

# CHAPTER 1

Coletti glanced out of the window of the 1992 Seagrave engine as it barreled northward toward Manhattan. The chassis bounced off the uneven pavement on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, knocking around the portable radios and air-pack harnesses fastened to the jump seats. Because he sat in his assigned seat, rear facing, officer side, Coletti couldn't get a good view of where the rig was headed. To do so, he would have to turn and crane his neck left out the door window or peer to his right through the windshield, past the lieutenant who sat in the front passenger seat.

Today, it didn't matter if he could see where the rig was headed or not. When he stared left out the cab window over Brooklyn, he saw a long horizontal tracer of black, angry smoke running high in the sky. It told him everything he needed to know. There was a large fire burning at the World Trade Center, and he was going to spend the rest of the day there. Maybe longer.

*Smoke. It always started that way,* he mused. Yeah, the call comes in, the alarm goes off, the gear goes on, and the rigs roll and

pull up at the scene. But nothing really starts until the arrival of that collection of solid, liquid, and gas particles that appear when a material undergoes combustion. Smoke. It could be seen, smelled, or felt—on the skin, in the eyes, and in the nose. Once it materializes, it's clear the run is real and not a jerk job.

Coletti shook his head and glanced toward the driver's seat. Ronkowski, the burly engine chauffeur, gripped the steering wheel with his left hand. His other hand grasped a portable radio handset, pressed to his right ear so he could monitor tactical radio transmissions from the fire scene and relay them to his company officer seated to his right. Lieutenant Glen Rowan, the company officer, had his own radio glued to his ear, tuned into the citywide dispatch. Between the two of them, they would have enough information about any incident, ready to anticipate what would be needed when their rig arrived on scene.

However, on this box, no one in the rig could anticipate what would be asked of them or what they were going to do. And the radio traffic on the tactical channel made that painfully clear.

Ronkowski shouted over the engine's wailing siren. "Lieu, they're reporting jumpers from the tower. Fifth alarm assignment. Fire through the skin of the building on the ninetieth floor." Ronkowski raised his eyebrows slightly and cocked his head when he spoke. He put the handset down, grabbed the wheel with both hands, and expertly careened the rig around a minivan. *Good old Ronkowski, Coletti observed. That meaty Pole operates this rig better than the accordion he plays at the Sobieski Hall in Greenpoint on Saturday nights.*

Kelvin Jordan, a six-year nozzle man built like an outside linebacker, sat facing Coletti. He stared at Coletti with shock and fear in his eyes. "Damn. That shit's not right."

Coletti gestured to him with his right palm facing the floor of the cab. "Easy. It's gonna be a long day."

Ronkowski gunned the engine forward in the empty HOV lane

toward the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel. The rig hurtled past packed express buses from Staten Island stranded on the side of the expressway because the cops had shut the tunnel down. Captive passengers and drivers sat there, transfixed, all eyes aimed at the inferno burning one thousand feet in the sky across the East River.

Coletti adjusted his turnout coat on his shoulders and eased his right arm through the strap of his air-pack harness. He did the same with his left arm, and then made sure the inhalation tube and regulator were attached to his face piece and dangled in front of him. The backup man, Rodriguez, sat diagonally across from him. He stared out the window at the World Trade Center. His lips weren't moving, but Coletti was sure he was praying.

*This is going to be a hard, difficult day.* Coletti's thoughts turned to more peaceful, happy times. Being with Ellie in an abandoned lighthouse on that little Italian island, Strombolicchio, came to mind. He bowed his head.

*Shit. At least I had that.*