

# SECOND NATURE



## CHAPTER ONE

This is what I know.

My father stood in the center aisle of the Lady Chapel—that hunched, hexed little building he hated as a father and as a firefighter—under the lowering band of sooty, mean-colored smoke, and he looked right at me. He understood what had happened to me, and although he couldn't tell me then, he was still happy. He thought I was one of the lucky ones.

I was.

This is what I remember.

There were fifty of us in the Lady Chapel that late afternoon, December 20, the shortest day of the year. Inside, in winter, it was always about as warm and bright as an igloo. Wearing our coats and mittens as we sang “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” we could see our breath. As a place of worship and a historic structure, the Lady Chapel was ex-

empt from all the building codes and conformed to none of them, which was why Dad despised the very sight of it. The mahogany pews, each with a different intricate carving, massaged for seventy years with layers of flammable polish, were nothing but tinder to him. Raw and reckless new structures, when they burned, were flimsy as tents. But the old chapel had stone walls a foot thick and had been reroofed so many times that Dad said that it could have withstood a phosphorus bomb.

It didn't take anything as potent as a bomb, only a small candle in a small draft.

That day, just as the choirmaster, Mr. Treadwell, brought together his fingertips and held them up to his delicate cheekbones, twinkly as a ballerina (looking back, I think Mr. Treadwell was twinkly all the time, what my mother called "a confirmed bachelor"), first one and then the other Christmas tree on either side of the altar went up like ten-foot sparklers. A few kids simply stood, flat-footed and amazed, as though the pyrotechnics were some sort of holiday surprise.

I knew better than to think that, even for a second.

It was only luck that I was in the last row of the choir's three-tiered semicircle, because I was taller and older, in eighth grade. I turned to run straight back, but the fire was more agile, leaping voraciously ahead of me along the strip of gold carpet between the seats. The Advent banners dodged and gyrated above my head like burning bats. I held my new purse, a birthday present from my Grandmother Caruso, up to my face, instinctively protecting my lungs. Then, I turned around to face the fire on the altar, which went against all instincts, except for someone raised in my father's catechism: Keep cool. Keep making choices. These rules were not second nature to me by then. They were first nature. I felt my way along the communion rail and then turned left at the wall, feeling my way along under the windows until I saw what I knew what must be the door—a ghostly flapping of white light that looked like a giant moth. This, I knew, must be the door opening and closing. When I got there, I reached for the big bronze curve of the door handle. I knew it must be there. But my fingers were clumsy in

my leather mitten, and when I stopped to pull it off, other kids rearended me, knocking me sideways. I jumped up and grabbed for the door handle again, trying to ignore the escalating chorale of high-pitched screaming. Was there a moment of stupor? It could only have been a moment. The next thing I recall clearly was standing up, looking over my shoulder at the oxygen mask on the face of my father's rookie, Renee Mayerling, a grown woman who was not as tall as I was already at thirteen. She shoved me along with the exigent roughness of a rescuer, with her other hand dragging Libby Van de Water. Suddenly I was out, tripping and falling on my face in a foot of fresh, burning-cold snow, which probably saved my eyes. As soon as I could, I lifted my head to look around me. There was my friend Joey LaVoy and his brother, Paulie, who were not in the choir but had come running over from the school, yelling, *Help them! Help them!* That's when I really saw the other kids from the choir everywhere around me, some lying still as sleeping bags, closed and pale, others crawling half naked, because their clothes had caught fire. There were a few I didn't even recognize, because somehow their arms and faces were swollen as brown as the surface of caramel apples. Renee came out and I looked for my dad, who would have been right behind Renee—I just sensed him being right behind her. And then he wasn't. Instead, he stayed inside the door, while Renee crouched low, holding out her arms to Dad. I understood then. I should have known it, and somehow I should have done something, like kicked away that big doorstep. One side of the huge arched door was always kept locked, by order of the principal, Sister Ignatius Bell, so that students could enter and leave the Lady Chapel in single file only. But kids hadn't run for their lives in single file. In the smutchy darkness, they collided with the locked side and fell, and the kids behind them tripped and fell, and pretty soon the ones on the bottom must have been pinned down and the others kept on coming.

I turned over in the snow and scooted to a sitting position, then struggled to my knees. I could still see over my father's head, all the way to the altar. Sweet Mr. Treadwell must have waited until he could

shepherd out all of the kids he could see. He stood on the altar like a living crucifix, his arms out and his head thrown back, the two flaming fir trees on either side of him, their skinny trunks gyrating like ink lines in the deep dirty yellow flames and then vanishing altogether. I cared about Mr. Treadwell but knew Dad would not be going back for him. It was already too late for my teacher. At last, Dad did come out and I exhaled a prayer of relief. The fire was taking on force: The whole chapel seemed to shudder, like a witch's oven in a cartoon, something the witch could command to do evil if she wanted to. But Dad was out. I could see my father's gray eyes behind his goggles, and it was almost as though he spoke to me: *Sicily. I'm okay! I promise! Would I let you down? I'm the Cap. I'm the Daddy.* Whatever else was happening around him, he reassured me. He never understated the dangers of his job, but he called them "manageable, with common sense." He made me think—long past the age when most kids stop believing in their fathers as mythic beings—that he was the barrier evil could not cross.

Dad must have heard a sound. He jerked and looked over his shoulder.

I think I saw skinny little Danny Furtosa at the same time my father did. Danny was standing about halfway between the door and the altar, with his hair on fire. This flat line of muddy smoke had begun to descend from the chapel's ceiling, layering down atop the glow of the fire—something I had seen only on my dad's five million or so accident-scene videos, which I was never supposed to watch but, of course, did. I knew that my dad was measuring that bank of smoke against the distance between him and Danny and hoping he had five seconds, which I knew even then could be plenty of time. And still, I tried to scream for him not to go. My mouth didn't open. My neck didn't lurch, the way it does when you gather your vocal chords to shout. I thought it was just smoke—and fear—clogging my voice, shoving it down.

It wouldn't have mattered. He would have gone anyway.

He got far enough to pick Danny up. And then there was a sharp musical burst as one of my dad's crew, Tom McAvoy or Schmitt, used

a pike pole to slam in one of the old leaded windows. My father and Danny Furtosa disappeared in the unfurling red velvet of the flashover. It foamed toward Renee and me like the disgorged depths of a dragon's throat. My dad always said there was nothing so pretty as a flashover. Renee said to me, "Oh, my God. Oh, Sicily. Listen. Look at me." But neither of us could look away. Did I notice, like Renee, how majestic and lovely that flashover was? Of course I did. I was my father's daughter. He wouldn't have panicked. And I didn't panic either. There was still a chance that my dad had survived. He was a twenty-five-year veteran. People lived through flashovers all the time. I knew he would have bad injuries. But that was okay if I could keep him.

The sharp dread for my father was not my only thought in that fractured and fractional moment. Never had I perceived fire as other than mesmerizing—something to be respected for its power but not to be feared, something that my father routinely conquered. Everyone would see the transformation of my face. Everyone with eyes could understand what that did to me. Not even I would grasp how powerful was the simultaneous denaturing of my being, the part no one could see, and how that shift would shape my life as much.

More.

If it hadn't been for that ten minutes ten days after my thirteenth birthday, I would have grown up exactly the same as a million other kids just like me.

The fire happened during the last hour of class on the last day of school before Christmas vacation at Holy Angels Catholic School. My father was forty-four years old, captain of Ladder 19, Engine Company 3, in Chester, Illinois, just outside Chicago. At the scene, his primary role should have been making sure where everyone was, but he and Renee were first on scene and the fire was too bad to follow procedure exactly: There were kids involved, and one of them was me. Although Dad would have expected that the training would take over, smooth as a motor starting, and that he would act no differently than he would if his kid wasn't inside, I didn't believe that then and I don't now. Still, he and Renee carried thirty-four to safety out of that gruesome, impossi-

ble, inaccessible little place, and twenty-six kids lived. No one could have done more. My father was a hero because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time too—damaged, but a survivor. But I was part of that fire too—and though I had nothing to do with it, I was in some measure responsible, just as you are in some measure responsible when a car rear-ends your car, because you're there. If you set a fire, even a campfire, the law says you're responsible for whatever it burns. If you could have put that fire out and you didn't, you're responsible. If I had been home sick that day—and I was sick, a little, and my mother wanted me to stay home, because she was wacky-protective if I even sniffled—my father still would have answered the three-eleven alarm. Would he have gone the extra distance? I used to toss that back and forth, thinking at first, maybe not; Dad was by the book. He said that his best friend, Schmitt, had “hero genes,” but that he himself did not. What my dad would have wanted was to be with me at the hospital that night, holding my mom on his lap like a child as she cried.

To my best friend, Kit Mulroy, and me, my parents' displays were humiliating. They'd been married since they were twenty-three and he still called her “my bride.” My mother was at the hospital that night, alone—with her sister and her parents and my friends' parents, yes, but entirely alone.

My father died where he stood, from his injuries. He would have been able to brace for it. He would still have been breathing air from his mask. When he put it on, I knew, he had twelve minutes, and the whole thing lasted no longer than six. When the hoses fought it all down—it couldn't have taken long, less than a minute?—leaving the chapel a thick, charred hulk, its medieval walls gruffly upstanding, the water along the roofline already slushing to a filthy glaze, I was still kneeling in the snow. It went that quickly. From behind me, I felt the urgent, gentle hands of the medics helping me onto a rolling stretcher. Everywhere, by then, were paramedics, from towns all over, their vans filling the circle and lunging up over the high curbs onto the lawn, rushing to the kids around me. Some kids the medics just knelt to



touch and then quickly, softly, laid a blanket over them, as though tucking them in, and walked past. Of course I knew why. Other kids they grabbed up, starting chest compressions and shoving oxygen masks on, yelling like athletes breaking the tape when they got a breath. It took so long for me to get out of there, because my cart's wheels got stuck in the snow. Renee tried to stand in front of me, but I saw guys from my father's crew bringing him out—in their arms, not on a bed. Dad still held Danny Furtosa in his arms. Danny's face was pushed tight against my dad's chest. In the end, Dad was old-fashioned South Side Irish, a certain kind of guy.

Even if he could have ducked and run to me, he wouldn't have wanted a little kid to die alone.