember?” Chupa said. “When you win, you cheer and chant as you get back into town. When you lose, you’re quiet, no joking. No one wins with a bad fire.”

Connecting the Dots Through Liberal Arts

My journey through the Arts and Letters program showed me that nearly all humanities content is connected. This is one of the main principles that I take to work with me every day as an administrator in a public high school. Each discipline is dependent on the other. I often find it fascinating and frustrating how the departments in my school are disjointed from one another. Social studies teachers refuse to understand that they are also literature teachers because there is no history without literature. English teachers often marginalize the historical background of a novel in order to get through the curriculum and teach students themes and symbols in order to do well on standardized tests. I often implore my teachers to work together and learn from each discipline.

Drew taught me to appreciate the humanities and accept the interconnectedness of it all. A course in Holocaust Studies showed me how to write about oppression and displacement as I

found myself thinking of the Jewish ghettos when describing the slums of Hoboken. My courses in McCarthy and Tolkein inspired many of my landscape descriptions. Surprisingly, I feel that my water color painting class added the most to my writing because it opened my learning to a discipline that I both never experienced before and felt very insecure about. I had to pay attention to the windowpane detail of the buildings or the way the bricks chipped on the older brownstones because my paintings needed this definition as well.

The idea for this dissertation spawned in Robert Carnevale's Historical Fiction class. But I can honestly say that I had this topic on my mind from the moment I took my first writing class at Drew. Throughout my course work, I always found myself telling stories from Hoboken. As Dr. Ready always says, we write what we want to know. My first writing class at Drew was a memoir class taught by Bill Gordon, the first time that I was creatively forced to look back on parts of my life. Throughout that class, the town of Hoboken became a character of its own regardless of where or when my story took place. I wrote short stories in these courses that dealt with the interactions between my own family, especially my grandfather who passed away in 2012, and the families of many of my friends. I found myself going further and further back into Hoboken's history and the characters who make up the town. When I took Carnevale's class, I tried writing about historical events that ranged from WWII to the Chicago Cubs Steve Bartman Game (I needed to have some baseball somewhere in my writing). I found those topics somewhat hollow and the fact that I could not emotionally connect to the topic made the assignments just that, an assignment that I needed to complete rather than something I enjoyed.

During one of the workshops, the discussion leaned toward minor historical events, events that may not be mainstream but important nonetheless. I found it difficult to separate my own personal historical events with those of the major ones in society. If I thought of the

conversation I had with my mother when the World Trade Center was attacked, I made my story about the attacks rather than my life event. Eventually, I worked on events that had no major historical context that could be found in a history textbook. The most interesting story from my childhood, the one that has shaped the current landscape of Hoboken, were the arson fires of the late 70s and early 80s. I started researching the topic and found a wealth of information, including a documentary titled “Delivered Vacant” by Nora Jacobsen. I was hooked. Not only did the documentary show video of what Hoboken was like during my childhood, it totally captured the tension and animosity toward politicians that even seven-and eight-year-olds knew about.

I wrote a short story, roughly twenty-five pages, about a fireman from Hoboken who worked during this time and as I wrote it, I knew it should be longer. I was about ten pages in when I realized I was writing this story to get to the end because I needed to see where it could go. The best part about this process was that the story itself was terrible, even though my classmates took it easy on me in the critique. I was happy because my initial feelings about the topic and the story itself were correct; I could expand and flesh out the details. I took the story apart after the semester and began to get deeper into my research. First, I went to the Hoboken Fire Museum and took notes on the uniforms worn during the 80s. I read through the training manuals and made copies of the arson training especially I called my friends who are current fireman and arranged for a ride along. My big break came when I stumbled upon an online archive from the watch group *Por Le Gente* that kept tabs on the landlords in town. The archive was on the Hoboken Historical Museum website. It had every newspaper article about the fires, rent control, displacement and rallies. I hit the jackpot because I was in the process of searching for all of these articles individually, so the website helped cut my research time in half.

I also found myself going back to Hoboken even though I now live in Clifton, NJ. I asked my uncle if I could work at our family liquor store delivering. I took notes on the architecture and the street routes (for reference when I had the firetruck rolling through town in the novel). The best part about this was the ability to meet and interact with the customers. I had worked at the store since I was 15 but I never looked at the people I delivered to the way I did that summer. Usually I remembered people by the tips they gave, now I tried to pay attention to how their houses looked when I went in to drop off the liquor. My favorite building was a converted hospital on Sixth Street off Willow Ave. This delivery was always the worst because Martin, the customer, would only give a dollar tip and would answer the door in a towel. The building is beautiful but has no elevator, and the stairs are in the center with balconies on all five floors. I knew this building needed to be a part of my story somehow, whether it was where the main character lived or where a main fire scene took place. I ended up choosing it as the location for Rivera's death.

Overall, this work is a culmination of my writing classes at Drew as well as the other liberal arts classes that were more research based. The amount of research, for me, far outweighed any amount of research I have ever done for any academic paper. I also found that I utilized many of the skills I learned throughout my coursework. I had Cormac McCarthy in the back of my mind when I wrote the fire scenes and Carnevale's advice when writing about history. I found myself hearing Liana Phieler's instructions during my water color classes as I described the setting of Hoboken. Through it all, I heard Bob Ready's voice--"Get it right."

Chapter One

Edward Fitzgerald sees the flames spitting from a window. A line runs down the left side giving scales to the smoking building and illuminating the cold January night. Witnesses cling together across the street as a suitcase engulfed in flames hits the ground and explodes burnt clothes onto the small lawn. Screaming residents try to escape to the street below. The floors have already caved through. A man throws himself from the fifth floor balcony and pieces of skin flick off to land seconds after his body smashes onto the concrete sidewalk.

Sean Ryan has the hydrant loose and the hose attached and hands Fitzgerald the hose as the water lazily pumps through as though it knows this attempt is futile. A black woman emerges from a third floor window, her skin a color Fitzgerald knows no human should have. She holds a blanket or bag ablaze in her hands. Her eyes wild, she is not in that apartment, but somewhere else. He points the hose up to this woman, momentarily extinguishing the package before she throws it down directly at him.

He drops the hose and catches the smoking bundle in his arms. Ryan rushes to the hose, curses, but Fitzgerald doesn't hear him. He looks at the blankets and feels something rigid underneath. The blanket was pink, he can see from the outline, but now is as charred as the woman's skin. He pulls back the blanket and reveals a blackened pink bow attached to the burnt hair of an infant. Her body oozes with fresh wounds and her chest convulses. She is nearer to death than life but Fitzgerald lays her on the sidewalk. He places his lips onto her burnt mouth and tries to breathe into the inferno where her lungs must have been. But there is no life left in this little girl.

As Fitzgerald releases his lips, skin sticks and rips from her mouth and hangs from his upper lip. He takes off his glove, falls back against the truck, wipes his mouth, his hand shaking in front of him, the upper lip wiggling in his hands.

Since coming on the job in '74, he has seen his fair share of images that, at first kept him up at night. There was the old man on 7th and Adams, who started a grease fire as he was trying to lift the pan with one hand and walk on his cane with the other. His arm and hand looked like a marshmallow left on the fire too long, smooth and white on the palm but blackened and blistered on top. That was the first time that Fitzzy actually saw pain. He has seen bodies wrapped up in body bags as the discolored, map like face disappears underneath the zipper. The last time is no different than the next time, and even this moment, a moment in which the average Joe may need hundreds of hours of therapy to get over, is pushed into the vault of Fitzzy's.

"Fitzzy!" Ryan screams. "Get off your ass and get the hose!"

Fitzzy returns to his post and continues to spray the now flameless building with water, nothing left but burning cinder. No survivors. There are never any survivors. Empty gasoline cans or bottles of kerosene cover the floor of what used to be the back door hallway in what used to be the basement apartment for what used to be a family of four. When the smoke clears, twenty-one are dead, mostly children who were asleep.

"Bastards did it again," Ryan says. He picks up a charred plastic bottle and tosses it aside. "This is different, Fitzzy, this isn't the projects that nobody cares about."

"We don't know who did this, Sean." Fitzzy fights the urge to agree with him.

"Bullshit. For Christ's sake, Eddie, we used to play here as kids in Carla and Mikey's apartments."

Fitzzy turns towards the building. The blackened metallic 131 number dangles from the face of the brick building. He finds some solace in knowing that Carla and Mikey moved out last year.

“Let it go, Sean. We got work to do.” Fitzzy kicks away a kitchen sink faucet as he looks for any sign that someone may be alive under the ash. He can still taste the charred flesh on his mouth.

Ryan doesn't press the subject. There is no use arguing the possible culprits when there are remains to be found. They find the bodies amid the rubble and help the EMTs place them in black leather bags before they ride silently back to the firehouse.

As they turn down onto Observer Highway and approach the firehouse, Fitzzy leans forward, grabs hold of the inner handle and swings onto the small platform before he jumps off the engine. He and Jimmy Morelli guide the truck safely into the garage. He unbuttons his jacket and hangs it outside his locker to dry overnight, the yellow and black coat still warm from the blaze. A heavy jacket, tonight it seems to weigh even more. His size 14 boots do not fit in the locker, so he leaves them standing against the wall. Every man in the company completes their undress in silence as the 6 o'clock hour creeps near. Eddie Rivera, whose locker is next to Fitzzy's, takes out a Roberto Clemente rookie card from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“You take that card on every trip?” Fitzzy says. He pulls on his socks.

“Every trip, Fitz. He's my good luck charm. I know nothing will happen if Roberto is with me. Greatest baseball player that ever played, Fitz. And don't give me that bullshit about Mantle or DiMaggio. They couldn't shine Clemente's shoes.” He takes the card and kisses it before putting it back in the jacket pocket. “He keeps me safe.”

“You know he died in a plane crash right?”

“That’s why Puerto Ricans don’t fly.”

Almost sunrise, Fitzgerald crashes on the couch in the lounge area to catch as much of a nap as he can before he clocks out at 8:00 am and walks home.

Even in the winter with snow on the ground, he keeps his fire boots on and trudges home, clearing his head of the calamity of the night. He likes the 6pm-8am shift the most because of these walks home. Even on the weekend at 8am Hoboken is alive with the energy of the upcoming day.

It’s about a nine-block walk to his apartment at 700 Park Ave. Sometimes he takes Washington Street straight down and stops at Bagel-O for a bacon, egg and cheese if he’s hungry. Washington Street is what it’s named, but the Hobokenites call it “The Ave.” It is the hub of town, where every parade takes place and where bars like Stinky Sullivan’s or the Far Side reside on every corner from 14th street to 1st. Today he cuts down and over to Bloomfield Ave. and walks in front of what is making Hoboken such a hot commodity, the multitude of brownstone buildings. Fitzzy doesn’t understand the clamor over these brick buildings aside from the fact that they are decently fire resistant. They are ugly to him, with their deteriorating brick and mismatched paint on the windows. He never understands how people can paint pale green on the windows right next to brown brick. The whole building looks like the inside of a baby’s diaper. He passes one on 8th Street that has been completely gutted, and even with no walls the place looks small. How do they fit a whole family in there? He crosses through Fourth Street Park and sees Jesus the Bum sleeping in the Gazebo. They say he was a big time banker on Wall Street whose wife cheated on him. They say he got fired because he was depressed and now panhandles to get by. He used to live up in Castle Point, they say. It’s gotta be like 20 degrees out here, and bearded Jesus pulls the raggedy blanket over his chin.

The steps to 700 Park are iced over. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters as he picks up the metal shovel outside the landlord’s (who forgot to throw salt down) basement door. At 6’3, the chopping of ice is a small task for Fitzgerald who, with his aunt and uncle, mother, and grandfather, take slightly more pride in their apartment building than most tenants. 700 Park might as well be Fitzgerald Manor with three generations living throughout the six-unit building.

His grandfather Joe is awake, and Fitzzy hears the bang of Joe’s wheelchair into the kitchen cabinets as he passes the apartment on the second floor and then his mother scream something from the living room and a plate crashes to the floor. Fitzzy thinks better on saying good morning and double jumps the stairs to his apartment on the third floor. He is sure everyone is sleeping in this Saturday morning, so he takes his boots off outside and leaves them against the wall in the hallway. It was an unwritten rule while growing up in Hoboken that no one ever wore shoes on a home’s carpet. Absent-minded children were usually reminded of this fact with a wooden spoon while absent minded adults were escorted out of the house.

He opens the door to the apartment slowly. Marie used to wait up to make sure he was safe, but over the last few years her nerves were quieted by the strong confidence of being married to the most respected fireman in the company. He creeps through the hallway toward the kid’s room. His eleven-year-old son, Jack, snores underneath a Reggie Jackson poster with his arm hanging off of his bed while his younger sister, Madeline, sleeps silently on her back under the covers across the room. The shade of their window casts just enough light for Fitzzy to see them sleeping peacefully. He turns to close the door when Maddy opens her eyes.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetie, go back to sleep, I’m home safe.”

“We heard the sirens, was it bad?”

“No, sweetie, everything was ok.” The baby’s burned face.

She removes her blankets and clumsily waddles over to her father. She is seven years old but has the demeanor and appearance of a girl much younger. She hugs Fitzy around the waist and nuzzles the side of her face into his stomach. He pats her hair and is about to pick her up when Jack gives out a loud snort, waking himself up.

“Jesus, what time is it?”

“It’s time for you to go back to bed, buddy.” Fitzy picks up Maddy and places her back in her bed.

“Daddy, I don’t want to go to school Monday. You’re off, can I stay home with you?” Maddy says in a whine that, a few years from now, will be annoying. But at seven, it’s cute when she acts like Daddy’s little girl.

“No, Maddy, you have to go to school. No days off. Don’t you want that perfect attendance record?”

“Yea, I do,” she answers, crossing her arms across her chest and shrugging, “but stupid Megan Thompson is going to be there again, I hate her.”

“Woah, woah, the Fitzgeralds don’t hate anyone, we just strongly dislike people,” he says with a smirk. The joke doesn’t catch.

“Ok, why do you hate Megan Thompson?”

“Oh god, can’t we do this in the morning?” Jack says, angrily throwing his head down on his pillow.

“Megan Thompson said that the Yuppies were going to take over our town, and everyone would lose their jobs.”

“Megan Thompson doesn’t...”

“And then she said that the firemen in the town are horrible and that they are letting the buildings burn on purpose and I said not my daddy, he would never let that happen.”

“Well that’s true, but...”

“And then she made fun of my hair.”

“Well,” Fitzzy smiles at her, “at least we got to the bottom of the problem.” He gets up from the corner of the bed. “You just let that Megan Thompson talk her head off. And if she doesn’t stop, call your brother.”

Jack turns his head over at the mention of his brotherly responsibilities.

“And you.” Fitzzy turns in his direction. “You always look out for your little sister.”

“Not this again...,” he says through the muffled pillow.

“Yes, this again. She is your only sister and you need to look out for her,” he says, almost as if he was reading off of a script. “When your mom and I are gone she’s all you’ll have.”

“What about Uncle James and Uncle Matt?” Jack asks knowing the reply would eliminate his two immature uncles.

“Like I said,” he sticks his hand out in front of him for emphasis, “she’s all you’ll have.”

“Ok, Dad, whatever you say.”

“Good night, guys.” He backs out of the room and heads toward his bedroom. His wife is asleep when he opens the door. His dog Jake is also fast asleep under the covers huddled up in the nook of Marie’s knee, his snout poking through the bottom of the blanket. Fitzzy slowly creeps to his side of the bed, trying to make his 260 pound frame as quiet as possible. He’d gotten much more coordinated over the years, deftly averting crystal glassware, picture frames; even the poor dog was fair game for his feet. He is a mammoth, and mammoths can only move so gracefully.

He makes it to his side but plops down on the bed, causing Marie to bounce from her sleep and Jake to jump down and run out of the room.

“Oh, Eddie, is that you?” she says, still burdened with sleep but awake enough for sarcasm.

“I’m sorry, honey. It’s been a long night.”

She sits herself up and adjusts her nightgown that is unintentionally giving Fitzy an eyeful of cleavage but he is too tired to even make himself notice.

“What happened?”

Almost immediately, as if he was aching for someone he could talk to, whom he trusts with his feelings, he spills the entire night’s events, stopping at the incident with the child. He wears the fear of this moment on his face and looks her in the eyes. They are eyes that see past the rugged bulky frame that he presents in public. He always gets lost in her eyes and they give her away. They are her anatomical mood ring. Sometimes he sees a green rim with specks of yellow and orange when she is happy and the corner of her eyes crinkle when she is drunk and smiles. Sometimes they are gray and she told him once that they are always gray when she needs him. Fitzy always thought she meant he clouded her judgement but he realized that he makes things crystal clear for her. Sometimes they are brown when she is angry or worried. They are brown tonight but remain the most beautiful thing Fitzy has ever seen and will ever see. He knows he can tell those eyes anything because they can keep secrets. He lets Marie bring his giant frame in closer to her body and lays his head on her stomach. Fitzy is crying now, his tears wetting Marie’s nightgown. It is a quiet cry, he doesn’t want to wake the kids, and he doesn’t want them knowing that he is capable of crying.

“It’s ok, baby. You did the best you could.”

He loves Marie for not needling him, for letting him get it out and be done with it without dwelling on what his emotions meant. They grew up together, hung out on the same stoops on Garden Street, were in the same class from grade school and all through high school, and probably would have gone to college together if Edward didn't get a baseball scholarship to Saint Peter's College. But even after all of those years of togetherness, they still want to rip each other's clothes off almost daily and this constant need for each other helps calm the fights and arguments that most couples get into. It isn't a fairy tale. It is normal.

"These fires just keep getting worse." Marie stares out of their bedroom window in the direction of the extinguished fire. "What is this the fourth one since '79?"

"Fifth, I think." He wipes away the remainder of his tears and sits up. "I can't even keep track anymore." Four large fires in three years does not sound like a lot, but four "suspicious" fires in three years does.

Marie gets out of bed and puts on her robe that hangs on the closet door above a full length mirror. She shivers and Fitzzy sees her eyebrows curl, worry making its way through her eyes and onto her face.

"How was the office today?"

"Boring. The only thing that happened was we got some new woman who just moved here come in. She was a real winner, let me tell you." She turns on the light but still keeps her face turned away from Fitzzy.

"Why? What was wrong with her?" He knows where this is going.

"Well, first off, she walks in wearing sneakers and a dress. Who wears sneakers and a dress? Like really? You can't just wear your shoes from work?" She is fully awake now and the

vibrancy with which she tells a story pushes the worry from her face as she sits back on the bed next to Fitzy.

“You were saying? Sneakers and whatnot,” Fitzy adds, hoping to politely get to the end of this conversation.

“Oh, yeah. So she comes in, and you know, she was pretty. I’m not going to pretend she wasn’t, and you could tell she was loaded.”

“Because she was pretty and wore sneakers?”

“No, smartass. You could just tell. She had expensive jewelry on and she just had that look.”

“You sound like every other person in this town when they see these Yuppies. I’m starting to hate that word.”

“Oh stop it, she was nice. She actually just moved here from the city. Her husband bought property here. He’s one of those.”

“One of what?”

“You know, a big-wig developer. They’re loaded.”

“What was her name?”

“Spelling, like the bee.”

“There’s a species of bee named Spelling?” Fitzy says.

“No, smartass. You know what I mean.”

Of course, he does know what she means and he knows the name. Across the street from the firehouse is an old factory just purchased by a man named Myron Spelling and his company, Skyline Development. A tanned face with ice-blue eyes, slicked-backed gray hair, and a smirk watches from a three foot poster pasted on the wooden fence that surrounds the construction site.

Growing up in Hoboken and working on Engine 3 since '74, Fitzzy has seen his hometown relatively unchanged until the last few years. In Carter's America, Hoboken was a slum, a filthy drug-and-crime ridden city that seemed to create more chaos than possible in its small mile square parameter. It was a mixture of Blacks, Puerto Ricans and old time Irish and Italians who lived no better economically than the minorities. There was no true minority in this town. But, even with the crime and unsanitary living conditions, this small town allowed its residents to feel close to one another. They were a family, and being from Hoboken meant something. There was grit, a toughness associated with living in such a place.

New businesses opened that competed with the likes of staples such as Fiore's Deli and Biggie's Clam Bar. And the prices were going up. There was never a financial divide in the city until the new generation started moving into the run-down apartments. And then it was the rundown apartments that became the problem. It became common practice for the native Hobokenites to ridicule the new Yuppies, a word that conjured suits, slicked back hair, BMWs, and children wearing cowboy boots while their parents pushed their strollers.

The reality of the situation was that these newcomers, just like every generation's "immigrants" were looking for a place to call home. Fitzzy understood this fairly early on in the process. But to tell others who were born and raised not to protect their town and be wary of outsiders, a tribe-like mentality that has no business in the modern world, is nearly impossible.

"I know that name, Spelling," Fitzzy says. "Her husband bought the building across from the firehouse."

"Yeah, well, she was nice, but definitely a piece of work if you ask me. She was arguing with Dr. Carmody about her diagnosis like she went to medical school. You should have seen his face!"

Marie continues her tirade against Mrs. Spelling, someone she just met but is already forming a full-bodied opinion about. Fitzzy is too tired to explain how unfair she is being. It has been a long night and he is glad he went to church last night before his shift began. Beyond the exhaustion of fighting the fire, he still can taste burnt skin on his lips, no matter how many times he washes his mouth.

Chapter Two

After sleeping through most of Sunday aside from dinner, Fitzy is up early on Monday, the second day of his three days off, helping Marie get the kids ready for school before she goes to Dr. Carmody's office. Our Lady of Grace School is only a few blocks away, but Fitzy likes walking them when he has the chance. Jack is at the age he wants to do everything on his own and Fitzy respects that, but he loves seeing the look on Maddy's face when he waves goodbye as she walks through the school doors.

"Remember what we talked about the other night, right, Mads?"

"Yes, Daddy. Call Jack if Megan says anything to me."

"Good, you hear that, Jack?" Fitzy says to an already down the stairs Jack.

"Daddy, I can't get my gloves on." Maddie smiles. He kneels down and fixes the inside-out gloves, puts them on Maddie's hands and then swings her up on his back, bouncing down the stairs as Maddie's laugh echoes through the hallways.

With Maddie in tow, Fitzy races past Jack, who is halfway down the block. He slows down and Maddie jumps off as Jack catches up.

"Don't tire yourself out, Jacky. You don't want to be beat for the game tonight." Fitzy sees the expression on Jack's face change at the mention of the game. The Biddy League Championship pits the Catholic School League Champion against the Public School League Champion. By default, it also pits the white kids whose parents can afford to send them to a Catholic school against the black and Hispanic population of the town. Jack is nervous, Fitzy can tell.

“Listen, Jack.” Fitzzy looks him directly in the eyes as the line to go in the building starts to move. “They think you’re scared, they think they are gonna wipe the floor with you tonight. And if you let them know you’re scared, that’s what is gonna happen.”

“But Richie Valdez can dunk, Da’. He’s my age and he can dunk!”

“So what? You can pass and you can shoot. You get two points no matter how you put it in the basket.” Fitzzy feels a lump in his throat at the thought of a sixth grader dunking. “Listen, I know you’re gonna think about it all day in school but try to forget about it until after. There’s nothing you can do until seven o’clock tonight.”

Jack shakes his head in agreement and walks into school with Maddy right behind him.

On his way back home, Fitzzy stops at the General Store across from O.L.G. to pick up the Jersey Journal. Last night’s fire is all over the front page:

21 DEAD IN APARTMENT BLAZE

That fire was too hot, and, although the investigation is ongoing, it is dubbed “suspicious.” He hates that word. It never amounts to anything. Call it like it is. It’s arson, and even though he is no arson investigator, the inside of those walls burned faster than in almost any other fire. At least this time they didn’t just leave the gas cans in the bedroom.

The last fire on 14th street was also “suspicious”, even though it was clearly an accelerated fire. The arsonists actually left the gas cans in the apartment. The whole place burned in minutes, and by the time they got there it was more cleanup than fighting. Three months later the building was demolished and new construction by Skyline was underway.

The deceased are named in the final paragraph, last is ten-month-old Cynthia Rodriguez. He folds the paper and puts it under his arm.

When he gets back to the apartment, there is a U-Haul parked across the street in front of Weinstein's Liquor Store. It's only the 21st of January so it is a little early for someone to be moving out unless they were evicted, but there have been tons of moving trucks all over town on any given day of the week. Someone moves out, that apartment doesn't stay vacant for long. Fitzzy wonders who was on their way in or out when he sees his landlord, Mickey Pearsall holding one end of a couch and his 20-year-old son Billy guiding the other side out of 700 Park.

"Need a hand, Mick?"

"Oh, thank God, I'm too old for this shit," Mickey basically throws the end of the couch at Fitzzy.

"What's goin' on, Mick? Billy got his own place or something?" Fitzzy lays the couch on the ledge as Billy drags it to the back.

"Don't drag it, you idiot! That couch costs more than you!" Mickey lights a cigarette.

"No, Fitz, the whole family is movin' into my other building on 9th street. Just bought it last month and it closed today. Bank gave me a hell of a time 'cause it was a cash buy. Gonna rent this one out to a handyman. This way, I don't have to pay for upkeep anymore."

Pearsall is always trying to make a buck or save a buck, sometimes even steal a buck if times got really hard, so this news does not surprise Fitzzy. He owns the Wilton Haus Bar on Newark Street and is known around town to cut the vodka with water. The Wilton Haus is a bigtime fireman bar and everyone knows which bottles to order a drink from and which ones to wash their hands with. But he allows the entire Fitzgerald clan to live together even though that means none of them are moving out any time soon. Even in rent-controlled Hoboken, tenants moving out is the quickest way to make some money for a landlord. The fact that the Wilton Haus never has a fire inspector enter the premises also helps.

“Not a bad idea, Mick. Do I know the guy?”

“I don’t know, maybe. His name is Ramon Ramirez, or Vargas, or some other spic name I can’t remember.”

“Vega? Ramon Vega?” Fitzzy hopes so because Ramon was good and Fitzzy does not want to have to try his hand at plumbing or electrical work if Pearsall hires someone else.

“Yeah, that’s it, Vega.”

“Oh, he’s a good guy. Works down at the high school, right?”

“I guess? I don’t know his fuckin’ life story, cump.” Pearsall uses one of the many words that are distinct to Hoboken’s own lexicon. Cump is a term of endearment derived from either the Italian cumpari but no one is totally sure where it comes from. But there are other words that sound foreign to an outsider. If you go to Piccolo’s you may be called a “bompey” if they think you are acting stupid or a “gomp” if you happen to be tall and somewhat goofy.

Fitzzy lets Pearsall and his son finish the move and heads upstairs to his grandfather Joe’s apartment. His mother, Lori, is most likely in the middle of cooking breakfast for the old man and Fitzzy figures he could avoid making a mess in his own kitchen.

The door is rarely locked, so he takes off his shoes and lets himself in.

“Da, you gotta take your pills! No argument!” His mother screams from the kitchen. He walks down the hallway and stands in the doorway as his grandfather gives her the finger while she gets his eggs.

“I saw that, old man!” Fitzzy says and they both jump.

“Eddie! You want some breakfast? Why am I even asking that question? Of course you want breakfast.” His mom fixes a plate as he sits down at the table next to his wheelchair bound grandfather.

“That was some fire the other night, Ed. You see the paper?” Scrambled eggs wiggle on his grandfather’s shaking fork and fall back to the plate.

“You’re tellin’ me. It was terrible. Did you see who the Yankees are trying to get?” Fitzzy tries to steer the conversation away from the fire and baseball is always a sure conversation starter with his grandpa.

“Carew! If those sons-a-bitches get Carew I am boycotting baseball!”

His grandfather was a former minor league pitcher in the Yankees organization back in the 30s and would always tell Fitzzy how much he hated it because it became a job. He hated the Yankees ever since his release but he also hated them because he was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan.

“They are ruining the game! First Jackson, now Carew. It’s not fair!”

“Yeah but Carew is a hell of a first baseman. It will be fun to watch.”

“You were a hell of a first baseman, Eddie.”

“Yeah, yeah, now you tell me I’m good? When I’m all washed up?” He elbows his grandfather in the side.

“No, I’m serious. I don’t know why you didn’t at least try out for some teams. That one shot you hit at Jaroschack was the farthest ball I ever saw hit. It had to be some kind of college record or something.”

“Saint Peter’s wasn’t exactly prime time baseball, Pops. No one really cared.”

“Well you were good, better than that bum Carew.” His grandfather gets the egg to stay on the fork and swallows a mouthful. A huge, toothless smile crosses his face.

“You guys comin’ to the game tonight?”

“We want to. It will be safe won’t it?” His mother rinses off a dish in the sink.

“It’s a basketball game Ma. I don’t think there will be any shoot outs over a Biddy Basketball game.”

“You never know. I was talkin’ to Rosemary and she said that she thinks there is going to be a lot of fights tonight, that those people play dirty. So I said, there are going to be cops there, Rosemary. It can’t get that out of hand. But you know Rosemary, if she gets something in her head you just can’t talk to her. Then she went on and on about Father George and how he came into the school when she was setting up for the winter dance yesterday to have some ‘Holy Water.’ What is she gonna’ say to a priest? No, you can’t have a drink? But he took a whole bottle of Johnny Walker, can you believe that? I just don’t....”

“So are you coming or not, Ma?” Fitzzy is not prepared to hear parish gossip for the rest of the morning.

His mother glares at him, the yellow outline of her green eyes give him “The Look.” The same one he used to get when he threw a tantrum as a child. “Yes, we are going. What time should we get there? Six-thirty?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I will be there by six to bring Jack for warmups so I will meet you outside.”

When Jack and Maddie get home at three, Fitzzy just wakes up from his nap. Jack runs to his room and puts on his uniform and sits at the edge of his bed.

“Jack?” Fitzzy leans against the door frame and looks at the ball of nerves that is his son.

“Yeah, Da?”

“You got three hours before the game. You don’t have to have your jersey on yet.”

“I’m ready. I want to be ready.”

“You nervous?”

“No.” Jack’s right leg bobs up and down relentlessly, the same as Fitzzy’s does while he’s in the fire truck on the way to a call.

“Just treat it as any other game, buddy. They may have more ability but you are a smart player.”

“It’s not that anymore.”

“What is it?”

“Da, I’m only ten years old and I can see it. I watched some of their games when they played before us.”

“See what?”

“The difference.”

“Well, I mean..” Fitzzy doesn’t know how to handle this.

“I’m not talking about them being black or Spanish, Dad. They don’t even wear the same jerseys. One kid plays in jean shorts, and dominates *in jean shorts*.”

“I’m confused, Jacky. What are you saying?”

“I look at my uniform and our team and we all have the same stuff. It’s nice stuff. We all have matching sneakers, new too, just for basketball. The kids on the Lakers, one kid, I literally saw the bottom of his shoe come off, and he played the rest of the game that way.”

Fitzzy understands. It disgusts him that his ten-year-old understands as well. He should be worried about the basketball game and not its social ramifications, even though they are significant. This is the first year that the Catholic School league has had a real chance to win the city title, something the Public Schools won the last 14 years.

“I just feel bad for them, Da.”

He is glad his son has compassion. But he doesn't want him to be soft and he knows none of the kids Jack is playing against will feel sorry for him.

"That's the last thing you should feel, Jack."

"That's messed up."

"No, what I mean is that, the last thing that team, those players, and that community want is your pity. Nothing would insult them more than you 'feeling bad' for them. Do you really want to know the best way to show how you are feeling toward them?"

"Yea.."

"Go out there tonight and bring everything you have at them. They will respect that. If you throw everything you have at them, and they beat you, there are no hard feelings. But if you show them pity, they will resent you, us, even more. You may not win but you will show them your respect for trying your hardest."

"And if we win?"

Fitzy hears his grandfather's words in his head. As he grew up without his dad, Fitzy's grandpa and mother played those roles. But sometimes a mom shouldn't be the one to show her son how to shave or how to compete in sports. His grandpa handled those duties.

He remembers sitting in the passenger seat of his grandfather's car with his black and grey ELKS Lodge 74 uniform on before his first little league game, a nervous chubby nine-year-old. His grandfather, a legend in Hoboken sports, made sure to walk him into the dugout so everyone knew he came from good stock.

Fitzy learned how to be a dad from a man that did it through two generations. As Fitzy grew into a dominant player, many of the coaches around the league complained that it wasn't fair and he started to feel that he was at fault. His grandfather squashed that idea quick and,

although he never had to face a situation with racial tension as Jack faces now, grandpa's words seem appropriate.

"You never feel bad about winning as long as that win came from hard work. As long as your opponent didn't lay down for you. If you win, you took it from a team that is good. You deserve it."

Jack shrugged.

Unsure of what else to say, Fitzzy puts his hand on Jack's shoulder and says, "Relax for a little, we are leaving at a quarter to six."

When Marie comes home, Fitzzy and Jack are ready to leave.

"What do you want me to make for later?"

"Chicken cutlets and mashed potatoes," Fitzzy and Jack say in unison as they leave.

They drive to Wallace school a few blocks away and Fitzzy parks his Camaro off the corner of 12th and Clinton. Mark Percontino, an old classmate, is on patrol tonight and Fitzzy knows his car will not be touched.

The six flights of metal stairs in the back of the school are icy, and Jack always slips on the way up, no matter how hard he tries to avoid it. There is no one in the gym aside from Jimmy Madigan, who refed the previous game tonight with Jo Jo Zabaleta. They are both cops and work for the recreation department to make some extra cash. They also hate each other because Jo Jo slept with Jimmy's wife.

"Fitzzy, hey how ya doin?" Jimmy runs over and shakes Fitzzy's hand.

"You pumped for tonight, Jack? Big game, the whole town is talkin' about it."

Jack nods.

Jimmy pulls Fitzzy away from the bench. "Fitz, I heard about what happened with that Rodriguez girl. So sad." Madigan puts his hand on his hips and shakes his head.

"Yeah. It was rough, but we all gotta deal with things right?" Fitzzy looks away. He doesn't want to make eye contact because he knows the conversation will continue. But Madigan continues anyway.

"Fitz, this wasn't a stubbed toe or a splinter. A kid died. A bunch of kids died."

"I know Jimmy. What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess. It's just gotta be hard. No? Dealing with seeing that."

"I try not to think...or talk about it." Fitzzy now looks Madigan in the eyes and Jimmy takes the hint. He turns back toward Jack, who is getting ready for warmups.

Jack takes his sweats off and grabs one of the practice balls. His coach, Bill Cunningham, comes in with his son Michael, who is also the team's starting center and Jack's best friend. He is 5'10 and weighs over 180 pounds. He is fat but at this age he is dominant simply because he is bigger than everyone else. Michael and Jack run Coach Bill's pick and roll offense to perfection, with the opposing players usually running into Michael and falling to the ground as Jack whizzes by for the easy layup. The two boys take turns shooting as more parents and fans for OLG arrive.

The door to the back swings open and a tall, hulking kid walks through the door. It is Richie Valdez. Fitzzy sees the look on the kid's face and wonders what would happen if Jack was under the basket when this kid drove to score. It wouldn't be pretty. He looks like a man. Almost six feet tall, he has the sinewy body of someone much older. If he smelled a weight room he might bulk up. When he takes off his bubble jacket, his muscles ripple under his dark skin. He looks determined and angry.

The rest of the Lakers and OLG players arrive and start their warmups. Marie and Maddy come in with his mom and grandfather. They wheel the old man next to the bleachers and sit in the front row. There are two sets of stands and the OLG side has to pass in front of the Laker fans. Each time an OLG fan passes, there are glares and silence from the Laker crowd. It is unnerving to Fitzzy because he works with or grew up with most of these people and everyone is usually friendly.

Fans watching the teams during warmups could easily see that there is no way this game is going to be close. The OLG players, aside from Michael, Jack, and Nicky Trentacosta, who was the team's best three point shooter, can't even make a layup. They steal glances at the Laker side as Valdez and Tyquan Bates trade dunks. Their point guard, who they all call "Cook" dishes out passes all over the court.

"These kids are unbelievable," Fitzzy whispers.

The first quarter is exactly what everyone in the gym expects. The Lakers jump out to a 20-8 lead as their fans whoop it up.

"They can't ball with us!" One male fan, who has to be about thirty, shouts. "White boys can't ball with us!"

"Steal the ball Richie! Steal it!" he shouts and, almost on cue, Valdez steals the ball and slams on the other end of the court.

The Laker fans erupt.

"That's not the only thing he'll steal!" Mario Cassetta, two rows behind Fitzzy, screams.

"What you say?" An overweight black woman stands up and points her finger at Mario.

"Shut up, you Moolie!" someone else shouts from the back of the stands. *Mulignan*, the Italian slang for nigger, is understood by everyone from the Mile Square City.

At this point, the two police officers from the center of the stands, escort the woman and Cassetta out of the gym.

With OLG down 25-11 at halftime, the Laker fans start celebrating. One fan brings out a boom box from under the stands and plays a few songs. When *Rapper's Delight* plays, a few fans get out of their seats and start dancing with their hands up. The Our Lady of Grace fans try not to watch but sit in silence, staring at the display.

Fitzy wants no part of this and goes to the vending machine at the far end of the court to get a soda. In front of him on the line is Eddie Rivera.

"Shit's getting outta hand here, Fitzy. They are kids, for Christ's sake."

"Only one more half, then we can all go home and relax."

"Yea, this game is a blowout anyway."

"Well, there's always the second half," Fitzy says.

"Ah, come on, muchacho. There's no chance here for your kids."

"Maybe Jack can give Roberto Clemente a kiss for good luck?" Fitzy says. He laughs this off but suddenly has the urge to punch Eddie in the face. He gets his Pepsi and waits outside the locker room for Jack to come out. When he finally passes, Fitzy pulls him aside.

"What's goin' on?"

"Nothin, Da. They're kickin' our ass."

"Watch your mouth." He knows this isn't the time for proper parenting. "You're right. But the question is, what are you gonna' do about it?"

Fitzy looks Jack directly in the eyes. No response.

"It's time to man up, son. Remember what I said about giving it your best shot? Remember what I said about not backing down?"

“Yeah.”

“Well, forget all that.”

Jack stares, confused.

“Well, their point guard, what’s his name, Cookie or something?”

“Cook, Da. They call him Cook.”

“Yeah, he’s manhandling you. I see it. Neither ref is gonna’ do anything about it, though.”

“So?”

“So, *you* need to do something about it. When he bumps you, bump him back. He elbowed you in the side in the first quarter and you looked for the ref. Give it right back to him. That’s the only way you’re gonna’ get back in this game.”

Jack looks at Fitzzy, astonished, but a small smile escapes the surprise.

With OLG down 25-13, Cook slashes down the lane for a layup as Jack slides over to take the charge. He extends his elbow into Jack’s chest as they both collide. No foul is called. The ball is still in the Laker possession when, underneath the basket while fighting for a rebound, Fitzzy sees Jack and Cook bumping each other for position. As the shot goes up, Jack bumps back once more, and when Cook comes back for retaliation, Jack simply moves out of the way, grabs the rebound, and steps over Cook as he lays on the floor.

“He pushed him, ref!” a parent from the Laker side shouts.

“Nah man, he just moved out of the way,” another parent says. “Cook just fell.” They both sit down silent.

“He’s a better man than me,” Fitzzy says as he lets out a chuckle. The embarrassment of falling on the floor riles both Cook and the Lakers. They start turning the ball over and fighting

with each other. Cook is seen holding his head in his hands every time he throws the ball away, with a smiling Jack going to take the inbound. With two minutes left in the fourth quarter, the game is 29-26.

What was gloating on the Public School side turns to anger and frustration. During timeouts, the coach of the Lakers screams at her players in both English and Spanish. The fans jaw at the refs, even Jo Jo. The Laker players themselves look confused. On the OLG side, Jack looks calm and Coach Cunningham diagrams something on his board.

When they come out of the timeout, Jack has the inbound and Trentacosta slides past Michael Cunningham's pick at the top of the key. Jack passes it, and Trentacosta turns and hits a deep three to tie the game at 29. OLG's fans go wild as someone on the Public School side throws a soda on the floor and is kicked out of the gym.

With twenty seconds to go, Valdez streaks to the basket and jumps for an easy lay-up. But as he does, Jack swats at the ball in Valdez's left hand and strips him. He jumps on the ball as does Cook. The two of them elbow each other before the ref calls a jump ball. The possession arrow says OLG with seven seconds to go.

No timeouts left and the gym is suddenly silent. Jack has the inbound and he gives Fitzzy a look before he slaps the ball. Trentacosta comes around the pick again but Jack sees Valdez overplay. Cunningham is wide open backpedaling toward the basket. He lobs the ball in and Cunningham lays it up uncontested with two seconds to go. The Lakers have no timeouts and Cook throws the ball down court but it skips off Valdez's hands and ends the game 31-29.

The fans storm the court. OLG fans rush over to their children while the Public School fans confront them. One father steps in front of Fitzzy and swings. He ducks and tries to restrain the man until another man grabs him from behind and throws him to the ground. There are fights

all over the gym. Fitzzy looks back as Marie and the Laker coach scream at each other. The two men going after Fitzzy are stopped by the two officers.

He looks for Jack and sees him stuck on the bench between two Laker players who look frightened as well. He gets up and grabs Jack and heads back for Marie who has gone back to his mother, grandfather, and Maddy. The six of them go out the back entrance, Fitzzy carries his grandfather, wheel chair and all, down the six flights of icy steps.

They all get into his mother's Explorer. Fitzzy will get his car tomorrow.

After a few minutes of sitting in the idle car, grandpa says, "See now, Lori, you shoulda let me hit one of them with the cane. Pow right on the head."

They burst out in laughter but it is restrained. Everyone is alright aside from a little soreness in Fitzzy's neck. When Lori turns on the car, they sit for another minute, unable to fully comprehend what just happened.

"Jack...you won!!!" Maddy screams. And everyone screams.

As they drive home, grandpa still complains about using his cane while Lori argues back. Jack and Maddy sit between Fitzzy and Marie, who glance, uneasily at each other as the blaring sirens and lights of a fire truck speed past.

Chapter Three

Over the next few months, the arguments over the basketball game subside and the fires increase. During one stretch in March, four homes on the same block on Hudson Street have calls. One of the buildings completely burns down. The homeless shelter on 3rd and Bloomfield is filled to capacity. As April rolls around, the smell of leather gloves and fresh cut grass mixes with the ashen fumes. The birthplace of baseball smolders with the anticipation of what comes next.

At the firehouse, the discussion turns to what is being built across the street.

“Look at the size of that thing.” Rivera juts his chin toward the 25-story condominium under construction across Observer Highway. Everyone grunts or nods at the sight of it. The men sit on white folding chairs at the opening of the firehouse garage. Fitzy has his feet up on a second chair as Ryan comes from the back of the garage and kicks it out from under him.

“Hey, asshole! I was using that!” he gets up to try to take the chair back but Ryan plants himself in it. Trentacosta takes Fitzy’s chair and spins it towards himself to use as an ottoman, leaving Fitzy standing.

“You snooze, you lose, cump.” Vinny Turso says, a big grin on his face. Fitzy knows he’s lost this round. He walks to the side of the opening and sits on the concrete, his back resting against the wall.

“How many people can that thing fit?” Rivera says, still talking about the condo complex.

“Who cares, Eddie?” Ryan says. “It’s a fuckin’ eyesore.”

“Better than an empty lot with crack pipes and needles, though.” Fitzy says.

He has no opinion on the building, but is glad that something is replacing what everyone who grows up in Hoboken calls Pookie’s Park. It was more of a dirt lot than a park, a cross

between possible parking lot and baseball field. Little League teams practiced here amid broken bottles and used drug paraphernalia. When Fitzzy was 11, his baseball coach Jude Gallo, took a broom and sweep the garbage from the infield. Outfielders were on their own. The park got its name from a long time addict, Willie “Pookie” Pervis, who was arrested over 100 times in the lot. As arrests go, he was a rookie cop’s dream for filling the quota.

A white Cadillac Seville pulls up in front of the building across the street. Mayor Sal Cardillo and city clerk Robert Haglen step out of the car and walk toward the trailer that serves as an office for the construction site. The door opens. Before the door closes, the four firefighters see Myron Spelling, gray hair slicked back, poke his head outside.

“What do you think that’s all about?” Ryan asks.

“I don’t know.” Fitzzy says. “But I don’t like it.”

“You know there is some wheelin’ and dealin’ goin on in that room right now,” Turso says.

“I can see Cardillo’s pockets getting fatter from here.” Ryan gets up from the chair. “Fuckin’ disgrace.” He walks up the stairs to the bunks.

Rivera and Turso get up. “I’m gonna take a nap,” Turso says. “Corruption tires me out.”

Fitzzy likes the quiet for now. He grabs a chair, leans it up against the wall for support and sits back. He is about to doze off when the door to the trailer opens, and Cardillo and Haglen walk toward the Cadillac. They see Fitzzy and give him a wave, he waves back, no words exchanged. Spelling, still standing in the doorway watching them leave, looks satisfied.

When Spelling closes the door, Fitzzy gets up and walks across the street. The building layout scheme--cleverly embedded between two “The Time is Now” campaign posters for Ronald Reagan on the side of the building--is huge and shows exactly what money can buy. A

courtyard with a barbecue station with what looks like 10 barbecues. A pool in the center of the courtyard with a diving board, a gym and a movie room. Fitzzy can't believe it. These people never have to actually leave their home.

His eyes move over to the pictures of the apartments, everything brand new, the appliances metal, shiny metal, the floors all marble, the bathrooms with separate shower and bathtub. Seems like a waste of space. The kitchen all marble countertops. Marie could do some damage in this kitchen. Fitzzy feels incompetent. He wishes he could give this life to his wife and kids. He imagines waking up every day and going down to the pool. Sure, it is shared with other people in the building, but it's theirs, anytime they want. He sees himself flipping burgers in the courtyard while Jack does a cannonball off the diving board, and after a long day of swimming and eating, they all watch a movie and fall asleep in the movie room. It seems like heaven.

He sees the price.

One Hundred Thousand Dollars.

Fitzzy plays with those numbers, counts the zeroes a few times over. No wonder the building has everything: anyone who lives here will be too poor to do anything else. He knows this is not true. This is considered a *bargain compared* to those condos in New York City, and whoever buys these will actually *save* money. He thinks of his own bank account and the measly \$5,000 he has managed to save over the last six years. Is that enough for a down payment on one of these? As for Spelling, Fitzzy sees that the building plans call for 100 apartments. He tries to calculate the numbers in his head again but the amount of zeros makes his head hurt.

As he is about to turn and walk back to the firehouse, the door to the factory opens and Spelling walks out. He wears a tailored gray suit that compliments his gray hair. He is good

looking, shorter and slimmer than Fitzzy but still an imposing figure. His wife must be gorgeous. Spelling walks over.

“Interested in purchasing one of these beauties?” His voice is slick, pleasant on the ears.

“Oh, no, no, this isn’t the type of place for me.” Fitzzy notices Spelling look and read his fireman’s t-shirt and thinks he sees his eyes roll.

“Myron Spelling.” He sticks out his hand for Fitzzy to shake.

“Eddie. Eddie Fitzgerald,” Fitzzy says, shaking Spelling’s hand. “But everyone calls me Fitzzy.”

“This place has everything a man can want, his home away from home when he’s home.” Spelling isn’t looking at Fitzzy, but at the poster, not even talking to him.

“It’s beautiful. Beats the hell out of my place.”

“Where do you live? In Hoboken?”

“Yeah, I live at 700 Park. Right next to the old Levelor Blinds factory.”

“Ah, that eyesore.” Spelling becomes more animated, his voice much less pleasant, “Someone needs to buy that place, level it, and make another one of these.” He points at the poster.

“Yeah, or they can make a new park or something.”

“Park? A park costs money but it doesn’t make money, my friend. That would be a waste.” Contdescension clings to every word that leaves Spelling’s mouth.

Fitzzy stares, doesn’t know what to say. “Have you sold all the apartments already?”

“Almost all of them. We only have a handful left.” He turns toward his office. “Why don’t you come inside for a minute. I have a few brochures that you can take home.”

Spelling's office is on the first floor of the building and oozes gaudiness. A massive mounted bison head hangs behind the wall of his desk. As Spelling sits down it almost looks as if the Bison is about to eat him. A desk that would probably take up Fitzy's entire living room at 700 Park. On his desk sits a gold plated name plaque and a gold plated pen holder. There are two chairs in front of Spelling's desk, and when Fitzy sits down he feels uncomfortably small until he realizes that his seat is much lower than Spelling's desk, which is also raised on a marble platform.

Fitzy looks up at Spelling, "Chairs are a little small, no?"

"I think they are just the right size." He leans forward, looking down at Fitzy. He slides a brochure across the desk as Fitzy struggles in the chair to reach forward in order to take it.

"Are you married?"

"Yeah." He leafs through the brochure to see even more pictures of the inside. The bathroom has a Jacuzzi tub for Christ's sake! "I think your wife is a patient at her office."

"Oh, your wife is a doctor?"

"No, a nurse."

"Oh." Spelling looks disappointed, as if he ran Fitzy's financial situation in his head.

"Well, take this home to your wife and have her take a look at it." He pushes his seat back and stands up. His head nearly hits the front teeth of the bison head. "We can offer competitive financing and would love to have a fireman living in the building." He makes that sound like a compliment.

Fitzy stands and takes comfort in once again being the taller man in the room. He walks toward the door, putting the brochure in his back pocket, and tripping over a small fan plugged into an extension cord on the floor. "You should probably plug this directly into the wall." Fitzy

says, not realizing he already has the cord in his hand in an effort to rectify the potential fire hazard. "One little spark and this whole place can go up."

"Always on the job I see, Mr. Fitzy." Spelling says. "Thanks for looking out for me."

"No problem."

"Feel free to show your friends." Spelling nods to the firehouse across the street as he leans against the doorframe of his office.

"Hey, Fitzy! You want in on the next round?" Ryan yells from across the street. The naps were short lived, and the three men set up a table on the sidewalk for poker.

"Well, Mr..... Fitzy is it? It was nice talking to you." Spelling pats him on the shoulder and turns to go inside. A handshake must be beneath him.

"Why were you talking to that asshole?" Ryan says.

"I wasn't, he came out and saw me looking at the poster." He leans on his right butt cheek, making sure the brochure stays put.

"That guy is a scumbag, Fitzy." Ryan sits down at the table. "He owns 1300 Bloomfield and started evicting everyone out of the building. My grandma lived there for thirty years and he kicked her out, like nothing."

"Wow. I'm sorry. Why couldn't she just stay?"

"Stay? He raised the rent 500 dollars, Fitz. Her rent was 250 since she moved in there. He tripled it. No way she could afford that."

"And she's white." Rivera pulls the change from his winnings toward his corner of the table. "If she was Puerto Rican she woulda been smoked out of her house like some fresh pernil. Be glad she only has to pay more money."

“That’s a fucked up thing to say, Eddie.” Fitzzy, his money now gone, gets up from the table.

“It’s true, though.” Rivera starts dealing the next round. “Big blind is a dime this round.”

“You know he’s right, Fitz.” Ryan says. “Even I agree with him on that.”

“Look around, Fitz. You don’t see no Cunnings or Matthews or O’Neils in the paper dying. No. There ain’t no Tursos or Petrellis either. It’s either a Martinez or a Bates or some other poor brown asshole who is either too poor or too stupid to get outta’ here.” For all the comraderie of the firehouse, the other men know Rivera speaks the truth.

“You don’t know what it’s like, fellas. I go to sleep each night thinking I smell smoke. I wake up in the middle of the night thinking my building is next. David and Jazmine try to ignore it, but I can see they are scared too. And they are just kids. And I’m a fuckin’ fireman. It’s bad down on Jackson, Fitzzy. Everyone just waiting. Who’s next?”

“You think Piccolo would do that to you guys?” Fitzzy asks. Stan Piccolo is the landlord of multiple tenements on Jackson Street and around other areas of the projects.

“I won’t hold my breath thinkin’ he won’t. He moved himself out of his apartment on Harrison. Little spicious to me.”

“That doesn’t necessarily…”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know Fitzzy. It doesn’t mean anything. But tell that to the people on 3rd and Bloomfield at the shelter.” Rivera gets up and walks toward his locker. “They probably thought the same thing.” He grabs the duffle bag inside his locker and swings it around his neck. “Fuck that.”

“Where are you off to?” Ryan says.

“The shelter. We are havin’ a meeting tonight.”

“We?” Fitzy asks.

“Los Olvidados. Someone has to look out for us.”

Ryan, Trentacosta and Fitzy stare at Rivera, obviously puzzled.

“Conjo! Los Olvidados. The Forgotten!” Rivera waves his hands in front of him as he says this. “It’s a neighborhood group. The nun at the shelter set it up. She’s tryin’ to get a sit down with the mayor over the whole housing shit.”

“Oh, of course. The Forgotten.” Ryan says. “How could I forget?” Everyone but Rivera laughs.

“Fuck youse guys,” Rivera says as he leaves the firehouse.

“What the fuck was he talkin’ about?” Trentacosta says.

“Who knows?” Ryan rubs on his stomach. “You guys hungry?”

“I could eat.” Fitzy says.

“Bennie’s?”

“No. Not pizza again.” Trentacosta groans.

“Biggie’s?” Ryan asks.

“What about Fiore’s?” Fitzy says. “What’s today?”

“Thursday! Hot roast beef ant mutz! Let’s go.” Trentacosta jumps up from his seat.

Fiore’s is deeply rooted in the depths of Hoboken’s native community. The line to get into the small deli on Adams street usually extended toward the corner. For the most part, the clientele remain Hobokenites, as those who moved in and worked at the various new companies in Hoboken could not order a sandwich and eat it in the thirty minutes they were allotted for lunch. When Ryan, Fitzy, and Trentacosta arrive outside the deli, the usual line awaits them.

“I better not get a scummer.” Ryan says. “If Willie touches my sandwich, I am walkin’ out.”

“I think Vinny is working today.” Fitzzy says. “You should be fine.”

The line moves along fairly swift, and the three men are now inside. Ahead of them is a young man, probably around 23 years old, wearing a brown long sleeved shirt, khakis, and rain boots even though it is early May, 75 degrees, and sunny outside. To the casual observer, the man is ordering a simple sandwich, ham and mozzarella. But to the men behind the counter, as well as everyone else who stands inside the deli, it is the *way* he orders the sandwich that causes so much agitation.

“Can I please have a ham and mot-zer-ella sandwich?”

The two men working behind the counter just look at him, neither starting the sandwich.

Finally, one of them says, “What’s that, buddy?” Everyone knows the order, but the sandwich maker is having some fun with this. Fitzzy, Ryan, and Trentacosta listen in to the entire conversation.

“I’m sorry, a ham and mot-zer-ella, please?” The man looks around in that uncomfortable manner when every eye in the room is watching.

“Motz-er-ella? I don’t think we have that. Johnny, do we have motz-er-ella?”

“No. I don’t think we do, Vin.” Johnny answers. “Maybe they only have that at those New York City delis.”

Fitzzy has had enough.

“Johnny, the guy wants a ham and mutz. Why don’t you just make the damn sandwich. We’re all hungry in here.” Vin and Johnny shoot Fitzzy a look, but begin assembling the sandwich.

“Was I saying it wrong?” the young man asks. “What’s ‘mutz’?”

“No, you were probably saying it right, we just say it a little different here. You got to say it with your gut, MUTZ.” Fitzzy pushes on his stomach as he says the word. “Use your hands too, that might help.” He puts his thumb and pointer finger together and holds them out, shaking them twice as he says the word again.

“Thanks, I didn’t know there were so many rules,” the man says sticking his arm straight out and shaking his hand as if he were sifting incense on an altar. “Motts,” he whispers to himself. Fitzgerald thinks to correct him once again but refrains, wondering if the same would be done for him if the roles were reversed.

He turns back toward the counter and sees Vinny and Johnny glaring at him. They see traitor while he sees what many of the yuppies must see: rudeness and disrespect for their own sake. Fitzzy robbed these two deli workers of the opportunity to put themselves above a newcomer in something as small as the pronunciation of a certain cheese. It was trivial.

Fitzzy goes back by Ryan and Trentacosta, who are laughing.

“What?” Ryan asks. “Are you turning into one of them now, Fitzzy?”

“Yeah.” Trentacosta says. “Are you gonna’ start wearing those expensive rain boots to walk to the firehouse now?”

“Yea. And maybe I’ll take your mother on a date wearin’ them too.” Fitzzy snaps back.

As Fitzzy steps up to order, Vinny and Johnny look past him to Ryan and Trentacosta and take their orders instead. Willie Sherman, with his one tooth smile and lazy eye, steps up and Fitzzy realizes that sometimes, even when he does the right thing, he still gets the scummer.

On the walk home after his shift, Fitzzy reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the brochure Spelling gave him earlier. He still can’t believe what this building offers. Could they

really afford to live there or was Spelling just busting his balls? Fitzzy sees hours in this condo. Hours of regular work, busting his ass at the firehouse and hours of overtime trying to scrape a little together for a rainy day. Maybe a vacation or something. But this condo looked like a vacation every day. What is the point of dealing with fires and the pain that comes with them on a daily basis if you don't have anything to show for it in the end? A cramped apartment and a douchebag landlord he gave his money to every month? This place definitely won't get burned down either. Fitzzy finds himself deeply wanting to live in this building.

When he gets home, Marie, Lori and his aunt Abby, who he has called Atti since he was a kid, are cooking dinner in Lori's apartment. It's lasagna night and all hands are on deck.

"You better be hungry Eddie." Abby says.

"When am I not?" He rubs his stomach. "Hey Marie, you got a second?" Lori and Abby give each other a look.

"Yeah, sure. What is it?" Marie says.

Fitzzy pulls Marie into the living room and shows her the brochure. Her eyes widen as she moves from picture to picture. Fitzzy, in an excited whisper is rattling off all the amenities and possibilities.

"It's got a Jacuzzi tub!"

"Affordable financing!" he says, echoing Spelling's phrase.

"A pool!"

"You think we could afford this, Eddie?" Marie holds the brochure up to his face.

"I don't know. Maybe. It's worth a shot, no?"

Lori and Abby, who have been listening to the whole conversation, come into the living room and rip the brochure out of Marie's hands.

“Hey!” Marie fails to pull it back.

They read through the brochure frantically.

“Oh. So you’re gona leave us, huh?” Lori says to Fitzzy, not really to Marie.

“Ma. It’s just a brochure.”

“Sure, leave your family in this dump while you live it up at the Taj Mahal,” Lori says.

“It’s just a nice condo, Ma,” Fitzzy says as Marie storms into the kitchen saying, “There’s no privacy in this house!”

“You’re gona leave me and your grandfather here? You know he doesn’t have much time left!”

“Ma. First off, I ain’t goin anywhere. Secondly, if we did, it’s only seven blocks away!”

“Seven blocks, seven miles, seven states. Makes no difference.” Lori has tears in her eyes.

“Are you serious right now, Ma?”

“You know what, Eddie?” She hands him back the brochure. “Do whatever you want.”

Fitzzy looks down. Abby walks by him and shakes her head.

Marie comes back in.

“If you want to move there, Eddie. Don’t let her stop you. You work hard.” She takes the brochure from his hands. “Plus this place is fucking magnificent.”

They laugh even though dinner will be in silence.

Chapter Four

The men are asleep when the alarm sounds. Some sleep through the first two sirens. Fitzzy, a light sleeper, has been awake since one in the morning and has done nothing more than stare at the concrete ceiling for the last two hours. He doesn't move at first. He, like the rest of the company, knows that a 3:00 am fire on a Wednesday in the spring is probably not because someone is making breakfast or lighting a stove for heat.

He grabs his jacket and jumps into his pants. Ryan and Lou Colon are right behind him.

"Anyone know where we're going?" He grabs on to the rung on the side of the truck and pulls himself up. Fitzzy and Colon follow.

"The yellow flats. 235 Washington," Captain Brigati says from the driver's seat.

Fitzzy's grandfather used to live in the yellow flats, given the moniker due to the yellow bricks that encompassed the top half of the buildings. Still one of the few affordable housing complexes in town, it used to be St. Mary's mental hospital. Grandpa Joe would always say that the bad kids in town went there and that it was still haunted by the ghosts of crazy people. Now it serves mostly minorities, some rooms housing families of seven or eight, as well as elderly nomads who never settled in. These buildings are in shambles. There is only the idea of a superintendent to fix the problems in the buildings, many of the residents taking it upon themselves to fix the broken sink or the falling ceiling. Last year, Fitzzy saw the decrepit state of the building while training for his fire inspector certification. There was exactly one fire alarm throughout the entire complex, which contained over 125 rooms through three buildings.

The fire is in full force when they pull in front of the McDonald's on the corner of Third and Washington. The fire seems, for the moment, to be contained on the third floor. As the men

jump from the truck and to their duties, Eddie Rivera runs up to the three of them. He is in sweat pants and a white tank top.

“This is one of the buildings!” He is crying. He grabs Fitzzy’s arm and starts to pull him into the building. “There are kids in there. I know where they are, Fitz. We were just here last night after the meeting. No fire alarms! None!” He speaks breathlessly and Fitzzy finds himself walking toward the building even faster.

“Eddie, you can’t go in there. Look at you.” Fitzzy indicates Eddie’s attire. “You got nothing on. Go back to the station and get dressed.” Glass explodes from a third floor window. A young girl, probably a teenager is hanging out of the window preparing herself to jump. The back of her hair is on fire as well as the back of her shirt and shorts.

“WAIT! STOP” Fitzzy screams. Rivera runs over to where he thinks she will land.

She leans forward and throws herself out of the window. Fire flows from her back and for a moment she looks like a comet hurling toward earth. Rivera breaks her fall as best he can, but her head hits into his shoulder before her legs break on the concrete. She is alive, but badly burned. Her hair is completely gone, the back of her head pink and white and glossy. Her ears are also blackened and will need to be removed. Fitzzy looks at her and wonders if this girl’s life will be worth living.

“This shit is too hot, Fitzzy. Too hot.” Rivera starts for the building again.

“Eddie!” Fitzzy calls after him, but he disappears through the doorway. He runs in after him.

Inside this building, the center hall is a wide open space, with one staircase leading to the subsequent floors in the center of the building. Each floor contains eight or nine apartments, five

stories up. As Fitzy enters the building, he realizes the third floor fire from the exterior is just a distraction, as the flames engulf the entire structure.

The building burns flashes of orange and yellow, illumination coming from unusual places, the flicker of a mailbox plate before it melts into the next box or the wood of the stairs corroding within itself as if the hell contained underneath is breaking through and pulling things under, or the banisters from the second, third, fourth, fifth floors gliding through the air and crashing silently on the floor, the flames too loud to hear anything else, too bright to see straight but bright enough to make clear the residents who cling to uncharred portions of the balcony, screaming for help, or jumping to what they believe is the only safe haven, thudding to the ground, the sound of bone breaking on the stairs or floor and flesh cooking some on top of each other, skin bubbling black, dirty soap bubbles during a bath, and flicks of skin swirl around and dance with the smoke in to be a tornado of blackness in the middle of this building, everything in the center as if this fire knew there was a stage and burned the players.

Fitzy darts his eyes at this spectacle, frozen in a kaleidoscope of flames, until he catches sight of Rivera on the third floor.

“Eddie!” he screams and Rivera sees him too. He is holding an older woman, frail and unconscious. He runs to the staircase but as he steps onto the first landing, the stairwell collapses, leaving him and the possible survivor stranded on the third floor balcony. Rivera’s shirt is blackened and Fitzy sees that his arms are burned, not badly, but burned.

“Eddie! Hang on. The ladder is coming!” But Rivera turns and starts for the higher floors. He is out of sight. This is a death sentence. When the only option is up, there are no options.

Fitzy runs out as Sean Ryan and Lou Colon rush past him.

“Eddie is up there, Sean!” Fitzy flails his right arm toward the balconies above.

“What? What the fuck is he doing?” Ryan says, his voice muffled by the visor.

“He has somebody. A woman. He went up.” Fitzzy looks down.

Ryan stands there for a moment, then turns toward Colon and they both rush toward the back of the building. Turso and Trentacosta sprint past as well. The sound of their boots thud against the softening floor broken by quick screeches behind the first floor apartment door that Fitzzy finds himself standing in front of. He kicks the door down, and the flames obscure his view to the living room directly in front of him. He looks down and tries to find the floor in front of him but, the flames on the floor are moving, darting in unnatural directions, even for something as unpredictable as fire. Balls of fire jump through the hallway into the kitchen. He looks down at his own feet, again realizes what the moving flames engulf. Throughout the entire apartment, dozens of cats writhe in pain, screech and dart to wherever they think safety must be. They are jumping, scurrying, limping, and clawing, even onto his own fire suit. He pushes through to the back and sees a woman, huddled in the corner, trying to avoid the flaming cats as well as the natural flames destroying her apartment. Her feet are singed and her breathing is shallow as Fitzzy gets to her. He cradles her in his arms and kicks cats out of the way as he rushes out of the apartment and out of the building to the pavement outside, where he lays her down for the EMT's.

He runs back inside and sees Ryan chopping at a wall.

“Did you get Eddie?” Fitzzy says. Ryan shakes his head no before putting one last slash through the wall.

‘He’s still in here, Sean. Is there a back stairwell?’

“There was a back stairwell. It’s like this fire knew what to get first.”

Fitzzy scans the floor, looking up at the bare balconies, the banisters burned away. He scans up to the fifth floor and sees the woman Eddie was holding, limp on the floor, her arm dangling out over the balcony. Fitzzy moves back toward the wall to get a better look. He sees Eddie, next to her, eyes open, breathing heavy. His hair is burned and his eyebrows are gone. He looks down at Fitzzy and Ryan, who joins Fitzzy. Rivera reaches out over the balcony and waves them out.

“Where’s the ladder?” Fitzzy screams. But the extendable ladder is attached to the truck outside. There are no ladders long enough to reach up to the fifth floor and there are no stairs to get to any floor.

Eddie mouths the word “go” to Fitzzy and Ryan as the fourth floor collapses in front of them. The balcony that Eddie is on begins to crack and the woman’s body slides down into the makeshift furnace below. They see Eddie close his eyes and roll toward the edge of the balcony.

This will be less painful.

They watch Eddie throw himself down five stories, out of sight.

His urge is to go and sift through the burning cinders but before Fitzzy can make a move, Ryan pushes him out toward the exit.

“Sean, we gotta go back in there!” Fitzzy is frantic, looking back in the building to see if, by some miracle, Eddie walks out with the woman in his arms.

“He’s gone, Fitz. He’s gone.”

The water pours over the flats, yellow turning to brown and then to black. After an hour the apartments are gone and the steel frame of the building is surrounded by ash. Eddie’s body is found under fallen stairs. He is not burned badly, Fitzzy thinks that this is at least some solace for

his wife Carissa. She will see Eddie as he was when he was alive, not a chainmail, scaled version of something out of a horror movie.

He wants to tell her himself. She shouldn't find out from a reporter or some stranger.

"Lou," Fitzzy says to Brigati. "I'm gona walk down to the shelter. I know Eddie's wife is there."

Brigati agrees and Fitzzy heads down the block and a half to the shelter. On the corner, some of the patrons of the shelter watch as police cars race toward what is left of the fire. The shelter is a mixture of homeless and those without homes. Fitzzy and pretty much anyone else who is raised in Hoboken know the difference. Over the past few years, with the new rent control laws that Mayor Cardillo and the city council put in place, and the fires, the number of those without homes has increased. Good people stay at the shelter now, not just drug addicts and gamblers.

Fitzzy, still in his gear, walks down the steps on the side of Third Street and opens the door to the main dining hall/sleep bunker. The room is the size of a small gym with a basketball hoop in the back. This was once the site of St. John's church and the parish would hold adult basketball leagues for the cops and fireman. It is still a church, but no one from the town goes there on Sundays. Fitzzy knows his fire code and also sees the inspectors certificate next to the door. The place has a maximum occupancy of 123 but there are easily 300 people crammed into this room. Adults sleep on blankets strewn across the floor while they let their parents or grandparents and children sleep on the cots.

To his left, two children, probably eight years old, argue over whose turn it is to sleep on the cot. In the far right corner of the room, the priest, Father Francis O'Malley, serves soup to a

few men. Fitzzy sees Carissa handing out freshly washed sheets and blankets to a family and he catches her eyes as well. He hopes she could read his face because words are too hard right now.

She gives the last blanket out and slowly walks toward Fitzzy. Her brown curly hair dangles in front of her face. She pushes it away and pushes away tears next. She is only five feet tall and before she can ask Fitzzy what happened, he says, "I'm sorry." She collapses onto his chest and heaves.

"He was only going to watch," she says through her crying. "He was only going to watch."

"You know that's not him, Carri." Fitzzy pulls her away from him. "He can't just watch."

"Why didn't you help him!" she screams. Fitzzy asks himself the same question.

"I'm sorry."

Father O'Malley comes over from the makeshift kitchen and consoles Carissa. He leads her away from the commotion of the room.

"Eddie's dead?" Fitzzy hears someone say behind him. When he turns and he looks around the room until his eyes fall directly below him. A nun, probably about four feet eight and stout is looking up at him, her light blue habit dangling behind her. She is older, probably in her fifties.

"Uh. Yeah. He died in the fire." Fitzzy is somewhat taken back by the abruptness of the questions and the truthfulness of his answer.

The nun looks down and starts to cry, but only momentarily. She moves back a few steps from Fitzzy in order to get as close to eye level as she can. "Those are the only tears I'll shed on this night." She looks sternly at Fitzzy. This nun is intense.

“Eddie was a good fighter. He was really invested in what we were doing here. You don’t even need to tell me. I know he died trying to save those people in that building.”

“That was Eddie.” Fitzzy stumbles over the past tense verb. He doesn’t want to talk about it. It’s too new. But even if it was old, Fitzzy still wouldn’t talk about it. Life is about trudging along for him.

“I’m Sister Perry. Roberta Perry.”

“Fitzzy.” He reaches out his hand and shakes hers.

“I assume you and Eddie were close? Did you work with him?”

“Yeah. We were engine mates.” He diverts his eyes from her and starts to look around the room again.

“Pretty sad. Isn’t it?” Sister Roberta say. “There are over 275 people crammed in here, and I assume more are coming after tonight. There’s just no room.” She picks up a Hostess wrapper off the floor and crumples it in her hand. “We never used to kick people out but now we can only give them a week. Maybe two if a few people leave.”

“It’s a shame. These seem like good people,” Fitzzy says, not really knowing what to say.

“They are good people,” she says sternly. “They are here because of circumstances. But most aren’t sitting here wallowing in self-pity. Eddie certainly didn’t.”

“Eddie?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t know. He kept it quiet. He worked for the watch group because, in his mind, I guess that was payment for staying here.”

Fitzzy’s eyes widen. “Eddie was living here? Why?”

“His landlord, Stan Piccolo. That’s why.” She crumples the Hostess wrapper a little tighter. “He tripled Eddie’s rent, and when Eddie fell behind Stan kicked him, Carissa, and little Eddie out. They had no place to go.”

They had places to go, Fitzy wants to blurt out. But he knows that, in Eddie’s eyes, they didn’t. He never wanted charity and was too proud to admit he was homeless. He could keep it quiet by living at the shelter. Most men who get kicked out by their wives will live at the firehouse, but Fitzy knows Eddie wouldn’t bring his whole family there.

“How long was he here?”

“I don’t know. He came in right after that big fire in January at 132 Clinton. I thought he was a fire victim.”

Things were starting to make sense to Fitzy. Eddie was a no show at the Wilton Haus for drinks too many times to count and he always seemed to have an excuse for not going out with the crew after a night shift. And then there was the night when he and Fitzy had to go to North Bergen for an arson intelligence class and Eddie wouldn’t let him drop him off at home. “Nah, Muchacho, Carissa is cleaning and I want no part in that.”

“What did he do here? The watch group?”

“Los Olvidados. The Forgotten,” Sister Roberta says, almost like a mantra. Fitzy remembers Eddie talking about it briefly. “We pay attention to what and who is attacking the poor in this town. We keep tabs on the developers who are trying to buy property in Hoboken. We voice our opinions and fight the city council on the rent control deactivation.” She was preaching now, her arms waving as if to embrace every aspect that Los Olvidados covered.

“We have a list of questionable landlords too. A few members work at Haven Savings Bank and Fidelity Bank on River Street and red flag large deposits made by anyone on our list.

We can prove nothing but we can give warning. We are some of these people's fire alarms because their buildings have none."

"What do the deposits have to do with the fires?" Fitzzy grabs two chairs for them to sit on.

"We have had landlords who have made large deposits. I mean \$30,000 or more. And within a month or two would crank up the rents or, even worse, their building catches fire." She scratches under her habit at her forehead. "No one noticed until it was more than just one or two landlords."

Fitzzy looks at Sister Roberta, who is an intimidating presence regardless of her size. These people are fighting for something, but losing miserably.

"What did Eddie do?"

"He would go in uniform to the buildings on our list and check to see if they were up to code. Not through the most legal channels, I know. But he would check to see if they had enough fire alarms, emergency exits accessible. Those things. When he felt that the building was heading toward a fire, he would let us know. He probably stopped dozens of fires before they happened."

"This is one of the buildings," Fitzzy hears Eddie's voice say. He was probably there when the fire started.

Roberta gets out of her chair. "I'd love to sit here and talk about the group all night. But, as you can see, there's a lot going on here, sadly."

"You need a hand?" Fitzzy looks around and thinks even a hundred hands wouldn't be enough.

“Sure, come with me.” Roberta leads him around the gym, and for the next two hours, he works. He gives out some breakfast to the early risers, takes out trash, moves some cots around to make more room.

Before he leaves, Roberta gives him a flier.

“What’s this?” He looks at the flier and the headline reads “March Against Arson For-Profit.”

“We are having a rally on Saturday August 12th. The walk is from 12th and Washington to City Hall. You should come if you can.” She smiles at Fitzzy before scuffling across the room to handle another argument between the homeless. “Eddie was going to be there. We could use another fireman!”

Fitzzy looks at the flier again. He hates politics mostly because he doesn’t understand them. But this is a fight against politics. Eddie wasn’t murdered. His death was his own fault but what he fought for ended up killing him. Fitzzy’s concentration is broken when Carissa comes out from the room cradled by Father O’Malley.

What the landlords and developers never realize is that they ruin people’s lives. He folds the flier and puts it in his jacket pocket. He doesn’t want to upset Carissa any more than he has to. He leaves and heads back to the firehouse.

He walks slowly on Bloomfield Street. It’s quiet. Los Olividados and Eddie and Carissa and the cats swirl through his mind. He has seen some terrible things during his time in the department but this year has been worse than he could have ever imagined. He passes 10th and Bloomfield Street and sees the new construction on the brownstones. One of the constructions is combining two brownstones into one massive urban mansion.

He turns up 12th Street and then Washington Street. The firehouse is lights out but the garage door is open.

When he approaches, he sees Turso, Trentacosta, and Ryan sitting together. No one is talking. They are just sitting in the dark. Captain Brigati lies on the couch against the wall. Jimmy Morrelli sits at the table in front of Brigati with his head down.

Fitzzy doesn't say a word to anyone and goes to his locker to undress. He opens his locker and takes his jacket off and hangs it up. Maddy and Jack's class pictures stare back at him. He takes his boots off and puts them down. Eddie's boots are in front of his locker. He stares at the boots for nearly a minute until he notices Eddie's jacket hanging on the opened locker door. He reaches into the pocket and pulls out Eddie's Roberto Clemente card.

He kisses it and puts it in his jacket next to the flier.

Chapter Five

The newspapers run wild with the story of the fire. Headlines read ARSON FIRE STARTED BY FIREMAN and THE ENEMY AMONG US: FIREMAN STARTS ARSON FIRE. They blame Eddie for this fire and some papers try to tie him to the other fires over the years. The mayor forces an investigation and Fitzzy relives the moments in that building multiple times to the investigators.

Why was Mr. Rivera at the fire while not on duty?

Why was Mr. Rivera there almost simultaneously as the building caught fire?

Los Olivados could answer those questions, but they swore to keep their information a secret and Fitzzy saw the need for such secrecy in this tumultuous climate.

Cops and fireman, who never really got along in the first place, are now at odds with each other even more.

But the worst part of all this, in Fitzzy's eyes, is the fact that the mayor forbade Eddie from receiving a proper fireman's funeral.

There is no procession through the streets of Hoboken for Eddie. Instead, his wife and family coordinate a funeral rite in the basement of St. John's Church where the shelter is housed. No protestors would set foot in there. He doesn't even get a wake because his body is so charred that Carissa says it would give their kids nightmares to see their father like that. It would have been easier to cremate but cremating a fireman just seems wrong.

On the day of the funeral, Marie lays out Fitzzy's only suit. It still has some dust on the cuffs of the pants from his great uncle Eugene's funeral, which is also the last time it was used. He hates that suit and hates the whole idea of a funeral in general. Eddie would always joke about his own funeral.

“When I die, I want to be buried on my stomach. You know why?” Eddie would say.

“Why Eddie? Why do you want to be buried on your stomach?? Fitzy would ask knowing that the answer would be the same for the 150th time he heard this joke.

“So everyone can kiss my ass as they walk by the casket!”

“Well, you know how I want my funeral?” Fitzy said.

“How?”

“First off, I don’t want anyone wearing black.” Fitzy pointed at Eddie,” I hate that fucking color.”

“And I want a DJ. I want music at my wake.”

Eddie looked at him with a smile.

“I’ll even play that bachata shit you like and you can dance all the way up when you come see me.” Fitzy laughed thinking of the sight.

“And you know what else I want?”

“What, muchacho? What do you want?”

“I want shots of Captain Morgan lined up for all of you degenerates.”

“Wepa! That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“And after you take the shot, you have to lift up my dead hand and give me a high five.”

Fitzy looked at Eddie and they both processed the thought of high fiving a corpse. They both burst out in laughter.

“I’ll high five your dead hand if you kiss my dead ass!”

Today there is none of that.

The gym under St. John's is packed when Fitzzy and Marie walk through the doors. This time, however, there are more fireman than homeless manning the floor. Fitzzy sees Trentacosta standing in his uniform, on break from his rotation at the firehouse.

"Hey, Nicky," Fitzzy says.

"Hey, Fitz." Trentacosta looks down at his boots. "Fuckin' shame Eddie can't have a regular funeral. No place will take him. They all think he did it." He goes over to Marie and gives her a hug and a kiss. She walks over to Carissa.

"I know, Nick." Fitzzy clasps his hands in front of him. "The mayor is really running with this thing."

"I can't fuckin stand that guy." Trentacosta looks up, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and some crying.

"Neither can I."

Fitzzy stands in silence for a few moments before walking over to Carissa and Marie.

"How are you doing?" he says to Carissa.

"As good as I can be." She blows her nose into a napkin. "I can't believe he's gone. And I can't believe how he's being treated in death. Aren't people supposed to forgive the dead?"

"He doesn't need forgiveness, Carissa. You know that," Marie says as she grabs her shoulder.

"I know. I know. You know what I mean."

As Fitzzy looks around the room, scanning the attendants, his eyes fall upon a familiar face, one that is plastered all over town. Myron Spelling and his wife are standing in the middle of the gym. He is holding flowers and looking lost. Fitzzy makes eye contact and Spelling starts to

walk over to the only person in this room he probably has had a conversation with. Everyone's eyes follow him.

"Mr. Fitzy! I am sorry to see you again under these circumstances."

What the fuck are you doing here, is what Fitzy wants to say.

"Yeah. Sorry," is all he can muster.

"I just wanted to extend my condolences to Mrs. Rivera." Spelling pushes the bouquet of lilies toward Carissa, who looks uncomfortable as she accepts them.

Everyone is still looking at Spelling and now Fitzy. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to get much quieter around him.

"I know I do not have many friends here, but I saw Mr. Rivera everyday outside my building and felt as if I knew him. Regardless of what they say he did, I felt it was right to be here."

They are stunned. Fitzy hears someone in the crowd say Spelling is full of shit and this is probably true. But he didn't have to come here and put himself out there like he is right now. No one would have cared.

"Th—Thank you," Carissa says. Her eyes dart from Fitzy to Marie and then around the room. The two of them were being judged.

Marie, standing next to Fitzy, nudges him and he comes out of his trance.

"Oh. Mr. Spelling, this is my wife, Marie."

Spelling smiles at Marie and extends his hand. "Pleasure to meet you. Your husband is a fine man."

Fitzy sees the judging in Marie's eyes. A salesman, schmoozer, Spelling gives just enough compassion to mask his shadiness. Marie probably thinks this guy could sell snow to an

Eskimo. But for all Spelling's snake oil salesman qualities, Fitzzy wants to respect him for doing the right thing.

"Don't lie to him, Myron." Marie is also good at masking her true feelings.

"Marie!" Angela Spelling yells and runs up to give her a hug.

"Myron, this is the woman I was telling you about," Angela says, still in a half hug with Marie.

"The one from Dr. Carmody's office?" Spelling says.

"Yes!" She turns to Marie and Fitzzy. "I love Dr. Carmody. My feet have never been pain free until we moved to Hoboken and met him."

Fitzzy looks at Marie and waits for some sarcastic sneaker remark but she just smiles and nods her head.

"You and your husband should come over for dinner some time," Angela says. Both Fitzzy and Myron look at her, Fitzzy with surprise and Myron with is a mixture of disgust and anger, his face almost twitching at the thought of Fitzzy and Marie setting foot in his house. Spelling pulls out his wallet and takes out a business card and pen. He writes his address on the back and hands it to Fitzzy.

"Don't you live in the complex?"

"Oh no. I can't stand the racket that the construction workers make." Spelling says. "We bought a little place up in Castle Point. Right by the park. Those views of the city are truly breathtaking."

Fitzzy tries to block people from seeing him take Spelling's business card, even though most of the crowd has moved on to other discussions, mostly about the mayor. Like most funerals, even the tragic "died too young" ones, the conversations move away from the dead

body lying in the box in the front of the room and enter the mundane. The wake is a distraction from the inevitable. Conversations about the mayor that started with people angrily cursing the fact that he wouldn't let Eddie have a proper burial soon morph into how the mayor's kid punched a classmate in the face and didn't get in trouble. Everything is diverted until the eulogies. That is when things get final and a permanent sense of loss is felt. Fitzzy hates the eulogies but Carissa asked him to speak on Eddie's behalf.

There is no microphone and Fitzzy does not feel comfortable speaking in front of crowds. He was the Valedictorian of his college class and when he got up to the podium to give his speech, a speech he prepared, had edited and read over, he looked blankly at the words, looked up at the crowd and waved his hand, said thanks, and walked off stage, much to the horror of the faculty and board of trustees. He can't walk off stage now, though.

"I just want to thank everyone for coming." He tries to raise his voice but everyone continues their side conversations.

"Eddie. Eddie was a great man." He looks at Marie. No one is paying attention.

Marie gets on top of one of the chairs, cups her hands over her mouth and shouts "Will everyone shut the fuck up! Fitzzy is talking about Eddie!"

The whole gym goes silent and turns to look at her. She fixes her dress and gently steps down with the help of Spelling, who is wide eyed and seems embarrassed.

"Like I was saying." Fitzzy mumbles. "Eddie was a great man. He was always there for whoever needed him." Fitzzy senses how generic this speech sounds.

"He was a hard worker and was always there for everybody." He hears this as soon as he says it and wonders how the hell he graduated high school let alone college. Eddie would be laughing his ass off right now watching Fitzzy sweat through a speech. Eddie deserves better.

“Eddie deserves better.” He says without realizing that he only meant to think it.

The crowd stares at Fitzy. They agree. Fitzy, emboldened, continues.

“He deserves to be here with us right now. He don’t deserve a funeral because he shouldn’t be dead.” Fitzy sees Carissa sob into Father Frank’s chest. Many in the crowd look down at their shoes or the floor when he says this.

“I can say he was a good fireman, even though the assholes up at city hall don’t think so.” Spelling and Marie stare in disbelief.

“I can say he was a good husband and father.”

“I can say he was a good friend, too.”

“I can say all of that. But I don’t need to because you know it.” He turns and looks at the closed casket. There is a picture of Eddie’s induction after the fire academy. He is in the middle with his arms draped over Fitzy and Ryan. It wasn’t one of those posed pictures. Just a candid shot of the three of them on one of the happiest days of their lives. He turns back to the crowd with tears in his eyes.

“But I will say one thing.” Fitzy is yelling now. He is angry. Angrier than he cares to remember and, like most people who rage, cannot understand why he is so angry.

“If I find the sonofabitch that set fire to that building. I am going to rip his lungs out of his chest and watch him watch himself suffocate.” There is a gasp in the crowd. Trentacosta and Ryan start clapping. Everyone starts clapping. What else is there but anger and frustration at a time like this?

Fitzy walks up to the closed casket. He doesn’t kneel. Marie stays back. He pulls the Clemente card from his jacket pocket.

“I wanted you to take this with you, Ed,” he whispers. He places his hand on the casket. He starts to sob. “But I think I’m gonna keep it.” He puts the card back in his pocket and tries to subdue the crying. His shoulders start to shrug with each sob. Marie comes up from behind and rubs his back. He has never lost anyone so close to him before. He has been to funerals and has been sad, but everyone who died was distant from his everyday world.

They bury Eddie later that day and have a fireman’s repast at the house before the night shift begins. Brigati gives a speech about Eddie and they drink. Those on shift have one or two and those off shift drink enough for everyone. Fitzzy is still in his suit and sitting in a chair outside the garage with Trentacosta and Turso.

Across the street, Robert Haglen pulls up in front of Spelling’s complex. Turso, drunk, starts laying into him.

“Hey Haglen! Your office ever gonna find out who’s burning down these buildings or are you just gonna sit on your ass?”

Haglen smiles slightly, almost as if he knew this was coming and had rehearsed the next statement. Fitzzy is on his feet.

“We didn’t have to make an arrest. The guy who did it was too stupid to get out of the building he set fire to.” He smiles wider, pleased with this. Fitzzy puts down his beer.

The crew is shocked but Haglen continues, “Maybe. Just maybe, if the firemen in this town worried about putting out the fires instead of starting them, we wouldn’t have so many problems.” Trentacosta has to hold Turso back. Fitzzy walks toward Haglen who smiles directly at him. He doesn’t hear a sound except for the crunch of the pavement under his shoes. He sees Haglen’s face but in a moment sees Haglen’s face grimacing under a barrage of punches. His hand hurts but Haglen’s face looks like it hurts more. Turso and Ryan pull Fitzzy off the ground

and off Haglen. He looks at his fist, bloodied and scratched. He missed a few times and scraped the sidewalk. He is shaking.

Haglen recovers some semblance of composure and says, “You’re going to regret this.” The men burst out in laughter at how cliché this sounds.

Trentacosta laughs and says “Are you going to get his little dog too?” Everyone laughs. Haglen holds his shirt sleeve to his most likely broken nose.

“Don’t worry, Fitzy.” Turso says. “He is too much of a pussy to press charges anyway,” They all walk back to the garage while Haglen gets back in his car and speeds away.

Fitzy sits back down in his chair, picks up his beer and takes a swig. Trentacosta, Ryan, and Turso are too giddy to even form coherent sentences. Fitzy isn’t happy but he isn’t unhappy either. Haglen deserves it and the anger he has felt for the past few weeks, an anger that even he didn’t realize grew with each passing fire, had reached a tipping point with Eddie’s death, and is now released. It feels good.

Fitzy feels a hand on his shoulder and when he looks up he sees Brigati, smiling so wide that he can see his missing teeth in the back of his mouth.

“I’m gonna have to send you home, Fitz.” Fitzy nods and stands up. Brigati gives him a pat on the backside before he goes back upstairs. He leaves the firehouse amid an array of high fives and fist bumps.

Fitzy is still buzzed and blood is still on his fist as he walks home. He looks at his fist and knows some of that blood is Haglen’s and smiles.

When he gets home, he smells chicken cutlets in the hallway. He knows Marie’s cooking anywhere and skips some steps like a teenager to get to the apartment quicker. He knocks on the door even though he has the key. There is something about the way Marie opens a door,

especially with an apron on when she cooks. It's like the movies. In Fitzzy's mind, the door swings open in slow motion, Marie's left arm slowly coming into view. Her brown hair bobs on her shoulders as she steps into the doorway. Her face always looks like she is about to say something sarcastic, one eyebrow slightly higher than the other as if to say "what the fuck are you looking at." Everything is bouncy, especially her tits. She's his wife so he can call them tits and they are magnificent.

"What? You lose your keys or something?" She says as she opens the door. She looks at Fitzzy, who leans against the doorway, looking at his fists now, trying to make sure Marie sees it.

"You're fucking drunk, aren't you?" Fitzzy hears the annoyance in her voice. She looks down at his fist and sees the day's work.

"Eddie. What did you do?" She grabs his hands. "Don't laugh! Did you get in a fight?"

"Yep!"

"With who?" She walks him over to the kitchen sink and washes the blood off his fists.

"Haglen." Marie stops washing and stares up at Fitzzy.

"You punched the city clerk in the face?"

"Multiple times."

"This isn't funny, Eddie. You are gonna get arrested!" She continues to wash his hands.

"No, I'm not." There is no blood left on his hands but Marie is still massaging them and inspecting the cuts. "Haglen is too much of a pussy to press charges."

"You know I hate that word, Eddie."

"What word, Marie?"

"You know."

“You don’t hate that word at night, though.” He takes his left hand and rubs her lower back. “Where are the kids?”

“What? You think you’re getting some because you were in a fight? Go take a shower. Dinner is going to be ready in fifteen minutes. Oh and I spoke to Andrea Spelling today when she came in and we are having dinner with them tomorrow night.” She smiles and pushes him toward the shower next to the kitchen. “And the kids are out with Abby.”

As he undresses. He throws each piece of the godforsaken suit across the room in the hamper. He is done with that suit. Maybe he’ll buy a hot pink one to wear to the next funeral. Fuck it. He moves the shower curtain and turns on the water. It takes a little longer to get hot than he remembers and steps into the tub. The water feels good. He lets it fall on his face. Behind him, the shower curtain opens and Marie steps in. He turns, water still in his eyes but he has a clear enough view to see her standing naked in front of him. She runs her hands down his body.

“Did you win?”

He kisses her and picks her up. The water cascades over both of their bodies.

“What do you think?” He says as he pushes her up against the tiled wall. The steam surrounds them and fogs up the glass doors. Marie giggles and Fitzzy kisses her neck, slowly making his way up to her right ear. He can feel her smile on his cheeks and he pushes into her.

She gasps out loud.

“I’ll never get used to that.” She says as she feels him inside her.

He puts his hands underneath her butt and she digs her nails into his back. As he pushes deeper, she pulls her head back and they lock eyes. He sees the green specs floating in the mostly gray of her eyes and he can tell she is trying to hide the fact that she needs him.

“I love you,” he says in a whisper that is almost drowned out by the sound of the shower.

“I love you,” Marie says back. “I’m all yours, Eddie.”

“Promise?” He asks as he pushes as close as he can, feeling her heart beat.

“Promise.”

The water stays hot as they are bound by their promises and the chicken cutlets slowly sizzle on the stove.

Chapter Six

He runs into the building only to see flames engulf the stairway. No one follows him and this worries him until he sees a figure in the corner underneath the stairs. He fights through the flames even though he is wearing nothing but a t-shirt and jeans. He cannot feel the heat or the burns as flecks of fire fall upon his skin. He kicks a burning table out of the way and makes his way to the body on the floor. Black and charred. He touches the shoulder. It crumbles beneath his hand. He tries to roll it over but only the head turns with life-like movement.

Eddie's face, charred, except for his eyes and mouth talks but Fitzzy cannot hear the words. He leans closer to the mouth and it is not words but a ringing sound. A familiar sound. It picks up volume until the entire building is ringing. The walls shake with the sound of the alarm. Fitzzy looks at Eddie, whose face disintegrates in his hands. The building is shaking now as the ringing grows even louder, permeating every aspect of Fitzzy's mind until the scene is ripped away into a vortex.

Fitzzy jumps out of his bed, still hearing the ringing, the fire alarm in the hallway of his apartment. Marie is at work but he checks her side anyway. He runs into Jack's room. Empty. As he runs out of Jack's room he trips but catches himself on the wall of the hallway and sees Maddie's room empty as well. The ringing is coming from downstairs.

He sprints out the door and jumps multiple steps as he descends to his mother and grandfather's apartment below. He does not open the door. Instead, he uses his momentum to plow through the unlocked door, breaking the hinge and falling flat on his mother's kitchen floor, door in hand.

His mother is running cold water over smoking bacon in the sink and standing on a chair, blowing the smoke away from the alarm with a dish towel. Jack, grandpa and Maddie look up from the table.

“Ahh. Right on time.” Grandpa says without missing a beat. “It’s a good thing your son is a fireman, Lorrie.” He looks at Jack and whispers loud enough for everyone to hear, “Your grandmother can burn an ice cube.” Jack laughs.

“I heard that!” Lorrie says as she steps down from the chair.

Fitzy, disoriented, lets go of the door and stands up. He looks at everyone in the room unsure of what just happened. Obviously it was a dream or in this case a nightmare that shook him from his sleep.

This is paranoia, and Fitzy has never been paranoid.

“Sit down, cump,” Grandpa says. “Have some breakfast.”

Fitzy shakes the dream away and joins his family for breakfast. Lorrie smacks the air conditioner in the kitchen to get it started, but it makes a short buzzing sound and dies. She opens the windows instead, the June heat is sweltering and, even at eight in the morning, the temperature is well into the 90s.

“It’s gonna be a hot one today, Jack.” Grandpa says as he looks at Fitzy with concern. Even though Fitzy just plowed through the apartment door in a panic, no one addresses it. No one discusses their problems. The door will get fixed later. It’s not important. Everyone knows there are issues. Everyone moves on.

Jack nods in agreement and begins to devour a whole pancake.

“You on the hill today?” Fitzy asks.

“Yep. Against Young Dems,” Jack says and smiles. Little League baseball in Hoboken is like going to watch the Yankees. There will be a crowd at this game. Managers will get ejected by umpires, fans will get ejected for cursing at umpires, and players will feed off it all. Jack plays for the Hoboken Elks Lodge, and anytime the Elks and Young Dems get together, it’s like Yankees vs. Red Sox, the Elks usually playing the part of the Yankees and the Young Dems nipping at their heels.

“When it’s hot, it’s all about your mind, Jack.” Grandpa says, still looking at Fitzy. “The heat can only get you if you let it.”

“Just make sure you drink lots of water during the game.”

Grandpa stares at Fitzy and Fitzy feels the knowing stare. His grandfather always knew when he was upset or angry and would usually take him to the mall to buy a new bat or a new glove. He may have bought Fitzy some happiness but the best part about him was that he just knew when to do it. He never pried for answers or asked questions. He understood as much as another man can understand. They could sit in the car for hours driving to a baseball game and not say a word. They were comfortable. Grandpa knew something was off with Fitzy and it didn’t take him breaking down a door to figure it out either.

“Now, Jack,” Grandpa says as he turns to face his great grandson. “A pitcher has to be the toughest guy on the field. You know why?”

Jack shakes his head.

“Because the pitcher controls who wins or loses,” He looks up at Fitzy. “Everyone else counts on them the most.”

“Yeah,” Fitzy says, “but it’s a team game, Gramps.”

“It’s a team game when the ball is hit. But you control whether or not that ball ever gets hit.” Gramps is talking over Jack, who looks up from his plate.

“Don’t you think it’s selfish to think that one guy is responsible for the whole team?” Fitzzy asks.

“No. It’s the nature of the game.”

“How ‘bout unfair? You don’t think it’s unfair to put all that pressure on the pitcher?”

Jack’s head darts back and forth from his father to his great grandfather.

“It’s only unfair to someone who don’t have the guts to take control of the game. No matter the situation, you can take control of it. Whiners complain how unfair things are. Winners make things unfair.”

Fitzzy looks at his mother standing by the sink, and she turns away to dry a dish with Maddie’s help.

Grampa’s eyes gloss over slightly. Fitzzy looks at his plate of cold pancakes and sausage.

“Jack. Are you a whiner or a winner?” Grampa asks.

“Winner.”

“Good. We only have winners in this family.”

“Dad, are you finished eating?” Lorrie asks.

Grandpa looks down at his plate and then gives both Jack and Fitzzy a sneaky smile.

“No. Got a couple more bites here.” He picks up a pancake and rolls it into a ball.

“Gramps what are you....” Jack says.

“Shhhh!!! Don’t be a squeaker!” He says as he picks up another pancake and rolls that one into a ball as well.

He places the two pancake balls on his plate, takes the sausage link from Fitzzy's plate, and places it between the rolled up pancakes.

"Look! A midget penis!"

Jack drops his fork and laughs out loud, and Fitzzy puts his hand to his forehead and shakes his head.

"Dad! Maddie is here!"

"Well, she should know what a midget penis is!" He is cracking up. Lorrie turns Maddie away from the table to continue washing dishes but Maddie continues to turn around. "You are a child. Do you know that?"

Grandpar picks up the sausage. "Fine, Lorrie. I'll circumcise him then." He takes a bite of the link but rolls his body toward the table and spits it out through laughter. His toothless smile filled with sausage bits as he looks at Jack and Fitzzy.

"Ok, kids. I think it's time to go back upstairs." Fitzzy gets up from the table. "Gramps has finally lost it." Fitzzy picks up the door from the floor. "I'll fix this later." Lorrie sighs.

Jack and Maddie follow Fitzzy to the door as Grandpa says, "I'm the midget mohel!"

When they get back upstairs, Fitzzy goes to the kitchen and grabs two garbage bags from the cabinet and hands them to Jack and Maddie.

"What are these for?" Jack asks.

"I want you to go through your clothes and sneakers and pick out the things you don't want or use anymore." Fitzzy says, "and put them in this bag."

"Why?" Maddie asks.

Fitzzy kneels down in front of her. "Well, sweetie. We are going to take some of our stuff down to the shelter for the people that got burned out of their homes." He is truthful with her.

The last time he brought clothes to the shelter, he went through their closet without them knowing and took things that still had tags on them from three Christmases past. But since Eddie's death last month, Fitzzy has been at the shelter almost weekly bringing some food or clothes each time with him. He has also been slowly learning some of the information that Los Olividades has on the developers and politicians. Who put in applications and who didn't to build new construction? Who supposedly gave kickbacks on kickbacks to the mayor? All speculation, of course, but for the people in the shelter who are searching for answers, speculation offers some comfort, someone to blame even though there still have been no arrests for any of the fires. Today, Fitzzy wants his kids to see some of the truth and not just what they hear from their friends. Especially Jack, who has been put in a strange position with his friends and kids in town whom he plays sports against.

"My sneakers too?" Jack says.

"Yes, Jack. You have like ten pairs of sneakers. You can afford to give one or two pair up."

They walk to the shelter, Fitzzy holding the two garbage bags. One is packed significantly less than the other (Fitzzy whacks Jack in the head with it as they walked out the door).

"Daddy?" Maddie asks. She tries to skip over the cracks in the sidewalk.

"Yes, baby?"

"What if no one wants my clothes? Can I keep them?"

Fitzzy knows of at least three little girls at the shelter who would fit into her clothes.

"Well, if no one wants them you can keep them. No sense throwing them out right?"

“If I throw them out can I get new ones?” Maddie says, and Jack suddenly seems interested in the conversation. Fitzzy curses his grandfather and mother for spoiling his kids so much. He curses himself for spoiling them even more.

“Do you need more clothes?”

“I don’t neeeeed them. But I want them!”

“Yeah, well I want a golden toilet but some things are just not in the cards.” Fitzzy waits for a laugh. Jack and Maddie roll their eyes.

“I’ll tell you what. I will get you each something since you are doing a nice thing for people,” Fitzzy says. “Out of the goodness of your hearts, right?”

“Uhh,” Jack says obviously confused by the question.

“Don’t strain yourself, cump. I’ll get you a new pair of sneakers. Don’t worry.”

As they approach the shelter, Fitzzy stops and stands in front of both of them.

“You are gonna see some things in here that maybe you shouldn’t. Your mom is probably gonna to kill me for this but you should see what is happening in your town,” Fitzzy says. They say nothing.

When he opens the door to the gym there are nearly a hundred people bustling around the court. Some are sleeping on the cots provided while a few kids shoot basketball at the far basket. No one seems happy. Fitzzy looks at Maddie and Jack for some reaction and they are as wide-eyed as he was the first time he came here. He puts his hands on their shoulders. Jack looks up at him.

“Dad. This is bad.”

Fitzzy shakes his head in agreement. He sees Sister Roberta walking over.

“Are these your kiddies?” she says with excitement.

“Yeah, these are the little rugrats. Jack and Maddie,” Fitzy says.

“Hello Jack. Hello Maddie. My name is Roberta.”

Jack gives an uneasy hello. Nuns scare good little Catholic boys, no matter how nice they appear.

“Guys, go through the bags and put them in the bins over there.” Fitzy motions to the sorting bins at the far end of the shelter marked shirts, pants, and shoes. Jack and Maddie take their bags while Fitzy stays with Roberta.

“So how’s it goin’, Roberta?”

“Good. Good. We have had some successes the past few weeks.”

“Like what?” Fitzy has been attending Los Olividades meetings sporadically since Eddie died. He has seen Roberta give impassioned speeches about the corruption at city hall and the degradation in which some landlords keep their tenants. Most of the people she mentioned were childhood friends of Fitzy. Even Haglen, who sported sunglasses for a month to cover up what he called a “terrible fall down the stairs,” grew up with Fitzy. Spelling’s idea that Roberta could be a sinister back dealing developer seems farfetched.

But he isn’t shocked by any of this. Men from Hoboken are known to be charismatic, engaging, and smooth. They are also known to be the first with their hands under the table to collect a bribe. Hobokenites weren’t pickpockets by exact definition, but talk to someone from Hoboken for a few minutes and you would either be sold something you don’t really need or investing in something that makes little sense to you. One of Fitzy’s close friends Sal Costello, and everyone in Hoboken is really a close friend if you think about it, once talked a yuppie who owned a little bakery and the building attached to it to let Sal use the garage to open up a pizza place and pay no rent. Sal talked the guy into taking a 10 percent partnership in the business

instead of paying the rent. As soon as he opened, he brought in Carlo's bakery pastries, pushed the yuppie to close his store and buy out of the partnership to recoup the money, while still allowing Sal to not pay rent.

So when Roberta tells stories of shifty landlords and old time Hobokenites who are cutting deals, it isn't a question of "how could they?" It is more of a statement of "took them long enough."

"Well, we have some reliable sources in the banks." Sister Roberta continues. "Both of them. Haven Savings and Fidelity."

"And what did they tell you?"

"Well," Sister Roberta pauses.

Fitzy smiles. "There is no one for me to tell, Roberta." She shrugs her shoulders down as if Fitzy's smile took away whatever apprehension she had left.

"Anytime someone on our list.... Remember the list I told you about?"

It is a who's who of landlords, developers, politicians, just about anyone who Los Olividades suspects of having their hands in the housing honey jar. Mayor Cardillo, Haglen, Spelling, of course, and then some scummy property owners like Vinny Williams, who owned buildings near the projects and who also ran the town's softball program and had the girls, 12, 13 years old, do car-wash fundraisers wearing bikinis with their idiot parents helping.

"Well," Roberta continues, "anytime one of those people on our list makes a big deposit or withdraws a large sum, we take note." She pulls out a piece of paper from a pocket in her robe and starts unfolding it. "Usually, when a big deposit is made, one of the buildings that these people owns is either involved in fire or a robbery. Anything to get the tenants out." She starts reading from the crumpled paper.

“Last week alone, Branda, Badunos, and Tomarchio all deposited over \$20,000 each.”

All three of those guys hung out at the social club across from Anthony’s restaurant on Madison too. Fitzzy pictures them throwing dollar bills at each other in the club, and it makes him furious.

“We also added a few more names to our list, just to keep an eye out.” She reads the paper again. “George Pelosi, Hal Palermo, and Mickey Pearsall all deposited \$10,000 last week as well.”

“Did you say Mickey Pearsall?”

“Yes. Why?”

“That’s my landlord.” Fitzzy remembers him moving out of the building. Jimmy wouldn’t do it. He was shady but he wasn’t heartless. \$10,000 is normal for someone who owns buildings and collects rent. That could be a few months’ rent.

“Now, try not to jump to conclusions.” She puts the paper away. “Some of the names on this list haven’t had anything happen to their buildings. Some of them just make a lot of money. We are just trying to follow the money to see if it connects to the fires. More often than not it does.”

“Do you think my landlord is one of them?”

“You know the signs, Edward.”

The signs were well talked about in the firehouse. It was almost a checklist of what happens to a building before it gets burned down:

A landlord moves out.

Fire alarms are suddenly nowhere to be found in the building.

Building front door locks never seem to work anymore.

The heater or hot water seem a little colder than normal.

Fitzy knew them. But Pearsall never touches the fire alarms in the building. The front door always locks, Uncle Bill always pulls the door ten times before he comes up from work to make sure it's locked. And the heat and hot water have never been better.

"I don't think he'd do it, Roberta."

"Maybe not. But just keep your eyes out. Everybody seems trustworthy before they stab you in the back."

"You've been in Hoboken too long, Sister. Talking like that."

Roberta puts out her hands like the old Italian men trying to talk with their hands. "Not that long. Although three years seems like a long time."

"Where were you before this?" Fitzy asks.

"I actually grew up in Hawaii. My family owns a few businesses and property in Maui," Roberta says. Fitzy is glad he didn't have to ask about this specifically.

"But I was first stationed at a convent in Chico, California. Oh it was beautiful. Sunny all the time." She looks up as if the ceiling is suddenly going to part and bring some of the California rays into the shelter. "But then I was transferred to New York and on my way they transferred me again to Hoboken."

"Lucky you," Fitzy says.

"You say that in jest, but I am lucky. I was living a charmed life in Hawaii and even in California. I never truly knew just how dire some people's lives were," she says. "My family is wealthy and I grew up with a silver spoon in my mouth. I come here and it was a shock to say the least."

He has to ask, "Your family never wanted to buy anything over here?"

“They did. They asked me to do some research when I first came out here, and I did.”

She is telling the truth. “And in my research I found out about the underbelly of owning property. I remember calling my father and asking him if he was a slumlord. I was angry.”

“Was he?”

“No, thank God! He owned commercial property, so only businesses really rented from him. But that’s not the point. The point was that I came here to see how people would sacrifice so much, especially their moral integrity, to make a profit. These people had no money for years, and all of a sudden they have a chance to cash in and they literally burn people to do it.” Tears started to well up in her eyes.

Fitzy puts his hand on her shoulder. He is happy with her answer and actually feels bad that the conversation led to tears. “Well, Sister. You’re doin’ a good thing here. That’s all that matters.”

Fitzy tries to put the thought of Pearsall burning down 700 Park out of his head and focuses his attention on Jack across the room. Jack takes out a basketball jersey and lets it hang out of the back of his jean pocket. Fitzy walks over.

“Whatcha’ doin there, Jacky Boy?” He pulls the Larry Bird jersey from Jacks jeans and holds it up. Fitzy remembers buying the jersey even though it was too big for Jack.

“Dad!” Jack yells and tries to pull the jersey from Fitzy. “I can’t give that one away. It’s Larry Bird! I love that jersey!” Fitzy shakes his head in derision.

“Fine. Keep it. Maybe you’ll grow into it one day.” He looks at Maddie, who is gently placing her clothes in each bin. “Maddie, let’s get goin’.”

Jack and Maddie walk in front of Fitzy toward the exit on the far end of the gym. As they get to the door, Jack stops.

“What is it, Jacky?”

“That’s Richie Valdez over there.”

“That’s right. They lived in the Yellow Flats.”

Valdez is unpacking a lone backpack. His clothes are too small for him. He mustn’t have gotten a new pair of pants in two years. Jack walks over to him. Fitzzy stays behind holding Maddie’s hand when he sees Jack hand his Bird jersey to Valdez. Jack walks back over and Fitzzy puts his hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“What he say?” Fitzzy asks.

“Nothin’. Just that he’s a Larry Bird fan too.”

When they get back home, Maddy and Jack run up to Abby and Bill’s apartment on the top floor, where they are staying for the night while Fitzzy and Marie go to the Spellings for dinner.

Fitzzy opens the door to his apartment and walks into the bedroom only to see an explosion of clothes and makeup all over the room. Marie is bending over in her closet looking for a shoe.

“What? Did your closet throw up?” Fitzzy says, pinching Marie’s ass.

“No, jerkface.” She stands up, “I can’t find my red shoes. You know, the ones with the strap across the ankle?” She is asking him but aside from color, all of her shoes look the same to him.

“Plus, I have nothing to wear.”

Fitzzy looks at the eight to ten blouses, various pants, a handful of dresses, and about thirty shoes that would tell otherwise.

“Why don’t you wear that blouse with the shoulders out.” He picks up the first piece of clothing he sees, knowing that if he doesn’t get Marie dressed soon, they aren’t making it out of the house for dinner.

“Oh, I was looking for that!” She snatches it out of his hands and puts it on. Fitzy takes out a blue dress shirt, one of only two that he owns, and his only pair of jeans. He only wears jeans when he goes out. He is dressed and ready to go in five minutes. Marie, finally ready, walks out of the bedroom. And as she walks past Fitzy with her makeup and hair finally finished, he realizes all that preparation really does pay off.

They hold hands as they walk up to Castle Point. A cool breeze momentarily makes them forget how hot the summer has been.

“Hoboken is so beautiful at night,” Marie says, looking at the brownstones on 10th and Park as they walk by. The buildings are narrow but immaculately clean. The banisters on this block are all freshly painted black, and most of these buildings have small concrete front yards with stairs that lead to the basement. Couples who own these buildings sit outside in these front yards, some smoking cigars, others drinking wine or reading a book. They wave to Fitzy and Marie as they pass. This is the other side of Hoboken, the comfortable, family-friendly side where the owners of these buildings who, if they have not inherited the property from a family member, probably work in New York City and purchased the house for an ungodly amount of money. But they look happy and peaceful. Just like anyone else, they want to wind down after a hard day of work. It reminds Fitzy of that brochure.

“So what do you think about buying one of those condos?”

“I don’t know Eddie. Your mom may kill herself.”

“Seriously. It’s like I am moving across the country.”

“She is just so used to having you around every day.” She reaches up to pinch his cheeks, “She just misses her baby.” Fitzzy recoils.

“But what if we could afford it?” Fitzzy knows he has less than \$5,000 in their savings account and could never afford whatever the astronomical mortgage would be on one of the condos, but dreaming never hurt anyone.

“I mean, it would be a great place to live. But are we those type of people?”

“Jesus Christ, Marie, again with the Yuppie nonsense?”

“No. I don’t mean Yuppie.” She pauses to think. “I mean, we will be living next to people who probably make two or three times as much money as we do. Are we going to really be friends with them? When they talk about their vacations and their jobs, are we going to have anything in common with them? Probably not. And I think I’d rather not have a pool and a Jacuzzi tub if it means not continually being reminded how much we don’t have when I think we have enough already.”

“So you would be happy living with my family in the same apartment building until we die?”

“Well, your mom is going to die first right?” she says with a smirk.

“Man, you two have been going at it lately, huh?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. If I hear one more ‘well you should do this with Jack’ or ‘are you sure you want to do that with Maddie, I think I may go nuts.’”

“I could get you outta there in a heartbeat, toots,” Fitzzy says.

“I know. I know. But there is something to be said with sticking with your family.”

Fitzzy grabs her hand a little tighter as they continue to walk.

“Fuck!” Marie shouts, startling a middle aged man on 10th street who was reading a book on his front stoop.

“What?” Fitzzy says.

“I forgot my mascara!”

“You look fine,” Fitzzy says without really understanding what he just said.

“Fine?”

“I mean beautiful, perfect, gorgeous.”

“Just go. I am going to run back home to get it. I will meet you up there.” She starts walking back the two blocks toward 700 Park.

“Ok, remember it’s 90 Castle Point.”

Fitzzy continues his walk until he is at the steps of Spellings house. It is as grand and over the top as he expected, with two gargoyle statues perched on either side of the rooftop and two lion sculptures standing guard at the bottom of the stairs. The door is massive, twice the size of a standard door and it has a full stained glass window pane. Guess someone with Spelling’s money doesn’t worry about getting robbed. Put this door on any building south of Willow Ave and it’s a burglary waiting to happen. There is probably an obnoxious doorbell that plays the sound of angels singing or something, but Fitzzy cannot find it so he grabs the door knocker and is surprised that even this is heavy. Only six blocks separate 700 Park from Spelling’s mansion but it feels like the properties are acres away. He picks it up off of the door and knocks a few times.

Spelling opens the door and Fitzzy walks into a gigantic open room. The place absolutely no walls. He can see the kitchen where the lightbulbs are in the ceiling; he can also see floor to ceiling windows that show the city glowing at night. The immensity of the house is staggering. A

loft with a spiral staircase spins out overlooking the New York City skyline and a fireplace crackles along the right side of the unit, yet it doesn't feel hot even in the summer.

"Won't you come in?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Nice place." Fitzzy takes off his jacket and wonders if this place has a special wing just for visitor's jackets.

"I'll take that," Spelling says, taking Fitzzy's worn leather jacket. "And where is your lovely wife tonight?"

Is this guy really talking like this? On purpose?

"Oh, she will be right up, she had to run back home, forgot her mascara or something. I just didn't want to be late."

"Well you are right on time, Angela set the timer on the roast for eight-thirty."

"And where is *your* lovely wife?" Fitzzy playfully gives Spelling a few punches in the shoulder, poking fun at the way Spelling talks. Spelling looks down at his shoulder and back up at Fitzzy, the hint of a smile miles away and Fitzzy realizes they aren't close enough for those friendly gestures.

"She had to scamper back to the office, trial initiates tomorrow and she needed her deposition." Spelling walks behind the granite topped kitchen island and opens the door to the oven.

Fitzzy knows maybe three of the words Spelling said, but nods in false understanding. Sensing the onset of awkward silence, Fitzzy walks around to help.

"Oh no, please, sit down. Would you like a beverage? Some wine perhaps? Or would a beer be more your style?"

“Yea sure, I could have a beer.” Fitzzy sits down at the table and fiddles with the cloth place mat. It feels expensive. Marie would go nuts for this stuff. It is 8:15, where the hell is she?

“Well, you are in luck tonight, Mr. Fitzzy.” Spelling pulls out a bottle of beer that Fitzzy has never seen before. “This little slice of Heaven is from a small brewery in Colorado. I have the first case ever delivered to the east coast.” Fitzzy can tell that Spelling is pleased with this and reluctantly takes the beer. Beer is beer he thought, you can’t really mess it up. He takes a quick swig and lets the liquid swirl in his mouth.

This can’t be beer. It is smooth. It tastes like fruit and Fitzzy kind of likes it. It doesn’t have that aftertaste that Bud has where it makes his face contract. He only drinks around the firehouse, and this is more due to peer pressure than an actual craving for the taste. But this stuff, he could get used to it.

“Stuff is pretty good.” Fitzzy has a dumb smile. Maybe he is wrong about Spelling.

“I hope so. At thirty dollars a case it should be exquisite.”

If Fitzzy hadn’t swallowed his last sip, it would be all over Spelling’s kitchen floor.

Spelling places the sliced pieces of roast on the table with a glass of wine for himself. Fitzzy sticks his fork into the plate, leaning across Spelling, who just stares in disbelief.

“Oh, sorry.” He puts the pieces back on the plate and brings the plate closer to him.

It is a quarter to nine and still no Marie. She would have been mortified by this last gesture. After years of savagely stabbing at food on the firehouse table, Fitzzy is conditioned for informalities. He is rough and lacks the etiquette for a formal dinner.

“So, Edward, how is life down at the firehouse?” Spelling cuts his slice into symmetrical pieces and lines them up in the center of his plate. Edward is through with three pieces of roast already and the remnants of the fourth are currently cutting off his attempt to answer.

“It’s tough. Too many fires,” Edward says after gulping down the slice. Spelling finally takes his first bite and chews the piece slowly and methodically. He leans his head back and swallows with, what looked like, every muscle in his neck.

“Yes, it is heart-wrenching to see so many good people displaced or even perish in these insane blazes.” Spelling picks up his wine and swirls it around a few times. “I am still saddened by what happened to your friend, Mr. Rivera.”

“Yeah, Eddie was a great guy. An even better fireman. It’s terrible.” Fitzy figures he’d better leave the last few pieces on the plate in case Marie or Angela ever decide to show up. It is just about nine and he is beginning to worry. She must be walking back up.

Spelling puts down his utensils and interlocks his fingers in front of his face. “Mr. Fitzy.”

“You can just call me Fitzy, Myron.”

“Fitzy then. I was wondering if you had any insight into the recent fire on Washington Street. Did the fire department ever finish the cleanup?”

“You mean the Yellow Flats Fire?” Fitzy puts down the fork.

“Yes, that one. That was the one in which Mr. Rivera passed as well, right?”

“Yeah.” Fitzy says. “That place won’t be cleaned up for another few weeks. Not enough man-power to fight the new fires and clean up the old ones.” Fitzy saw the knuckles on Spelling’s hands stretch and tighten as he said this. “Plus, there is still the investigation as to who started that fire.”

“I thought the newspapers said it was actually, and I don’t mean to be rude when I say this but, Mr. Rivera who started it?”

“That’s a bullshit story,” Fitzzy blurts out. Spelling sits back in his chair. “I’m sorry for the language, Myron. But Eddie didn’t start any fire. He was trying to figure it out with the rest of his group down at the shelter.”

“Ah, the shelter. That’s right.” Spelling grabs his wine and sips. “That nun who runs the place is a little much, no?”

“What do you mean?” Fitzzy asks.

“Well, I just wonder about her motives. Why is she so invested in this housing situation?”

“She just wants people to be treated fairly is my guess,” Fitzzy says. Where the hell is Marie?

“In a perfect world I would say yes. The crusading nun fighting for the poor. But did you know that her family owns several properties in Hawaii?”

“No. But why does that matter?”.

“Her family is in the real estate business. And she only came to Hoboken two years ago when the vacancy law was just signed into action. Seems a little suspicious to me.”

“Are you telling me that Sister Roberta, a nun, is actually trying to get in on buying property in Hoboken?”

“Well I cannot say for sure but if so much negative attention is brought upon developers, myself included, wouldn’t it make it easy for someone like her to drive out the competition and make a low ball offer?” Spelling takes the bottle of wine and fills his glass. He reaches behind and passes another beer to Fitzzy.

He can’t believe that this lowlife would actually accuse a nun of arson.

The door to the house swings open and Angela and Marie walk in.

“Sorry, boys. I ran into Angie here on my way back up and we stopped to get a bottle of wine.” Marie puts the bottle on the island. “Oh my God. Look at this kitchen!”

Spelling gets the rest of the roast from the oven.

“You ate already?” Angela says, disappointed.

“Well, we didn’t know how long you would be. Besides, it gave Fitzy and I a chance to bond over some alcohol.”

Fitzy, only two beers in, already feels buzzed. The alcohol content in Spelling’s beer is nearly triple a normal Bud or Bud light.

“So have you two thought about buying in my building?” Spelling says as Marie and Angela eat.

“It’s a beautiful building,” Marie says. “But I think we are happy where we are.”

“That’s a wonderful feeling,” Angela says. “Isn’t it?” She says this as if it isn’t. Fitzy wonders how often she and Spelling move around and if she would trade the grandness of this apartment (and her husband’s ambition) for something smaller and more stable.

After dinner, Angela and Marie stay inside and continue to talk over wine while Spelling and Fitzy sit outside on the balcony.

“Such a beautiful view, isn’t it?” Spelling says as he scans the New York City skyline. “One day someone is going to be on that side and look across over here and say the same thing. And all of the buildings they see will be Spelling properties.”

Fitzy doesn’t say a word.

“Something wrong, Fitzy?”

“You’re wrong about Sister Roberta.”

Angela pokes her head out of the opening in the doorway. "You boys want some dessert?" Spelling shakes his head no and she goes back inside, never waiting for Fitzzy's response.

"I never said it was a fact. I am merely speculating." Spelling turns towards Fitzzy. "Don't many people in Hoboken speculate about me and my wife?"

He is right. How many stories has Fitzzy heard, even from his friends, about Spelling and how terrible he is. And here Fitzzy sits on the balcony of a man that is so reviled in Hoboken that just being in his presence is cause for alarm among Hobokenites.

"My point is this, Fitzzy." Spelling says. "You can't rely on what other people say without seeing something first hand."

"True."

"Now, have you ever seen me start any of these fires everyone seems to think I am responsible for?"

"No, but you could have technically paid someone to do it."

"True. But is there any proof of that? You mean to tell me that I am so evil that I would pay to have buildings burned down knowing that children would be in there? Is that the type of person you think I am?"

"I don't know what type of person you are. I just met you."

"And when did you meet Sister Roberta?"

"Around the same time I met you." Fitzzy is struck by this point.

"Understandably, my appearance lends itself to scrutiny. I do not have the benefit of a nun's habit," Spelling says. "But the way things look are not necessarily the way things are."

Spelling takes out a cigar from the humidor on the table. "Would you like one?" He extends the cigar toward Fitzzy with a cutter.

"Sure." Fitzzy slices the end off and lights a match.

"That's a Cuban you are smoking right there. Maduro leaves."

Fitzzy takes a few puffs. It is strong and the nicotine goes to his head.

"Maduro leaves are the darkest." Spelling flicks the end of the cigar. Ashes fall into the ashtray in one big clump. "The darker the leaf, the better the burn."

Chapter Seven

The summer continues to push temperatures well into the 90s through July. But the fires surprisingly die down. Summer months are usually the busiest time for both cops and fireman, with fights breaking out in Columbus Park at night or at the Wilton Haus after a few too many tequila shots on the weekends, and backyard barbecues going awry. For the first three weeks of July, though, Fitzzy and company barely put out a firecracker, even on the Fourth of July. The lack of fires gives Fitzzy some peace of mind as he and his grandfather watch Jack play ball throughout the summer. Fitzzy knew he would enjoy watching his son grow up and selfishly hoped he would grow into a great baseball player. But now, as he sees that dream realized in Jack's current play, he wants to freeze time.

Jack's birth was not a total surprise. Marie and Fitzzy weren't "trying" but they weren't not trying either. When Marie told Fitzzy she was pregnant, he was happy. He wasn't jump through the roof ecstatic because he wasn't sure what it meant for him or Marie. He just knew it represented change and he was ok with that. He never let life events get him riled up. He knew they happened and you dealt with them. Those nine months were more confusing than anything. His world seemed like a snow globe with everyone swirling around him, darting from side to side in baby euphoria while he stood motionless in the middle waiting for the shaking to stop.

Those nine months paled in comparison to the first month of Jack's life. All of his friends said how having a baby changes you, how there will be sleepless nights and crying. But none of those descriptions fit what really happened. Fitzzy knew what crying sounded like. He saw and heard people wail and weep at fire calls. But he knew why those people cried. When Jack crinkled his face and opened his mouth, he let out a sound that Fitzzy, who was able to tune out fire engine horns during naps at the firehouse, had no control over. He got angry at the sound

because it was a constant reminder of how things changed and he found himself leaving the house more often than not just so he wouldn't have to hear it. He knew it was selfish and that he was being a baby and worse, an awful dad, but he didn't know what else to do. He was unhappily happy.

Until one Saturday morning on laundry day. Marie was out buying diapers and returning some baby clothes and Fitzy took Jack in the swing down to the laundry room in the basement of the building. He sorted his clothes and Marie's and Jack's. He put some music on the radio. Jack was staring around the room and ABC by the Jackson 5 came on. Fitzy thought it was a sign or something. Talking to Jack as a baby was one of the most uncomfortable things he ever did. It was like talking to himself and he really didn't find himself that interesting.

Jack smiled when the song hit the chorus. Fitzy looked round the room and closed the door.

"You like this song, Jack?" Fitzy said in as high-pitched a voice as he could muster because Jack only seemed to smile when he sounded like he was castrated.

Jack cooed and waved his left hand. "Keep using that left hand, Jacky boy, just like grandpa."

Fitzy started off by mouthing the one, two, three while he held up the appropriate number of fingers. A little more left arm swinging from Jack and Fitzy was spinning around singing the chorus.

Jack was now bobbing his head slightly and pushing off the base of the swing with his feet. Fitzy grabbed a t-shirt and rolled it up to mimic a microphone. He was channeling his inner Michael Jackson. But Jack stopped smiling and just stared at him. His eyes were huge, just like

Marie's, and in the midst of changing from blue to green. Fitzzy thought something was wrong so he knelt down and hovered over Jack.

"What's wrong, buddy?" Fitzzy said out loud not necessarily expecting a response but holding out hope that Jack might just come out and say something.

"Please don't poop. It's not poop, is it? Please no poop," Fitzzy said frantically. He had not changed one single poop filled diaper in the two months that Jack was alive. Not because he was lazy either. He would run out of the room gagging at the sight and smell of the poop. It looked like spinach being pushed through a soft serve ice cream machine, and he realized he could never eat from the Mr. Softee truck ever again.

But Jack just kept staring.

And Fitzzy started to cry. He cried hard and messy. The tears dripped on Jack's onesie. He looked up and tried to wipe his eyes but his shoulders started heaving and he started laughing.

"Am I going fucking nuts?" he said aloud with a chuckle. It wouldn't stop though. He was laughing from his belly and crying from his heart while his brain failed to process any of it. "What's wrong with me, Jack?" Jack just kept staring. And then, finally, he smiled.

Fitzzy realized at that moment that he was not only the happiest he'd ever been, he was proud. Proud to be a dad, a husband, a fireman, a man. Jack looked at him with the truest eyes he had ever seen. Eyes that knew nothing of Fitzzy's hatred of his own father or the guilt that he carried with him over his absence. In those eyes that now opened to their full circumference, iris and all, Fitzzy saw need.

In the small dank laundry room of 700 Park, Jack broke Fitzzy, and he would never look at his son, or dirty clothes the same way again.

Now, as he looks at Jack dominating the baseball landscape in Hoboken now, he can barely mask his pride.

Jack hits two home runs in a game, strikes out 17 in another. The Jersey Journal has Fitzgerald headlines almost every other day recapping the games around Hudson County. As the end of July approaches, Jack is selected to the Hoboken South All-Star team and has worn the red polyester jersey with “South” scripted across the front and 17 emblazoned on the back every day since.

“Da’, can I wear my jersey to the Feast?” Jack asks one afternoon in between batting practice throws with Fitzy.

“You’re gonna get food on it.” Fitzy says. He whizzes a fastball toward the outside corner and Jack smashes it the opposite way down the first base line. Jack sets back up, pigeon-toeing his front foot, just like Fitzy did in the picture that hangs in the hallway from Fitzy’s days at Saint Peter’s.

Jack, unfazed by the maturity of hitting a ball that hard to the opposite field says, “Mom can get the stain out, can’t she?”

Fitzy sticks his tongue out a little bit and bites it before he lets another fastball go. The ball sails just over Jack’s helmetless head, close enough to scare and knock Jack to the floor but far away enough not to cause any damage. “The correct response is ‘I won’t get any stains on my uniform.’” Fitzy returns the smile.

Jack gets up and sets himself in the batter’s box again, his eyebrows furrowed in anger. Fitzy smiles even wider at this. He rears back again but instead of a fastball, he turns the ball in his hand and finds the two seams that his grandfather taught him to throw a curveball with, and snaps off a filthy curve that starts at Jack’s head and breaks toward his shoelaces. But instead of

diving out of the way, Jack stands in and keeps his weight on his back foot. He laces the ball back up the middle and knocks Fitzy off his feet as the ball nearly misses hitting him in the shoulder.

“Ok.” He wipes the dirt off of his hat and says, “You can wear the damn jersey to the feast.”

The Saint Ann’s Feast is a spectacle for the senses. It is as much a Hoboken tradition as working on the waterfront, baseball, Frank Sinatra and a good mozzarella and roast beef sandwich. For four days at the end of July, the city shuts down at 4:00 pm, culminating in a grand procession at noon on the last day, a Sunday, Feast Day.

For the last three years, Fitzy has been a part of this procession, carrying the Saint with a few other cops and fireman. Dressed in white pants, a white short sleeved shirt and a red fabric belt that hangs off of his hip, Fitzy proudly walks the streets of Hoboken before he and his family attend the last night of the feast. The walk starts at St. Ann’s church and makes its way up 7th street toward the avenue. He sees Marie, Jack, Maddie, Lori and Grandpar sitting outside 700 Park and gives them a wave. His mother starts crying, as she does every year, as he passes. Jack already has his jersey on and Fitzy gives him a wink as he walks by.

As a fireman, Fitzy is part of nearly every parade that takes place in the town. He marches on Washington Street for the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, even the Puerto Rican Day parade, but he enjoys the Feast Day procession the best. He isn’t dressed in his uniform for one, but when people look at him carrying the massive six-foot-tall Saint on his shoulders, he knows that this tradition means a lot to them. St Patty’s day is about getting drunk, that’s it, but for the people that, year after year, sit outside of their apartments anxiously waiting to catch a glimpse of the Saint, Fitzy sees it as a tradition that is worth something.

Later that night, as the whole family walks down to the feast, Jack asks, “How come you carry the Saint every year, Da?”

Lori points a finger in the air and says, “Because it’s tradition!”

“I don’t really know what you mean by that, Nanny,” Jack says.

“Don’t be a smartass,” Grandpar says.

“Jack. Do you see all the people that sit outside waiting for us to pass?” Fitzzy says. Jack nods his head.

“Well. They wait there year after year just to see the Saint pass.”

“Yeah. But why?” Jack asks

“Because it is important to them.”

“I still don’t get it.” Jack says, “What’s the big deal about seeing a statue being carried all over the place?”

“Ok. When you pitch, do you do anything before every pitch or in the dugout before you go back out there?”

Jack thought for a second. “Yeah. Me and Madigan have a handshake we do before we get back out to the field.”

“Ok. Anyone else who sees you do that will ask themselves why you do a stupid handshake every inning.”

“It isn’t stupid. It’s good luck and it’s only for me and him.”

“That’s how people feel about the Saint. It’s good luck. It gives them a good feeling. And it makes them feel a part of something.”

“See. It’s tradition!” Lori says again raising her right arm in the air as she says it.

As they walk closer to Adams Street, the entrance to the feast is congested. There are two sausage and pepper stands on either side and the smell of smoke sausage and the griddle permeate the air. There is no room to walk and smoke from the cooking stands fills the air, making a light fog throughout the blocks of the feast. Fitzzy is immediately starving.

As they push their way through the first block, they come to a standstill.

“This can’t be the line.” Marie says as they halt behind a line that extends nearly two full blocks toward the stand that this feast is most famous for, the zeppoles. Sweet dough dropped in giant vats of oil causes hour long lines every night. With a little powdered sugar, the Saint Ann’s zeppoles are a fried, fattening delicacy. As the multitude of feast goers walk by with their hands elbow deep in grease stained brown paper bags, they are worth the wait.

“Yep. It is.” Fitzzy responds, pulling out a twenty-dollar bill. “Here. Go get something to eat. Jack and I will wait on line.” Marie takes the cash and Maddie, Lori and Grandpar roll toward the back of the feast.

“I want Piccolo’s!” Grandpar yells before they are out of earshot.

“This is a tradition I don’t mind waiting for,” Jack says

The line moves at a snail’s pace but they are finally able to see the zeoples and the oil vats. Watching the workers pour the dough into the oil, and the smell that comes next is always a favorite for Fitzzy. Jack cranes his neck as the balls of dough cascade into the vat and then sniffs a deep breathe.

Maria Fusiak, Fitzzy’s fifth grade teacher and Jack’s current sixth grade teacher is the cashier. Jack is petrified and, to a certain extent, so is Fitzzy.

“Hey, Ms. Fusiak,” Fitzzy says.

“Eddie. You can call me Maria, you know.”

“It just feels wrong!” Fitzzy says.

“Hello, Jack,” Fusiak says in the serious tone of an old school teacher who knows that she instills nightmares into the dreams of her students and takes some semblance of joy in this.

“Hi, Ms. Fusiak,” he says while looking down at the pavement.

“Jack!” Fusiak says. “Look at me when you are talking to me.” She smiles at Fitzzy, who uncomfortably smiles back as he suddenly feels as if he is 11 years old and did not hand his homework in on time.

Jack looks up. “Hi Ms. Fusiak.”

“That’s better.” She reaches to her right and takes a fresh zeppole from the pile, dumps it in a bag of powdered sugar and hands it to Jack. “This one is on the house.”

Jack looks like he doesn’t know what to do. Is it poisoned? Fitzzy is unsure as well but thanks Ms. Fusiak and collects his baker’s dozen at the end of the stand. The bag is hot.

Fitzzy and Jack walk to the back of the feast where the Piccolo stand, and their eight-dollar cheesesteak sandwiches. The kid rides are back there as well and Fitzzy knows Maddie bugged the hell out of Marie to get on those rides.

Jack’s hands are covered in white sugar and if he could unhinge his jaw to take bigger bites, he probably would try.

Marie is standing in front of a train ride and he sees his mother and grandfather on line at Piccolo’s. He walks up behind Marie and puts the bag of zeppoles in front of her face. She grabs it out of his hands and devours one, turns around with a mouthful of dough and laughs. Maddie circles back around on the train and waves at them.

In the distance, explosions are heard. No one moves as these are expected during the closing hours of the Feast. Each year, Hoboken residents set off “Feast Bombs.” Sometimes,

entire blocks are rigged with fireworks that light up the sky in that neighborhood. To anyone outside of Hoboken, the last night of the feast may very well look like a war zone, with orange and white blasts illuminating the sky all over the town.

There is a loud Feast Bomb explosion around the corner from 7th and Madison near the end of the feast. Fitzy smells the smoke and it is very different than the plume coming off Piccolo's stove. This smells like burnt fabric. The crowd moves toward the explosion and Fitzy follows, unsure of what is happening. Marie, Jack, and Maddie walk behind him. A fire truck pulls up on the corner of 7th and Madison, and Fitzy he turns the corner, he sees a car engulfed in flames. Ladder 8 handles this territory and Fitzy sees Billy Knapp and Josh Rodriguez hop off the truck.

"Fucking idiots," Knapp says as he passes Fitzy with the hose.

Knapp attaches the hose to the hydrant across the street from the fire as Rodriguez gets the spectators to step back. A cop car has pulled up behind the firetruck and John Cuning steps out to help Rodriguez. Knapp extinguishes the car fire before it explodes. A woman, frantic, runs up to Cuning as the car steams.

"Officer! Officer!"

Fitzy walks a little closer to hear the conversation.

"Those people," she points across the street to where the San Monte Giacomo social club and some of its members sit outside. "they set off bombs on this block!"

One of the club members walks up, lights a cigar and starts puffing on it as he gets closer.

"Johnny boy!" he says to Cuning.

"Hey, Sal." Cuning looks upset at the fact that he knows this guy. Fitzy has seen him before but doesn't know his name.

“We was just setting off the Feast Bombs and one of them hit this car. It ain’t even supposed to be parked here right?”

“Actually Sal, this is residential parking now.”

“Arrest him officer! He almost blew up the entire block,” the woman yells.

“Hey honey,” Sal grabs his crotch, “arrest this!” The woman gasps.

“Sal. I’m gonna have to write a summons for this. This wasn’t safe.”

“Oh. I see. A fucking yuppie complains and I get a ticket, huh?” He blows smoke into Cunning’s face. “What happened to tradition in this town?”

Cunning does not respond and hands Sal his summons. The woman looks pleased.

Chapter Eight

“It has come to our attention that the apartments on 8th and Park have been without electricity for the last few weeks,” Sister Roberta says to roughly fifty Los Olividades members sitting in front of her. Fitzzy, sitting on a folding chair in the middle of the gym, knows she is referring to “Little India,” a block long section of housing that is primarily made up of Indian immigrants in low income housing and is only a block away from his building.

It is 97 degrees out on this August day and even though most of those people cannot afford air conditioners, those who can are unable to turn them on.

“This is as blatant a tactic for displacing these tenants as anything we have ever seen,” Roberta continues. “The landlord, Arlan Cushing, is deliberately making conditions unlivable in hopes that his tenants will leave!” People in the crowd whisper to each other, while some shake their heads.

“Is this the price we are paying for ‘renaissance’?” she asks, air-quoting the word that newspapers are using when writing about Hoboken’s housing dilemma.

“No!” A woman in the front row shouts.

“Is this is the price we are paying for change?” Roberta stops and surveys the crowd. More “no’s.”

“Then we must show our true strength.” She turns behind her and picks up a stack of papers off the folding table and begins to hand them out.

“We need to be together in this fight. And show city hall that we will not just let people who have money destroy the lives that we have built.” She says ‘we’ as if she is one of them. Spelling’s words creep back into Fitzzy’s mind. Everyone is motivated by something. What is Roberta motivated by?

She hands a flier to Fitzy. The headline reads “STOP DISPLACEMENT” and proceeds to list every deceased fire victim of the last year, starting outside of 800 Park Avenue, this first building on the Little India block, and ending at City Hall.

As Fitzy reads the flier, he glosses over the politically charged statements like “march against Reaganism,” and a picture of Arlan Cushing. The photo is in black and white and the Australian Cushing sits posed for the camera, bald with a poorly fitting suit draped over his overweight body. He looks like a humanized version of Mr. Potato Head, just paler. Fitzy’s eyes are then drawn to the picture of a burning building. It is a news clipping of the fire at 121 Clinton. The building is engulfed and seeing it from this angle disturbs Fitzy. He knows what happened at this moment inside. This flier is blatant propaganda but right above the photo is the question “Whose children will be next?” He remembers Cynthia Rodriguez and the other children whose names he cannot remember. Why have so many children died in these fires? How do the parents survive but leave their children to burn? He knows the answers to these questions lie in the fact that, for the everyday person who is not trained in firefighting, being trapped in a fire is disorienting, confusing and frightening. But he knows he would go back for Jack and Maddie regardless of his fireman training.

Roberta is back up on the stage. “Join me at noon on August 12th to march against greed!” The crowd claps and cheers. Fitzy stays seated and continues to read the flier as other begin to file out.

“Doing some light reading?” she says.

“This guy looks miserable.” Fitzy says, pointing to Cushing. “With all that money, you’d think he would at least smile.”

“It’s never enough, Eddie.” Roberta sits next to him. “They make a million and they want a million more. The sad part is that there are so many like him. Full pockets but empty.” Fitzzy resists the urge to interrogate her on the spot. He can’t help but wonder if her pockets are expanding. He moves to a more pressing subject.

“I wanted to tell you that I haven’t seen Pearsall in months, not even at his other buildings,” Fitzzy says hoping that this is a good sign. Since Roberta mentioned Pearsall with the other suspect landlords, Fitzzy has kept an eye out for anything that looks shady.

“Not surprising,” Roberta’s hands fidget. “Either he is laying low until a fire is started or everyday life has kept him busy. This isn’t a science, Eddie.”

“What else can I do?” He knows he sounds whiny.

“Keep watch. Keep your family safe. Always be prepared.”

“I am. But the thought that someone could be so cruel as to burn people out of their houses just drives me crazy.” He wants to see a reaction from Roberta but she doesn’t flinch.

“Some people have no moral center, Edward,” she replies.

He wonders if everyone is that good at lying.

Fitzzy leaves the shelter and starts walking home. As he passes Johnny and Harry’s, the new steakhouse on the corner of 6th and Bloomfield, he sees Cushing sitting at a table and immediately looks down at the flier. He’s fatter in person for sure. He passes the table and catches a glimpse of Myron Spelling, who sits with Cushing and is angrily pointing his finger into Cushing’s chest. Cushing looks like a little boy being scolded by his father.

The next morning, Fitzzy pulls out the box of new fire alarms from under his bed. He starts installing them on the lower levels of the building and is putting the final screws in the last one on the main floor when the door opens.

“What are you doing Eddie?” Lori asks Fitzzy, who is standing on a ladder in the hallway leading up to her apartment.

“Fire alarms.” Fitzzy screws the final screw into the ceiling and descends the ladder. “I got four yesterday and this is the last one to put up. The others are in the basement just in case.”

“Oh, Eddie. What are you worried about?” Lori hands Eddie her grocery bag. “Can you bring this up?”

“If a match is lit in this building, one of these will go off,” he says, taking the bag from her hands. “I’m not taking any chances.”

“Eddie. The only fire that will get set in this house is if your aunt cooks in the broiler again.” They walk up the stairs and Lori opens the door to the apartment. Grandpar is sleeping in his recliner.

In a whisper, Eddie says, “You never know, Ma.” Lori just shakes her head. Fitzzy puts the grocery bag on the kitchen counter.

“What are you making for dinner?”

“Pot roast. You want some?”

“Yeah. I’ll be down later.” He creeps out of the apartment and heads upstairs. For weeks, Fitzzy has been on edge. The lack of fires has actually made him anxious for the next one. Who was next? Would they hit the projects again? Or would they move to the middle class that occupied most of the tenement apartments in midtown? He requested those fire alarms just to be safe. He figures the collective ringing would wake everyone up if it happened in the middle of the night, but he knows that his family is a news headline waiting to happen if a fire were to catch at 700 Park. He asked Brigati for a smoke generator and siren in addition to those fire alarms. Whether or not they liked it, his family would be prepared.

While Lori prepares the pot roast and Grandpa naps and Marie helps the kids with their homework, Fitzy prepares the generator at the bottom of the stairwell. He switches it to on and runs up to the top floor with the siren in his hands as smoke starts to fill the hallways. The fire alarms begin to blare and he starts turning the siren as he runs back down the stairs. When he gets outside, he puts the siren on the pavement and takes out a stopwatch from his back pocket. Two and a half minutes is the target time.

Neighbors began to look out their windows as Marie and Jack run through the smoke with Maddie in Marie's arms. She is frightened and knows that that fear is what got her outside so fast. She does not notice the stopwatch in his hand.

A minute and thirty-five seconds.

Uncle Bill and Aunt Abby come through next looking confused to see Fitzy outside with the stopwatch.

Two minutes and fifteen seconds.

Finally, James, in nothing but a white wife beater tank top and boxers holds Grandpar underneath his right arm while Matt holds the left, Lori is right behind them looking wildly from left to right as she steps through the smoke. Grandpar is coughing loudly. Fitzy clicks his stopwatch.

"Is everyone ok?" Lori asks.

"Yeah. We are fine." Abby says, "I wasn't cooking this time. It wasn't me."

Marie looks at Eddie, who is looking at the stopwatch.

"Eddie. Did you do this?"

Fitzy continues to look at the stop watch.

Grandpar is wheezing now and coughing loudly.

“Eddie!” Marie yells.

Fitzzy looks up at her, at everyone and says, “I... I wanted to make sure we were ready.”

Grandpar’s coughs drown out some of what he says.

Everyone, including the neighbors, stare at Fitzzy.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Marie says as she drags Jack and Maddie back into the building, shutting off the smoke generator as she walks by.

James and Matt grab Grandpar and help him back into the building with Abby and Bill supporting his backside.

“You don’t think, Eddie,” Lori says as she starts up the stairs. “You never think!”

Fitzzy looks at the stop watch in his hands and back up to his mother ascending the stairwell, then he looks back down at the watch.

Four minutes and thirty-five seconds.

Not good enough.

Chapter Nine

The day of the rally is hot and sticky. The thick humidity is palpable, Fitzzy's shirt already sticks to his body after only a single block walk to where Sister Roberta and some other members of Los Olividades stand, awaiting the arrival of the crowd.

Roberta's forehead is glistening and the black and caramel skin of the majority of spectators casts a mirror-like sheen that sparkles in the sunlight. A blue Ford pickup is parked with a wooden platform in its bed, and a microphone plugged into a generator stands on top of it.

"Can you help a little old lady?" Roberta reaches out her hand toward Fitzzy, who helps her get into the truck bed and onto the platform. "Would you like to come up too?" she asks Fitzzy.

"Oh, no thank you. I am fine watching from down here." He thought about not coming to the rally.

Fitzzy maneuvers himself toward the back of the crowd. Roberta grabs the microphone, and the snare and screeching of the sound stabilizing gets everyone's attention.

"It is ninety-five degrees out here today," Roberta begins. "Ninety-five degrees. And the residents of 800 Park cannot even put a fan on, let alone an air conditioner." She points to the building behind her, where the tenants are standing out front. Over thirty people live in these apartments, most related, all seem withered and exhausted.

"They have no lights. No access to a stove on a daily basis. They are forced into crude methods just to feed their families. Methods that put them at greater risk of starting fires so that those at City Hall and their landlords have someone to blame when the building is engulfed in flames." The crowd is angered by this. A man shouts, "Cardillo don't care about us!"

“There is a lack of compassion from our politicians and our city leaders. They play the blame game. It is the electric company’s fault or it is the tenant’s fault for not paying their rent on time. It is never the landlord’s fault. Well I am here to tell you today that WE know where the blame falls. It falls on Arlan Cushing. It falls on Mayor Cardillo. It falls on everyone who carelessly stands back and does nothing as people of color burn in this town. How many children must die a horrible death before something is done?”

The pickup truck begins starts to creep forward slowly.

“Follow me as we bring our collective voices to City Hall for all to hear.”

A woman, whose arms and neck are covered in burn wounds yells out, “Stop the fires! Catch the Liars!”

The crowd picks up on this and begins chanting as the procession moves up 8th street toward Washington Street.

“STOP THE FIRES! CATCH THE LIARS!” Roberta joins in.

As the crowd moves onto Washington Street, traffic stops and people get out of their cars. The pickup truck seems to be moving a bit faster and the crowd is nearly jogging at this point as if getting to City Hall faster will make a difference. Fitzzy passes countless friends and sees Trentacosta and Turso sitting outside Bennie Tudino’s pizzeria. Turso has a slice dangling in front of his mouth as he looks at Fitzzy in disbelief. Trentacosta holds up his arms and screams, “What the fuck are you doing?” with a smile on his face. Fitzzy just continues on the march.

When they get in front of City Hall, Roberta continues the chant, turning directly toward the doors of the building.

“STOP THE FIRES! CATCH THE LIARS!” reaches a crescendo.

Everyone knows Cardillo or Haglen are never coming out, but that is not the point. Sooner or later this many voices have to be heard.

Fitzzy stands in the back. Out of the crowd toward the far right, he sees Mickey Pearsall walking over to him.

“Fitzzy?” he asks. “What the fuck are you doing here?” He is incensed.

“Here to give my support, Mick. It’s terrible what is happening to these people.” He clenches his fist hoping that Pearsall gives him a reason to swing. “Why are you here?”

“Came to see why all the animals were outta their cages. It’s a fuckin sea of Moulis out here. I never woulda pegged you as a Spic Supporter Fitz.”

“Half of these people were probably your tenants once, Mick. You don’t feel bad?”

“Feel bad? Why the hell would I?” He pulls a cigarette out of his pocket and pulls a match out as well. “Why would I feel bad about these hood rats who bring the drugs and the gangs and the guns to my buildings when I could rent to a nice white family like yours? Or, better yet, a nice white yuppie couple who will pay me three times as much. You’re lucky I don’t raise your goddamn rent!” He lights the cigarette and throws the match down at Fitzzy’s feet.

“Go fuck yourself, Mick.” Fitzzy starts walking away.

“Woah. Cump! I’m just busting balls,” Pearsall yells. “But if you keep hangin around these jungle bunnies and moon crickets, maybe I will,” he says with a laugh.

As Fitzzy walks away from Pearsall, police sirens blast through the chants and the cars pull up to the left and right of the blue pickup.

“PLEASE CALMLY DISPERSE!” blares out through the megaphone atop the car to the right. Chief Falco sits in the passenger seat next to Madigan. Two more cop cars pull up behind the car and four more officers step out, billy clubs in hand.

The crowd stops its chants and Sister Roberta, who has also stopped her raucous rousing, puts the microphone to her mouth and calmly says, “This is a peaceful protest officers. We are not harming anyone.”

Falco, who still has not gotten out of the car responds, “YOU ARE BLOCKING TRAFFIC, SISTER. PLEASE DISPERSE OR YOU WILL BE FORCIBLY REMOVED.”

“FUCK YOU!” someone says from the crowd.

“CONO DE MIERDAS!” another yells

Two cops, probably rookies since Fitzzy has no idea who they are, step forward. The crowd moves back slightly.

“PLEASE CALMLY DISPERSE,” Falco blares through the megaphone.

There is some jostling at the front of the crowd and the officers have their clubs cocked back. A Corona bottle sails over Fitzzy’s head and crashes at the feet of one of the officers, getting remnants of glass and beer on his shoes. The officer looks for the culprit when another bottle sails past Fitzzy’s head at a much greater speed and hits the officer squarely in the face. His nose leaks blood and he begins to flail his club at the crowd. The other officers push forward and start swinging viciously.

Falco, still in the car, can barely be heard above the screams and yells of the crowd and policemen, but both he and Roberta are probably imploring the mob to stop. Fights break out around Fitzzy and he sees Pearsall get into it with a young Puerto Rican kid, probably no older than nineteen. Pearsall pushes the kid back and then swings, narrowly missing the young boy’s face. Two other boys now join in and circle Pearsall, who sees Fitzzy. His eyes dart from the three boys that surround him to Fitzzy. He can see that Pearsall is about to get his ass kicked but he stays put. The boy on the left lunges in and Pearsall falls back into the arms of a shirtless boy,

who holds Mickey by his arms. Both boys now take turns pummeling Pearsalll, who has his eyes closed between punches, only opening them to glare at Fitzy watching. Finally, an officer sprints into the melee and bashes the shirtless boy in the back. The other boys flee. Pearsalll kicks the boy who is on the ground before the officer pushes him away. He looks at Fitzy and smiles, nodding his head in that gesture that says, “Ok, I see how it is. Just wait.” He slides out of the crowd.

Sister Roberta is still standing on the pickup truck bed where there is fighting all around the truck. Fitzy runs over, pushes through the crowd, his head on a swivel hoping not to catch the backswing of a club, and reaches up to help her down. He pulls her through the crowd and toward the corner of 1st and Washington.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” she snaps. “Excuse me. I am fine. Why did they have to ruin this? It was peaceful.”

“All that will come of this is how unruly and violent Los Olividades appears.”

“Someone did throw a bottle, Sister.”

“Yes. You’re right,” she says. “But just the presence of police makes everyone so tense. And did they really need that many cop cars? Such a shame.” They both stare at the crowd as multiple arrests are made.

Over the next two days, riots break out throughout the city. Businesses on Washington Street are vandalized. Bennie’s front window is smashed with bricks. Even Bosworth’s funeral home has broken glass in front of the building. The projects, never safe, are a war zone. Hoboken only has 130 police officers, and all of them begin shift duty patrolling Jackson Street from 4th to 7th streets.

With the city in turmoil, Mayor Cardillo finally decides to answer some questions and holds a press conference on the steps of City Hall later that August. Channel 7 covers it. At the firehouse, the crew gathers around the set as the doughy Cardillo steps up on to his platform to reach the microphone:

“Over the course of the summer, Hoboken has faced some challenges. We have had a rash of fires, that, unfortunately have been caused by recklessness and, in some cases, bad luck.”

“Bullshit,” Turso says, taking a swig of Miller Lite.

“Rest assured, these fires are under investigation and our police force will stop at nothing to make sure that no stone remains unturned. The FBI have even offered their services but we, as city leaders, feel that this is a Hoboken problem and Hoboken problems are solved by Hoboken people.” He fuddles with some papers on the podium.

“Sure, why have the fucking United States government help,” Trentacosta says. “We have fuckin’ Matty Falco and his lazy eye to do the job!” he says in reference to the police chief standing behind Cardillo with sunglasses conveniently covering his wandering eye.

“Now, as far as the incidents in front of City Hall the past month and the subsequent incidents on Jackson Street and throughout town, let me tell you this....” Cardillo points toward the camera. “No citizen of Hoboken, white, black, Puerto Rican, whatever, will be permitted to cause disruption in this town.” His arms are bent at the elbow and he is gesturing as if to say “Come fight me.”

“This is brutal.” Fitzzy says. “He might as well put a table on TV right now, have Cushing or whoever on the other side, and live broadcast them handing him stacks of cash under the table.” The other firemen nod in agreement.

“What about your boy Spelling?” Turso says with another swing of beer.

“What are you talking about?”

“Christy was tellin’ me the other night that you and Marie were thinkin’ about buyin’ a place over there.” He points to Spelling’s building. The other fireman seem shocked, both at the fact that Fitzzy would buy from Spelling and that Fitzzy could afford to buy anything at all.

“He gave me a brochure, Lou. He’d sell snow to an eskimo if he could.” Fitzzy doesn’t add that he and Marie consulted their accountant and could indeed afford the place if they wanted to. Or the fact that he ate dinner at Spelling’s house.

“Yeah, sure. You think you’re too good for us?”

“Lou, you’re drunk, ” Fitzzy says.

“Yeah, but I’m tellin’ the truth, no?”

“No. You actually are not telling the truth.” He says. “But Lou?”

“Yeah?”

“If I wanted to buy a fucking mansion in Castle Point, it’s none of your fucking business.” Fitzzy says.

“Are you turnin into one of them?” Turso asks.

“Lou, relax cump,” Trentacosta says. “He looked at an apartment. Who cares?” he says without conviction.

“Get him out of my face, Nicky,” Fitzzy says. “Please.”

“Or what? What are you gonna do?” He feebly throws the can at Fitzzy, who catches it. He knows this is just drunken stupor.

Trentacosta and Colon drag Turso up to bed. The rest of the crew look at Fitzzy and then slide past him up to bed as well. He stays downstairs and sleeps on the couch. Sometimes he feels like he’s married to these guys and he knows that tonight he’s in the doghouse. It will pass.

As he flips through the channels and starts to doze off, a commercial for the game console Atari comes on. Pac Man comes on the screen and the yellow face with the gaping mouth begins to consume everything in his path, even the ghosts after Pac Man consumes a power pellet. The whole commercial is Pac Man chomping on pellets until he eats everyone and moves on to the next level, to eat more, never satisfied until he is finally killed by one of the ghosts.

Chapter Ten

“Hey fuckface,” Turso says, shaking Fitzy. “Wake up.”

“What? What time is it?”

“It’s 11 in the morning. I stayed on for a double today.”

“Oh, what? You’re my friend now?” He slept straight through the morning.

“Yeah. Sorry about that. I really couldn’t believe you would wanna move there, though.”

“Lou, but what if I did? Is that bad?”

“No. It isn’t. I mean, everyone else in this town is trying to do better for themselves. At least you aren’t doing what half these shims are doing.” He sits down next to Fitzy and takes the remote. He flips through some channels.

“There weren’t any calls last night?” Fitzy asks.

“Nope. Last night was the quietest night I have ever seen. Good thing too because I was hammered.”

Colon comes down from upstairs. “Hey, assholes, you hungry?”

“Benny’s just reopened,” Turso says. “Wanna get a slice?”

“Works for me,” Fitzy says, struggling to get off the couch.

Fitzy, Turso, and Colon walk to Benny’s Pizzeria down the block from Ladder 17. It’s comforting to eat one of Benny’s famous slices the size of baseball pennants. The new window was in and no one could tell that this place had been ransacked a few weeks ago.

“Hey Fitzy, looks who’s here,” Colon says, pointing to an old man wearing a dusty, oversized, tattered tuxedo and carrying a yellowing songbook and walking stick. He is blind, and his eyes, a glossy blue, bulge out of his head.

“Hey, hey! Gentleman John, how the hell are ya’?” Fitzzy gets up and helps him over to their table. Gentleman John is a town nomad. He never sleeps in the same bed for two consecutive nights, as most Hobokenites know this. The fireman and police officers in the town look out for him. A singer when he was younger, he now spends his days giving cringe-worthy serenades from the lexicon of Frank Sinatra and other oldies in a tattered tuxedo, his yellowing hair slicked back. The firemen call him “Crazy Old Blue Eyes.”

“Sing us a song Johnny,” Turso says.

“Yea, but no Sinatra,” Colon Says. “I’m tired of that crap, can you sing some Celia Cruz?”

Gentleman John twitches and gives a bellowing laugh. Fitzzy and Turso laugh as well.

“Ok, this is an Oldie but a Goodie.” Johnny stands by the entrance, momentarily blocking the way into the pizzeria. Benny doesn’t care though; he has a front row seat.

I was born in Hoboken!

Johnny drags out the ‘oken’ waving his cane in the air.

H-O-B-O-K-E-N

Where the girls are the fairest

The boys are the squarest

H-O-B-O-K-E-N

Give my regards to Hoboken

Down where the breezes blow

In all kinds of weather

We stick together

In H-O-B-O-K-E-N!

The crowd of 10 people give Johnny a nice round of applause. Benny puts a slice out for him on the counter, but he doesn't take it right away.

"Now, fellas, I got just the thing for youse guys. Something real appropriate for youse." John crouches down, waving his stick in the air.

"Johnny, be careful with that thing." Turso laughs.

"No, no, just listen, it's a real goodie by my good friend Johnny Cash." John climbs on top of the small table, the three men help him up, confused but reluctant to let him fall.

Everyone in the pizzeria turns to watch. Gentleman John has a captivated audience.

No music, no mariachi accompanied Cash during his performances. Instead, Gentleman John stands rigid, letting his cane fall to the floor. He sways side to side and sings:

Love is a burning thing

And it makes a fiery ring

Everyone looks at each other. Fitzzy and Turso grit their teeth.

"Come on, Johnny, this is boring too. I'd rather hear that Sinatra shit than this," Colon yells. Gentleman John continues:

And it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire

The ring of fire

Johnny is in a trance, his voice bellowing in a demonic impersonation of Cash. Some of the patrons start to leave, and Benny, who thought the spectacle to be somewhat entertaining, now comes out from behind the counter, annoyed at his lost profits.

"Get down, you crazy old bat," Benny says.

"Yeah, Johnny!" Fitzzy yells. "That isn't fucking funny."

But Johnny continues until the three men rise from their seats to leave. As Fitzzy leaves the booth, Gentleman John grabs his shoulder, bends down, and darts his eyes all over Fitzzy's face, finishing his song:

I fell for you like a child

Oh, but the fire went wild

Fitzzy pushes John's hand off his shoulder and pushes the old man back into the wall, causing him to fall into one of the booth's seats. They leave the pizzeria as Gentleman John replays the chorus over and over until he is out of earshot. "Motherfucker is crazy," is all they keep saying on their way back to the firehouse.

Later than night while the men watch TV or drink beer or play cards, the alarm sounds. Everyone calmly puts their activities on pause and suit up.

The radio blares the address, 906 9th Street. The hair on Fitzzy's neck rises. It is one of Pearsall's buildings. Turso and Trentacosta look away so as not to make eye contact with Fitzzy.

When they pull up to the building, there is only smoke. No fire has started. Two police cars are double parked up the block while three officers inspect the scene.

"No fire yet, fellas," Madigan says as he puts his hat back on.

The crew rushes past him and opens the door. The residents are out on the street, thankfully. The smoke is coming from underneath the stairwell. Fitzzy and Trentacosta rush to see a jug of anti-freeze and a jug of Potassium Permanganate spilled over on the ground. The liquids are slowly spilling toward each other and the smoke comes off the few small droplets that have landed together. This job isn't finished.

"Pot Perm and Anti-Freeze," Trentacosta says. He shakes his head and pulls two towels out of his pants pocket to keep the liquids from becoming dangerous.

“Nicky, look at this,” Fitzzy says, nodding his chin to a blue handprint on the wall from Pot Perm.

“They are still here, Fitz,” Trentacosta says.

The back door is opened slightly and the two firemen push through and look down the back alleyway. A shadow moves around at the far end of the alley and they rush towards it.

On the floor in front of them lies a man writhing in so much pain that his screams are barely audible. His hands are over his face and smoke rises from both his hands and face..

“This dumb fuck got it on his hands and touched his face,” Trentacosta says.

Fitzzy pulls the hands away to reveal the burned and skinned face of Chris Smith.

“Nicky. It’s Crimply.” Fitzzy says looking up at Trentacosta.

Chris “Crimply” Smith gets his nickname from the acne craters that dot his face, making him look perpetually crimped or squinting.

“Chris! What are you doing here asshole?” Trentacosta yells and motions to kick him. Crimply continues to scream a little louder now. Madigan rushes up behind them.

“This the guy who did it?” He looks down, “Holy shit. Is that Crimply?” Fitzzy and Trentacosta nod. Fitzzy sees a wallet underneath Crimply’s body while Madigan calls for an ambulance. He pulls out Crimply’s license and can’t help but look at the picture on the license and think his current face is an improvement. Underneath the license is one of Spelling’s cards. He shows it to Trentacosta, who immediately starts kicking Crimply.

The ambulance takes an unconscious Smith to the hospital. Fitzzy gives the wallet to Madigan.

“Hey, Jimmy.” Fitzzy hands him the wallet first and then Spelling’s card, “Can you look into this for me?”

Madigan looks at the card. "I will Fitz, but we both know it won't go anywhere."

"Just find out what you can for me, Jimmy. Just for me."

"Meet me at the Wilton Haus at 11," Jimmy says. "I'll tell you what I know."

Luckily, 906 9th street still stands as the crew pull away. The residents, those who didn't find a place for the night, can go back to living whatever type of normal life they had. If those chemicals had collided, that place would have burned down in an hour or so.

Back at the firehouse, Fitzzy changes into his civilian clothes, puts on a pair of sneakers, and takes a taxi downtown to the Wilton Haus. Madigan is already there with two shot glasses of tequila and a lime rind in front of him. No one else is in the one room bar but it feels crowded. Fitzzy pulls up the seat next to Madigan and before he can order, a shot of tequila and a lime are placed in front of him.

"You gotta catch up if you want anything from me," Jimmy says as he holds up his third tequila. Fitzzy clinks his glass and chugs it back. He doesn't chew the lime out of principle.

"Alright Jimmy, let's have it."

"Well. The first thing you should know is that Crimpely died in the hospital tonight. He actually drank some of that shit by accident."

"He was always a harmless moron. Not so harmless now I guess," Fitzzy says as another tequila is placed in front of him. "This has Pearsall written all over it, Jimmy."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well. First off, Spelling isn't the type of guy that would hire a Crimpely to do something like this."

"You saying Spelling has nothing to do with this?" Madigan asks.

“I would love to say no. But my gut feeling is that he is probably behind this and every other fire in this town.” Fitzzy downs the second drink. “Shame of it is, I actually like the guy.”

“Is that the tequila talking?”

“No. But I don’t think he hired Crimply to do this. I think Pearsall is all over this one.”

“Spelling was investigated for about an hour when he first came to Hoboken after that first fire. But then the investigation just stopped. I should know because I was supposed to get a warrant to look in his office, and the warrant was never written.”

“Someone is getting a nice chunk of change I bet,” Fitzzy says.

“The thing about it, Fitz, it always goes back to the landlord. And even when we know for a fact that a landlord did it, aside from seeing them set the fire, taking pictures of them setting the fire, and getting them to admit on camera they set the fire, it just goes away somehow. One minute I am getting ready to go arrest a guy and the next minute I am being told to hold off for a while in order to build a case that never gets built.”

“Crimply had Spelling’s card in his wallet. Why?” Fitzzy asks.

“If you say he would never hire a Crimply, the only thing I would say is that Spelling told Mickey to take care of it and Mickey hired Crimply. Which makes sense because Crimply would do anything for a few bucks.”

“I wonder how much Spelling is giving Mickey for that building.”

“If it is the way you say it is, Mickey Pearsall is about to become a millionaire.”

They look at each other and simultaneously toss back another tequila. Their faces contort in disgust at the idea of Mickey Pearsall the millionaire.

After a few more tequilas, Fitzzy leaves Madigan at the bar and takes a taxi home. He steps out and onto the sidewalk in front of 700 Park. The September breeze brushes him and he

shivers. He starts up the stairs, then stops. He takes a long look at his building, noticing the green paint chips on the third floor windows. He sees the bricks need repairing on the second floor right outside Jack's room. The front door needs repainting and the glass cleaned. He walks up the stairs, feeling the roughness of the banister where rust has piled. For the first time, he wonders if fixing these problems at 700 Park is worth it. He puts his key in the second door, and it closes slowly behind him not locking yet again.

Chapter Eleven

“Eddie, are you eating dinner before you go?” Lori asks Fitzy.

“What’s on the menu?”

“You got brass balls, you know that?” Lori says. “It’s Sunday, what do you think we’re having?”

“Abby pasta?” Fitzy asks and then quickly answers, “Yeah. I’ll eat.”

Sunday dinners at 700 Park are always some type of pasta. Abby may be the only non-Irish person in the building, but she makes her presence known on Sundays. When everyone eats together, there is enough food for about 30 people, even though only 10 are at the table. Abby puts the in table leaves on the dining room table and everyone crams in. She and Lori struggle to put the bowl of pasta, the size of a large mixing bowl, in the center of the table. Mounds of parmesan cheese bookend the table and another bowl of meatballs, sausage and gravy is placed next to the pasta. Jack’s eyes light up at the sight of this. He has been known to eat 20 meatballs on a given Sunday. Crispy mini meatballs are also put on the table before a stack of Dom’s bakery semolina bread, almost as high as Maddy is tall, fits on the table with a chunk of butter.

“What’s for dessert?” Grampar says, the sarcasm dropping off his fork with every meatball. There is very little talking at first, just grunts and “pass this” or “pass that.”

“Why don’t we go down the shore this summer?” Abby says. “You know, a whole family vacation.”

“Where?” Lori asks.

“What about Point Pleasant?” Marie says. “Abby, can you pass the parmesan?”

“Or Wildwood?” Jack says. “Everyone on the Elks goes every year, maybe we can go?”

“What about A.C.?” Grandpar says. “Black 17 all the way!”

“There is this one place we used to go in high school, the White Sands,” Lori says. “It’s in Point Pleasant.”

“That’s a great idea,” Abby says. Fitzy sees Marie’s beady eyes look at him across the table in the knowing glare of “That was my idea!”

“They have rooms that sleep up to ten people,” Lori says. “We could all be together.”

“Great,” Marie says with just enough fake enthusiasm to seem genuine.

“I’ll call tonight. Maybe we could book the room for the last week of July,” Lori says.

After dinner, Fitzy walks to the firehouse for his night shift. He picks on some left-over chicken parm that Trentacosta made, he is still hungry. He pulls out a lawn chair and sits outside the firehouse. September weather is always the best to Fitzy, just cold enough that you can turn off the air conditioner and save some money, but just warm enough that you can wear a jacket and still be comfortable. It is also the end of baseball season, and 1981 is the craziest season in recent memory.

“Fucking bums!” Turso yells at the TV.

“Yanks lost again?” Fitzy asks as he flips his head back to see Turso flip him the middle finger as he walks upstairs.

“This season is such a waste,” Trentacosta says. “The strike ruined it this year.”

“At least they are in the playoffs,” Fitzy says.

“Yeah but watch. The Brewers will knock them out first round.” He gets up and pulls a chair next to Fitzy. Fitzy pulls out a cigar and match from his shirt pocket and lights it.

“When did you start smoking?” Trentacosta asks.

“I had one a while back. I kind of like the way they taste.” He takes a few puffs.

“You know Fitz. Smoking in front of a fire house is not the best look.”

“It’s probably the best place to smoke one in case something happens.”

“True.”

Fitzzy finishes the cigar as Trentacosta falls asleep in the chair. He heads upstairs to take a nap.

The sound of the bell doesn’t wake him right away. His eyes are cloudy from the cigar smoke but he sees boots running by his bunk. Turso runs by and shakes him. Fitzzy wipes the gook from his eyes and jogs downstairs to his locker. He puts his gear on and hops in the truck next to Trentacosta.

“Where we goin’?” Fitzzy asks.

“Not sure.” He turns toward Minelli. “Hey Cap, where’s the call?”

Minelli doesn’t answer right away. He looks down at the radio.

“Cap! Where is the call?” Trentacosta asks again as the truck flies down Washington Street.

“Park Ave.” Minelli says in a barely audible mumble.

“What was it?” Fitzzy asks.

“700 Park Ave.” Minelli turns his head toward Fitzzy. “I’m sorry, Fitzzy.”

Fitzzy sits back in the seat. The truck whirls right down 4th street and makes another sharp right onto Park Ave. It’s only 1 in the morning. Maybe some of them were awake. Maybe Lori and Abby were up planning the shore trip and got everyone out.

The truck screeches to a halt on Park Ave. and Fitzzy and Trentacosta are almost knocked from their seats. The sirens blare out and Minelli gets on the speaker.

“PLEASE MOVE YOUR VEHICLES FROM THE ROAD!”

There are two double-parked cars blocking the truck. A man runs out of the building on the right in his underwear and starts to unlock his car.

Fitzy jumps out of the truck and starts to sprint the three blocks toward 700 Park Ave.

“Fitzy! What are you doing?” Trentacosta screams.

The suit is heavy and the boots rub against his anklebone. He throws off the oxygen tank and helmet. He sees flames burst through the third floor window even though he is a block away. He looks at the front steps and Marie, Maddy and Jack are outside with Abby and Bill. Fitzy sprints past them and runs past the broken glass upstairs to Lori’s apartment.

“MA!” Smoke fills the apartment but there are no flames yet. It must have started upstairs. “MA! GRAMPS!”

“Eddie! Over here!” James screams from the living room. Fitzy runs in and sees James trying to move Matt, who has passed out.

“We came back in to get Gramps and Aunt Lori,” James says as he tries to pick Matt up.

“Where are they?” Fitzy looks around the apartment, frantically opening the bedroom doors. He opens Lori’s and she is unconscious on her bed. Fitzy runs over and picks her up. She begins to cough.

“What....” Lori tries to say. Fitzy runs past James who has Matt on his shoulder as he walks downstairs. He gets outside and the fire truck is finally outside setting up the hose. He hands Lori to Trentacosta and turns back toward the building. He runs upstairs, skipping steps. He nearly breaks the door to his grandfather’s room down and sees Grandpar in his chair in the corner of the room.

The paint on the ceiling is melting and he knows that the fire has reached his apartment and his family's belongings flood his mind at random. All of their things. Wedding albums. Jack's baby toys. The number 17 chain that all the boys in the family wear.

He shakes his head and looks down at Grandpar. His withered body is slumped. This is how he always sleeps. Fitzzy grabs him around the waist and back and puts him on his shoulder. Fitzzy turns towards the door and runs down the stairs, sprinting to fresh air. He puts his grandfather on the sidewalk and listens for breath. He is still alive, but Fitzzy knows the amount of smoke he inhaled is deadly. He presses gently on Grandpar's chest and tries to administer CPR but he can barely compose his thoughts let alone count the 15 compressions. A wet cough escapes his grandfather's mouth but his eyes do not open. Fitzzy grabs him but is pulled away by Minelli and two EMT's work on Grandpar. They place him on a stretcher and put an oxygen mask on his face. The entire family surrounds the stretcher and watches as he is placed inside the ambulance.

"He is my best friend," James says and cries into Abby's shoulder. Uncle Bill hugs him around his shoulders.

Lori, who is being attended to by another EMT, runs to the stretcher and screams for her daddy. Fitzzy holds her as Marie holds Jack and Maddy, both crying into her stomach. As the ambulance drives off, glass shatters behind them. They all turn to see that the fire has reached Lori's apartment. Trentacosta is on the front steps waving others to run in and they disappear into the building. All three levels are burning now, as they huddle together. The fire makes this night too hot. The water from the hose drenches the front of the building, but it feels like a cold rain as it drips on their foreheads. The melted green paint of the building reveals old bricks underneath. Fitzzy remembers when it was painted, almost ten years ago. More windows break,

and they can hear the firefighters yelling inside. They look at Fitzzy to see if he knows what they are saying, but he knows the language. In any language, nothing good will come of this. All companies busy. Accelerant. Enter on the A-side. Charge the hose. Maybe they should use exterior attack and keep the men safe. Or remove themselves from the fire ground.

As Fitzzy stands outside of his own house fire, as years of memories burn to the ground, the language begins to feel foreign to him. He thinks back to the things that are, or were, in this place. Life is made up of things. Some things you can't have back. Some things are permanent and some are a one-shot deal. There is too much inside to think of one thing, but the 17 chain keeps coming back to him. 17 was his grandfather's baseball number. Everyone had one. Jack still has his own. Fitzzy keeps his on his nightstand when he is at the firehouse. Wearing the 17 jersey is a tradition and only Grandpar can say when you earned the right to wear it. It was like being knighted. A small gold chain was the proof.

Fitzzy lets go of his mother, who is still crying, and walks toward the steps. No one sees him at first but Marie looks up and says "Eddie, what are you doing?"

"I just need to get something." He continues walking.

"Are you an idiot?" Marie walks toward him. "Get over here. You are not going back in there!"

"Eddie! Stop!" Lori yells. But Fitzzy starts running into the building, past Turso and Colon. The fire has ravaged the building but the hallways are still in decent condition. They always are. He grabs an ax out of Minelli's hands as he runs up to his apartment. The flames have engulfed the kitchen and living room but Fitzzy rushes into the apartment. The floors have collapsed in places but the walls are always the strongest so he stays close to the edges of the room. He makes it to the bedroom as the ceiling bursts into flames. The floor of this room is

nearly gone but there are two planks that are still strong. He side steps onto the one closest to the night stand and reaches out for the drawer. The heat has sealed it shut. He takes the ax and smashes the top of the stand. Everything inside has melted or is beginning to melt. Including the chain. The diamond 17 is hot, but still has the shape of the number. He picks it up and immediately burns his palm. He puts it in his pants pocket and can still feel the heat through the fabric. He turns to slide out of the room but as he takes his first step, the plank splits and he falls to the apartment below, cutting the back of his head on the way down. Turso is in Lori's apartment and picks him up. Blood drenches his fire suit from Fitzzy's wound. Fitzzy is dragged outside. The night air hits him but he closes his eyes. Turso lays him on the ground.

"Eddie, are you awake?" Marie says.

Fitzzy struggles to open his eyes. The room is dark aside from a small lamp. He opens his eyes and sees Marie sitting next to him, the lamp to her left. Her face is resting on hospital bed rails.

"What happened?" Fitzzy asks.

"You're an idiot. That's what happened." She caresses the side of his face.

"Is Gramps ok?"

"He is in the other room. Everyone is in there."

Fitzzy pushes himself up and throws his feet over the side of the bed.

"Eddie. Just lie down. He is ok."

"I need to see him." Fitzzy stands up but as he does the light gets fuzzy and he stumbles to the end of the bed. Marie grabs him and helps him walk while simultaneously trying to cover Fitzzy's backside with the gown that could pass for a mini dress on him.

They walk to Grandpar's room, which is across the hall. Everyone is standing against the walls looking at the bed as Fitzy and Marie walk in. Grandpar has tubes coming from nearly every orifice and is breathing through an oxygen mask. At least he is breathing. His feet are covered.

"What did the doctors say?" Fitzy asks.

"He inhaled a ton of smoke, but they think he should be ok." James says.

"It's his heart they are worried about," Lori says as she grabs Grandpar's hand. His eyes open momentarily then shut. "Dad, we are all here for you," she says and squeezes his hand. His eyes open again and he moves his head slowly, almost surveying the room. He moves his head side to side and his eyes widen as he seemingly comes to the realization of where he sits, and the apparatuses that are inside of him.

Grandpar tries to break out of his restraints, coughing violently.

"Dad, what is it?" Lori says frantically.

"Gramps, you wanna tell us something?" James says. "What is it?"

"Your hand? What's wrong with your hand?" Lori says as Grandpar rips his hand from her grip and waves.

"Do you wanna write something? Eddie, give him the pen and paper, he is trying to tell us something." Lori opens the drawer next to the bed but finds nothing. Jack runs to the nurses desk outside of the room and gets a pen and notepad.

He gives Grandpar the pen and he scribbles what seems to be the letter "L" and then, through his chicken scratch, finishes a word that appears to be the word "LAST" but it looks more like "LET."

Lori, getting more and more frantic by the minute, draws each letter of the alphabet out and proceeds to ask Grandpar to nod as she spells out the word.

“L?”

A shake no.

“O?”

Another shake?

“Q?”

“Q, mom? Really? Q? Maybe he wants you to be Quiet?” Fitzzy says. Lori glares at him.

This goes on for a few more letters in what would seem to be the most perverse game of Wheel of Fortune ever witnessed.

Suddenly, Lori gives Fitzzy the book and walks out of the room. Marie and Fitzzy chase after her.

“I know what he is trying to tell me, Eddie,” she says as tears well up in her eyes.

“What? What is it? I thought he was gonna buy a vowel,” Marie says trying to keep her from losing it.

“Let me go’, that’s what he is saying to me. He wants me to let him go.”

Fitzzy has no idea how she got that when the man shook his head no at the letter “L,” or how she was able to decipher his word when it looked more like a seismic reading on a Richter scale.

“Are you sure? Why don’t we try again?”

They go back in for the money round and Lori begins with her assumption.

“Let? Da? Are you saying let?”

Another shake no.

“Well, that’s good” Marie says aloud.

“Help? Are you saying help?”

Another shake.

“H? Gramps? It begins with an H?”

Finally, a nod of confirmation.

“Help? Are you saying help?” Lori says again.

“Ma, he just said it wasn’t help or let, maybe you need to get some freakin’ help or let it go!”

“H? Ummmmm, Hurt? Do you hurt?” Abby asks.

A shake of the head no. “Hot? Are you hot?” Fitzzy asks.

He nods his head yes and gives what looks like a small side smile, the type of smile he puts on when he is shooting spitballs at the waitress at IHOP or pretending that his shrimp cocktail actually talks.

“You son of a bitch,” Lori says as she storms out to get the nurse.

As Fitzzy chases after Lori, his gown comes untied and his backside is exposed.

“Ma,” Jack pulls on Marie’s shirt. “Why is dad’s ass out?”

“Don’t say ass!” Marie says as she covers her laugh with her hand.

Chapter Twelve

They take shifts staying with Grandpar, and Lori is never left alone. The firehouse has become home for now. The alphabet episode is the most coherent Grandpar has been for the better part of the next week. After the fire, no one is allowed near the building for a few days while both the police and the arson investigators search the debris. When Minella finally gives Fitzy the go ahead to see what is left of his home, Marie and Abby take the walk from St. Mary's Hospital with him.

There is a gaping hole where 700 Park once stood. The building behind on Garden Street shows burn marks on the bricks outside. The firefighters were able to contain it that night. Only a few piles of brick remain on the sidewalls of the building. It's been nearly a week since the fire. Standing next to the blackened wood and charred belongings that look more like train tracks scattered along the floor, feels a few degrees hotter. Fitzy wants to walk through the rubble but decides against it as a bulldozer pushes burnt wood towards the street.

Marie and Abby can only sob into Fitzy's chest as he puts an arm around each of them. He is equal parts sadness, desperation, and anger, each one canceling out the others to form a numbness he has never felt before. He is holding them but feels himself leaning on them as well. His boots are heavy, and he hears them crying and feels his own tears slowly dot his cheeks. They both grab him tighter, and he drops his head, his tears now falling on the concrete and mingling with the gray water left from the firefight. Their home is gone, and they have neither the ambition nor the money to find a place that will accommodate them the way 700 Park did. Fitzy lifts his head up, hears the trucks beeping in the background, pouring their lives into a dumpster.

He hears behind him, "Fuckin' building was a piece of shit anyway."

Fitzzy, Marie and Abby turn to see Mickey Pearsall standing next to Jimmy Madigan, who is on duty directing traffic during the cleanup.

Pearsall looks directly at Fitzzy and seems to puff out his chest while standing next to Madigan. His right eye is still swollen from the beating Fitzzy gave him. He continues to talk to Madigan within earshot of Fitzzy who can barely control his rage. Marie and Abby almost simultaneously grab Fitzzy by the arms.

“You are a real scumbag, Mick!”

“Who do you think you’re talkin’ to?” Pearsall says.

“How much you getting for this?” Fitzzy says as he breaks free of Marie and Abby. “How much are they paying you?” He charges at Pearsall but Madigan steps in his way.

“Eddie, just relax.” Madigan pushes his hands against Fitzzy’s chest. “Not here.”

“Keep that lowlife away from me!” Pearsall says.

“How much are they paying you!” Fitzzy screams.

Marie and Abby grab Fitzzy again and try to pull him away when the three of them see James and Matt running up from Willow Ave.

“Grand...” James tries to say, exhausted. “Gran...”

“Grandpar!” Matt says through heavy breathing. The five of them run toward St. Mary’s hospital. Fitzzy rushes through the emergency room doors on the side of 7th street and pushes past a nurse who is holding the door open. He runs up the stairs to the fourth floor where his grandfather’s room is but sees the room empty. He turns toward the nurses desk.

“Do you know where Joseph Feinstein has been taken?”

The nurse looks down at first. Fitzzy can sense what is coming.

“He went into cardiac arrest.” She looks up at Fitzy. “They took him to the operating room on the fifth floor.” Abby, Marie, James and Matt rush through the door as Fitzy runs past them toward the stairwell. They follow.

When he gets upstairs, Lori, Jack, Maddie and Uncle Bill are in the waiting room, all crying. Maddie and Jack hug Lori while Bill slumps in a chair at the far corner of the room. Abby goes over to him.

“What happened?” Fitzy asks the room.

“We are waiting for the doctor to come out,” Lori says in a voice raspy from screaming and crying.

Fitzy and Marie sit down next to Lori. The waiting room looks like the inside of a funeral parlor, Fitzy wonders if that is done intentionally to prepare families for what is to come. The walls are covered with beige wallpaper with floral print to give it texture. There is a crucifix hanging above a lamp. The desk has a framed portrait of the Virgin Mary. Every chair has cracks along the backs and seats of other families’ sorrowful waiting.

Lori’s eyes are swollen and she muffles her cries in a tissue as the door of the waiting room opens and the doctor walks in. He glances at the crucifix on the wall before taking a deep breath. The entire room knows what words are about to come out of this man’s mouth. But that knowledge almost makes it more difficult to hear.

“I’m sorry.” He mutters. “Mr. Feinstein did not make it.” The words linger in the room like unwanted guests or intruders. They wrap themselves around each of them as if the sentence itself forms a noose. At that moment, Lori wails and crumbles into Jack’s arms. The room gets uncomfortably long for Fitzy as if the hallway is stretched toward a vortex. He stares straight ahead, his chest heaving. This man was two fathers to him and now he is gone. He feels his right

knee give out and drops to one knee on the floor. Marie comes over and hugs his back. He sobs uncontrollably.

The doctor, as composed as possible, says, "You can say your goodbyes if you'd like."

Fitzzy raises his head and says, "I can't." Lori looks at him and her face contorts to cry some more. She gets up and hugs Fitzzy with Marie.

"I can't," Fitzzy keeps repeating. "I can't see him like that." He thinks back to the other wakes and funerals he has been a part of, especially the wakes. He hates wakes. He never opens his eyes to look at the body in the casket because he always wants to have his last memory of their face be one in action, not in death, regardless of how peaceful they may look. He made the mistake of looking at the casket when he went to his old Little League coach Mike Fellecci's wake. Seeing the full brown beard and that manipulated, contorted mouth on a man that never smiled is the image he always returns to when Fellecci's name is mentioned. Not the tough practices that made Fitzzy a better player, or even the conversations they would have outside 700 Park with his grandfather. He could only imagine what his grandfather's face looks like in the immediacy of death without a mortician's skillful hand.

"We have to say goodbye," Lori says. Fitzzy continues to repeat, "I can't."

Everyone gathers around Fitzzy. Bill and James help him stand. His eyes are pinched shut.

"I can't look at him." He repeats, "I can't look at him."

"Just keep your eyes closed, then," Marie says. "It's ok."

Fitzzy holds on to Lori's shoulders as she guides him through the double doors that lead to the operating rooms. He squeezes her shoulder as he hears the click of the door behind him and squeezes his eyes tighter. He wants no memory of any of this. They walk a few more feet and stop. Fitzzy feels Lori's shoulders jump and realizes she is crying hard now. Jack and Maddie are

next to him and he hears them cry as well. He takes his hands off of Lori's shoulders and puts them around his children but he is not strong enough to open his eyes.

"This way daddy," Maddy says, taking Fitzzy's hand off of her shoulder and interlocking her fingers with his. Jack does the same. Fitzzy squeezes their hands as a thank you. They lead him into the room and his thighs gently bump into the operating table. He knows his grandfather is on that table. Everyone is audibly crying and Jack and Maddy let go of Fitzzy's hand.

"We love you, Grandpar," James says through his cries.

"I love you, daddy," Lori says.

Everyone surrounds the table and Fitzzy hears their goodbyes. Lori comes next to him and hugs him. She takes his hand and puts it toward the table. He immediately pulls it back, shutting his eyes as tight as he possibly can. She grabs his hand again and holds the top of it, guiding his palm toward the table. She lays Fitzzy's hand on Grandpar's and it is still warm. He feels Grandpar's thick fingernails and the calluses on his palm. He holds his grandfather's hand tight. This feels like the first time they ever held hands.

"I love you, Grandpar," Fitzzy says in a whisper that fights through his cries.

Fitzzy's eyes are pinched shut but he sees his grandfather standing behind a pitching screen at the batting cage down at the high school. He is throwing curveballs at Fitzzy when he was 10 years old, breaking off one nasty deuce after another and Fitzzy keeps flailing at them frustrating himself. He was in awe of his grandfather back then. He was his hero.

He holds tighter onto Grandpar's hand as the reality of the past tense envelops the entire room.

Chapter Thirteen

“I’m getting tired of shoveling dirt onto people I love,” Fitzzy says to Marie as he takes off his funeral pants and crumples them on the folding chair next to the cot. Marie sits on the bed and takes her shoes off, refusing to engage in the conversation.

The funeral was hard. So were the days after as the entire family made the firehouse into their makeshift home. The crew doesn’t mind because Lori and Abby cook every night mostly to keep themselves from thinking. The papers said 700 Park burned down because of an electrical fire. Fitzzy can’t even get aggravated anymore. As the cold chill of October creeps into the firehouse, the prospect of finding an affordable place to rent in Hoboken becomes bleak.

“Are you taking the kids to get their Halloween costumes on Friday?” Marie asks.

“No, you can do it.” Fitzzy is annoyed at the thought of normalcy from Marie. She glares at him and he senses a fight.

“Fine. I’ll do it like I do everything anyway.”

“You know, I don’t need this shit Marie,” Fitzzy snaps back. “We got enough going on without you being a bitch to me.” He knows he’s pressed a button.

“Oh, I’m being a bitch?” She stands up. “You know what, Eddie. You can go fuck yourself.” She storms passed him as Turso walks up the stairs.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Fuck off, Lou.”

“Listen cump, don’t take out your marital frustrations on me.”

“What is it, Lou?” Fitzzy says impatient.

“Well, I thought I’d tell you that you should probably pass by your house.” He looks down as he says “house.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know Fitz, you should just go walk by.” Turso keeps looking down. “You should see it for yourself.”

Fitzzy takes his car instead of walking. He can just double park because at this point he doesn’t give a fuck about anything. When he pulls up to 700 Park, the hole in the block remains and he isn’t sure what Turso was talking about. He parks and gets out. He squeezes himself between two parked cars and scans the wreckage again. It’s a pretty quick cleanup even by Hoboken’s DPW standards. The building in the back still has the dark burn marks from the fire. He scans where the front of building would be, and hanging on the pole of one of the NO PARKING signs is a big poster. Fitzzy sees a face staring back at him: steel blue eyes and that slick backed gray hair that almost seems cliché at this point. For a second, he actually thinks Myron Spelling is standing on the block, but then he sees the words next to the picture:

EVERYTHING I LIST TURNS TO SOLD

There are more pictures. Pictures just like the ones on Spelling’s poster outside the firehouse. Granite kitchen counter tops, a fireplace. These were only \$100,000 and there were six available. Spelling was turning a three apartment building into six condos and will probably make \$600,000 on the whole sale. This building can’t be worth more than \$75,000 total. What did Mickey make off of this? A few thousand? Even fifty grand seems like a robbery. He isn’t mad at the poster or even Spelling. Part of Fitzzy knows that if it wasn’t Spelling, it would be another low life who paid Mickey off to set the building on fire. The rage that is inside of him also knows that there is no use fighting. What can he do? Go punch Spelling in the face? Sure, but a guy like that has lawyers on speed dial, and Fitzzy doesn’t have the funds to fight it.

The little money he has he is keeping while the family looks for a place to live. Lori and Abby looked at a few places in Secaucus that a \$5,000 down payment could possibly swing but none of them want to live in Secaucus. He could go to the Police Department and say that Pearsall was paid off by Spelling, but he knows that half of those cops are crooked and probably have their own pockets fattened by Spelling himself. What bothers Fitzy most about this poster of Spelling's face, and the whole plight that Hoboken faces at this moment, is that there is no emotion in the villainy of these crimes. There is no hatred, only money. Spelling doesn't hate blacks or Puerto Ricans, at least he doesn't know if he truly does, they just stand in the way of him making money. When there is a fight, two people need to be pissed off at each other, there has to be a mutual hatred. There is none of that in any of the fires. Fitzy and all the others who were burned out aren't fighting a person; they are fighting money.

He starts his walk back to the firehouse, but not before he rips the poster of Spelling off the street sign and crumples it. He throws it where the stoop once stood at 700 Park and heads home.

At dinner, Fitzy brings the topic of moving to a head when he says, "You know we can't stay here much longer. He rips a piece of semolina bread open and the steam seeps out from the yellow center.

No one responds. Lori and Abby act as if they did not hear the statement.

"Anyone want more manicotti?" Abby asks as she gets up from the table across from Fitzy.

"Or cheese?" Lori asks, and she rises as well right next to Abby. In an effort not to speak, Matt and James, sitting next to each other at the far end of the table, both take heaping portions

of manicotti and drown their dishes in cheese before stuffing what looks like the full manicotti in their mouths.

“Ok,” Marie says, reaching for more soda. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know,” Fitzy says. “But we need to find a place somewhere, Hoboken or not.”

Everyone stops eating and turns to Fitzy.

“Not Hoboken?” Lori asks. She is getting worked up.

“Where are we goin’ in Hoboken, Ma?” Fitzy says.

“Hoboken is home, Eddie,” Abby interjects.

“Yeah, well, our home don’t want us anymore,” Fitzy says. “Where are we living? The Projects? We ain’t affording anything else in this town.”

“What if we moved to Rutherford or Secaucus?” Bill says. Abby shoots him a look but he continues. “We have some money saved. It’s not much.”

“We are not leaving.” Lori says but her voice breaks at the end of the sentence.

Fitzy gets up and walks around the table to his mother. He puts his hands on her shoulders. “Ma we have no choice.” He massages her shoulders.

“Abby, rent here is probably more than a mortgage a few miles from here.” Bill says.

“Hoboken is home.” Lori says putting her right hand over Fitzy’s on her shoulder. She looks up at him, tears in her eyes.

“Home is wherever we are, Ma” Fitzy says.

“Are we even going to be together?” Abby asks as she starts clearing the table. “Is that even possible?”

“We make it possible,” Bill says.

Lori and Abby continue to cry as Marie, who crouches between their two chairs, tries to console them while Bill and Fitzzy try to discuss using the little money they have saved for a possible down payment. Matt, James, and Jack shovel more food in their mouths knowing that adding to this conversation is just a bad idea. From the end of the table, Maddy raises her hand as if she is in school. No one sees her at first but then Marie notices the hand in the air.

“What is it, baby?” Marie says.

Maddy speaks but the sound of Lori and Marie crying and Bill and Fitzzy talking and Matt, James, and Jack chewing drown out her voice.

“Hey, Maddy is asking something.” Marie says and the noise starts to die down. “What is it baby?”

“If we move, can we have a pool?” Her face is serious as if she has been contemplating this for a while.

The innocence of the question makes Fitzzy smile. Lori and Abby chuckle through their sobs. Matt, James and Jack keep eating.

Marie looks at Fitzzy before she says, “Of course we can. But we may not be leaving.”

“I don’t care where we live if we have a pool.”

“Then we will get a pool.” Fitzzy says. He looks around the table. “Apparently, home isn’t where your heart is, it’s where your pool is.” They all give a halfhearted chuckle.

“As long as we are together,” Lori says, drying her eyes with a napkin, “Home is where we are.”

“So are we really moving out of Hoboken?” Bill asks.

“It is kinda exciting.” Abby says. Everyone gets up from the table. Abby and Lori finish cleaning up while Bill and Fitzy discuss going to the bank while Marie brings Jack and Maddy into the other room where their cots are.

“Can we have a diving board, too?” Maddy asks as she and Marie walk into the other room. Marie turns her head around towards Fitzy and he sees some sadness in her eyes. For the first time in his life as a father, he knows he is probably going to disappoint his daughter.

Fitzy walks down stairs and pulls up a chair outside. The air is cool and the October night allows for a sweatshirt but Fitzy is fine in his t-shirt and basketball shorts. The light is on in Spelling’s office across the street. Trentacosta and Turso pull up chairs next to Fitzy.

“Looks like he’s burning the midnight oil over there,” Turso says, jutting his chin towards Spelling’s office.

“Fuck him.” Fitzy says. “Apparently I’m buying a house with a pool.”

Turso and Trentacosta give puzzled looks. “Huh?” Turso says and Fitzy summarizes the fight and conversation that was had upstairs.

“So you’re really gonna move out?” Trentacosta asks.

“Like I said,” Fitzy leans back in the chair and runs his hands through his hair in frustration. “We got no choice.”

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” Turso says. “You can mow the lawn, plant a little garden, maybe have a little gnome in the front lawn.” They laugh at the thought of Fitzy putting a garden gnome in his hypothetical front lawn. The conversation turns to one liners and jabs about suburban living as the smoke slowly creeps out of the doorframe of Spelling’s office. It isn’t noticeable at first, and the firemen, including Fitzy, do not see cause for alarm as they sit outside of the garage. Fitzy leans his head back, looking up at the moon.

The door to office swings open and a cloud of smoke bursts through the doorway as Spelling runs out waving his arms.

“My office! There’s a fire in my office!

Turso jumps up and turns to go put his gear on, his instincts taking over, but Fitzzy grabs him by the forearm.

“This don’t seem like an emergency, Lou.” He looks back, staring at Spelling who stops waving.

All three of them stand up slowly, Trentacosta stretching his back a little. They fold their chairs and walk to the side of the garage and stack them against the wall as a flabbergasted Spelling stands across the street. They walk to their lockers and pull on their pants and step into their boots. Turso checks his hair in the mirror before putting on his helmet. Trentacosta picks up an ax on his way out as all three walk across the street.

“You three won’t have a job by morning,” Spelling says as they approach. The smoke thickens.

They ignore him and walk into the office. The fire has engulfed the small carpet next to an overturned garbage can but it is not dangerous. Trentacoasta hands the ax to Fitzzy and picks up the fire extinguisher, that Spelling must have failed to use properly, off the floor and puts out the fire. Fitzzy sees ashes in the ashtray on Spelling’s desk and sees the remnants of a cigar butt on the floor.

“Hey, Lou.” Fitzzy says. “Keep him occupied outside.”

Turso gives Fitzzy a wink and walks out. “It’s a Category 7 in there Mr. Spelling. A real F-5 fire in there,” they hear him say.

Fitzzy looks at the ax in his hand. He looks at the monstrosity that is Spellings desk. Trentacosta takes a few steps back toward the opposite end of the office. Fitzzy grips the ax and wields it over his head, slamming it down in the middle of the desk. The blade catches. It is good wood. He pulls it out and swings again, splinters flying all about. He swings until most of the desk is in pieces. His chest is heaving but he picks up the ax again and turns toward the artwork on the wall. He thinks Maddy can paint better with her feet and swings through the glass and through the wall. The painting flies off the wall when he pulls the ax out and he swings at a second painting getting the same result. He has hit his stride and swings the ax at the wooden filing cabinets, sending papers flying across the room. He swings with reckless abandon until he catches the bison head out of his periphery. He walks over to it, knowing that this is probably the most expensive item in this office. He grips the ax a little tighter and swings the blade, smashing it through the head, sending the whole thing crashing to the ground. He starts to swing again and again and before he can swing one last time, Trentacosta grabs the handle of the ax.

“That’s enough, Fitz.” Fitzzy turns towards him and drops the ax. He falls to a knee and begins to sob, the frustration and stress finally overwhelming him.

Trentacosta picks him up underneath his shoulder. “Feel better?”

“A little.” But Trentacosta looks at him with a smile. “Ok, a lot.”

When they walk out, Spelling asks, “Well?”

“That fire spread pretty fast in there, Mr. Spelling.” Trentacosta says.

“It did?”

“Oh, yeah.” He doesn’t hide his sarcasm or his smile. “Lots of damage.”

Spelling doesn't respond. He walks through the doorway. The three of them creep into view to catch his reaction. He stands in the middle of the office and Fitzzy can tell he doesn't know where to look. He turns towards his desk, which is a splintered mess.

"This desk is worth more than all of your salaries!" He yells. They laugh.

"None of you will have jobs by the morning!" He yells. "You don't know how this town works!"

"The Hoboken Fire Department is always here to help, Mr. Spelling." Fitzzy says. The Fire Union will make sure their jobs are safe.

Chapter Fourteen

The house hunting eventually leads to a four-bedroom house in Secaucus that also has a basement. Abby and Bill, Lori, Matt and James each have a room while Fitzzy, Marie and the kids live in the basement until they finish it into two more bedrooms. It is cramped but everyone is together. And there is a backyard with grass. There isn't a pool and Maddy is disappointed but Fitzzy promises her they will get one someday.

They close on the house in January but only start moving in as Valentine's Day approaches. Fitzzy is in town on his off day to pick up the last few items from their stay in the firehouse. He drives to work now. He hates it. A drive doesn't clear his head as his walks did. He can't stop and swing on the swings in Fourth Street Park on the really bad nights. He has sat in traffic more times over the last three weeks than he has in his entire life. He hates looking for parking. The Secaucus house is at least peaceful. As he drives through town all the buildings blend together and are indistinguishable.

He drives past the shelter and sees Sister Roberta packing some luggage into a taxi so he pulls into the fire hydrant spot and gets out of his car.

"Need some help?" He asks.

"Oh, thank you, Eddie." She says. She looks sullen.

"Going on a vacation?"

"You can say that," she says. "A permanent one."

"You're retiring?"

"No, just taking over a parish in Hawaii."

"Sister, there are worse places you can be forced to go to work." Fitzzy says with a smile.

“There’s so much work to do here though.” She looks like she is about to cry. “I don’t want to leave Hoboken.”

“Trust me Sister.” Fitzzy says picking up the last piece of luggage. “No one ever does.”

They exchange a few more pleasantries and promises to keep in touch and Roberta heads off in her taxi to her new life in paradise while Fitzzy gets back in his car and drives to the fire house. He goes upstairs and starts packing the last few items of clothes and toys as Turso, Trentacosta and Ryan come upstairs.

“So what’s it like Fitzzy?” Ryan asks.

“What’s what like?”

“Shoveling snow out of your own driveway.”

“It’s a pain in the ass, Sean.” He grabs Maddy’s cabbage patch doll and puts it in his duffle bag.

“I don’t know. I think I’d like having a guaranteed parking spot,” Ryan says.

“Wanna switch?” Fitzzy asks.

“It can’t be that bad, Fitz,” Turso says even though his face betrays him.

“It ain’t home,” Fitzzy says. “At least not yet.” He puts the last pieces of clothing in his bag and walks back out to his car.

He puts the bag in his trunk and gets in the driver’s seat. He closes the door to his car and starts the engine. He takes the Clemente card out of his pocket and rests it on the dash board. He can almost hear Eddie saying, “We don’t need this shit, Fitzzy.” He looks into the window of Spelling’s office, which now stands in a portable trailer. Fitzzy wonders if that bison head would fit in the trailer. That desk certainly couldn’t. There is no victory here, only minor inconveniences. He puts the car in drive, but before he presses on the gas pedal, he sees the

curtain move slightly. He sees the silhouette of Spellings face, his eyes, and stares. The curtain closes and Fitzgerald drives out of Hoboken, looking back through his rearview mirror. In it he sees buildings being built, brick by brick, ascending toward the sky. He sees happy families playing in their new courtyards. A father catches his two daughters in his arms. He sees his city reaching for the heavens. He knows not to look back but cannot help the dangerous attraction.

He sees his city.

He sees the flames.

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Educational Institutions.

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