

# CHAPTER ONE

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

9:05 A.M.

**A**s they headed west over the Brooklyn Bridge, Peter Murphy double-checked his gear, making sure he had all his equipment. It might have seemed silly, but the precaution was something they taught in the FDNY Fire Academy, where only weeks ago he had been training. Guys had been known to leave the firehouse without a helmet or a radio or a fully charged “can”—as the silver hand-held fire extinguishers were known. And that could be troublesome and embarrassing, especially for a “probie” like himself. As the junior man on Ladder 389, it was his job to be the “can man,” meaning he would carry the small fire extinguisher during a forced entry, positioned behind the “irons” man, who carried the tools to break through a locked door or window at a fire scene. Peter’s job was to suppress any fire during the entry and help search for victims while waiting for the engine company to arrive with hoses and more men to put water on a fire.

At the arc of the roadway on the bridge, speeding along toward Lower Manhattan, Peter and the rest of his unit could see clearly the fully engulfed upper floors of the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center. It was a surreal sight. More than once during the short ride from Brooklyn Heights—the truck’s sirens screaming the entire way—Peter thought how ineffective the little handheld fire extinguisher would be in this situation. The other men also glanced at each other in the cab of the truck but said little. They knew this would be the biggest fire of their lives, and the senior men also knew if things didn’t go right, it might be their last. Their adrenaline was pumping.

“Listen up, probie,” said Lieutenant Kevin Callahan, the senior man on the rig. “No matter what, you stay right next to me. I want you so close I can smell your awful breath. You got me? And do exactly what I tell you, when I tell you. No thinking. Just follow my orders, okay?”

“Copy that, Lieutenant,” Peter shouted back.

A six-foot-two former marine with a shaggy crop of brown curly hair and a six-pack of abs that he worked on daily at the gym, Peter Murphy had learned how to follow orders without question, even when they seemed asinine.

Peter tried not to let his thoughts run away from him as the truck and his comrades drew closer to the blazing Twin Towers. But this was easier said than done. This would be his first actual fire while with the FDNY, which he had joined at his mother’s urging, following a year off bumming around the beaches of Southern California. He was eager to prove himself to his fellow firefighters. They were a tough and seasoned bunch. Mike the Termite (known for his car-

penry skills); Patrick (aka the Irish), who never missed a Notre Dame football game and who, yes, could drink them all under the table; Sal (the Eggplant), who brought his Italian mother's recipes to the firehouse, perfecting them over the years, and who had the most experience on the job; and the Lieutenant, who the other men simply called "Lou," in deference to his rank.

Peter Murphy knew his mother, Sarah, and father, a recently retired NYPD detective, must be watching the drama unfold on the TV in their Pelham Bay apartment in the Bronx, a few miles north. He thought about calling her. But most cell phones were down, and he didn't want to seem like a wuss in front of the other men. He tried to concentrate on the task ahead. And he recalled the lessons learned at the fire academy. Above all else, the instructors taught safety. Over and over, they stressed how to size up a fire scene, conduct a safe search and rescue, and then know when it was time to get out—without getting yourself or your fellow firefighters killed. The ultimate goal of every FDNY member was to live to fight a fire another day.

As their rig barreled over the bridge, Peter replayed his instructor's safety messages in his head. But none of it seemed applicable to what he and the men were facing today. No one had foreseen this ultimate Manhattan high-rise fire, caused by hijacked airliners being piloted into two of the tallest buildings in the world. It was not a scenario that they had ever drilled for in the academy.

Peter had no idea what to expect. He knew he would have to trust his lieutenant and the more senior men from his firehouse. He knew part of their job was to protect the

probie—him—from danger. That was the unspoken, unwritten rule of any firehouse: The senior men could harass the probie as much as they wanted at the house, but—on the fireground—the other men instinctively tried to keep any probie out of harm's way while giving him enough room to learn the job. They had all once themselves been probies, rookie firefighters who generally lacked the experience to avoid getting killed, the kind of experience that could only be gained by years of responding to calls big and small. From the stovetop pot burners to car accidents on the FDR to fully engulfed apartment fires where a roof could cave in with little notice, the men of Ladder 389—based in Brooklyn Heights, near the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge—had seen it all, at least until this morning.



Lieutenant Callahan had his own misgivings coming over the bridge. The radio traffic on the FDNY communications channels already was jammed beyond anything he had experienced, making it difficult to get any useful information about the situation he and his men were about to face. It seemed as if every member of the FDNY was responding to the WTC, which was not necessarily a good thing. Callahan knew that too many firefighters—all eager to help and arriving at the same time—could lead to chaos at the fire scene if the bosses didn't control the situation. And the attack had occurred at the time of an FDNY shift change, so many firefighters who were just coming off their tours joined those reporting for the next shift, jumping on rigs together across

the city—all heading to the WTC. Some firefighters whose rigs had already left the firehouse commandeered MTA buses, ordering the bus drivers to take them downtown to the Trade Center so they could be part of the action. This was the biggest, baddest fire in a generation, and no one on the FDNY wanted to miss it.

Lieutenant Callahan concentrated on how to protect his men, especially Peter. The largely Irish and Italian-American workforce at the FDNY took care of their own. They often passed the job itself down from one generation to the next, from father to son and from uncle to nephew. This made the FDNY an insular place, one that remained an overwhelmingly white and male world. Whatever the FDNY lacked in diversity, it made up for in family ties and brotherly bonds—on and off the fireground.

Lieutenant Callahan felt the burden of that tradition as the men roared over the Brooklyn Bridge, especially when he got his first good look at the Twin Towers in the distance, wrapped in flames and smoke beneath a perfect blue September morning sky, knowing that anything could happen.

“This doesn’t look good,” Sal said to the Lieutenant, out of earshot of the probie. “What’s your plan?”

“We’ll have to size it up when we get there, but make sure the other guys stay close,” Lou said. “It’s going to be a crazy scene. I’ll check in with command—if there is a command. You get everyone else ready. Make sure they have their masks and their Scotts are fully charged. But don’t load them up with any extra stuff. It could be a long climb up those stairs. No way are we going to be able to put water

on that fire. It's too intense and too high up. I assume this is a search and rescue operation at this point."

"Roger that, Lou," Sal responded.

Today, though, all their skills would be put to the test—just to make it out alive. Lou glanced at Peter and the other men.



Peter caught Callahan's look and wondered if he would ever get to see his mom again. It was a fleeting thought, one he pushed to the back of his mind. He had dreamed of the life he wanted to build for himself with his girlfriend Anna, his high school sweetheart. They had recently started to talk about marriage and about saving up enough money for a down payment to buy a starter house out in Suffolk County in Islip or Commack or Ronkonkoma, more than an hour's drive from Manhattan but where a young couple who scrimped could still afford a modest home. They both wanted to move out of the Bronx.

Like generations of firefighters before him, Peter had begun taking jobs in the home renovation and construction trades to supplement his FDNY salary. He did mostly unskilled tasks, like helping to rip out an old bathroom or laying down lumber for a new deck, working as a helper on jobs secured by the Termite and the other more senior and more skilled firefighters from his firehouse. Eventually, Peter would learn one of the skilled trades—laying tile or basic carpentry—from the other guys in his house and strike out on his own. Working two jobs was how the guys afforded

the two-car, one-house-in-the-suburbs, middle-class lifestyle they and their wives and children had come to expect, even on an FDNY salary. The flexible schedules at the firehouse, where you could work a twenty-four-hour shift and then be off for three days, allowed them to juggle it all. And juggle they did.

As the Lieutenant predicted, it was chaos when Peter's company arrived at the base of the North Tower. A few senior officers manned a makeshift command post in the lobby. They appeared to have only the slightest sense of what was going on in the 110 floors above them. They had no TV to help them see what was unfolding. It occurred to Peter that anyone watching the drama unfold live on television probably had a better view of what was happening than the FDNY officers at that command post.

Peter's FDNY unit was among the first to arrive.

Peter saw some units from other companies racing up the nearest stairs, not bothering to check in with the chiefs at the command center, who were trying unsuccessfully to keep track of which firefighters were going where. "Let's go," one FDNY captain yelled to his men. "We can't wait for orders."

Peter and his unit began their ascent on foot—all ninety-nine elevators in the North Tower were inoperable. As Peter, Mike, Patrick, Sal, and the Lieutenant worked their way up the stairs, each carrying up to seventy-five pounds of protective gear and equipment, they squeezed passed hundreds of civilians making their way down, mostly on their own.

The cinder block-lined stairway with its concrete steps and steel railings was mostly clear of smoke; those coming down were calm. As Peter's unit checked in on each floor they passed, making sure no one else had been left behind, the offices they encountered looked as if it was a weekend and everyone had simply gone home. Desks, chairs, phones, and cubicles were all in their proper order. But for the chaos in the lobby and on the street below, it looked like a regular workday inside on the lower floors, except for an occasional jarring noise outside the windows—the sudden, unnerving, and regular thuds from street level.

It was a strange sound, not one Peter had ever heard before. It took Peter and the other guys a while to figure it out. On the tenth floor, they stopped, rested for a moment, and peered out the narrow, ceiling-to-floor-length windows. As they watched from inside, they noticed objects whizzing past.

"Is that what I think it is?" the Lieutenant asked the other guys.

"Jumpers," Sal said solemnly. "It's got to be a beast up there if they are jumping."

Peter at first didn't get it. He had heard the term "jumpers" before, but he thought it referred to people committing suicide and choosing to do so by jumping off one of the city's bridges. Why would people be jumping from the upper floors, especially if the FDNY was on the way?

He asked his lieutenant. "What's going on? Why are they jumping?"



“The heat must be so intense up there that they are choosing to jump rather than be burned to death. It happens,” the Lieutenant said. “Let’s keep moving,”

The senior officers in the lobby had confirmed that their objective at this point was a rescue mission, not to fight the fire, which was too huge and too high up. They were to check each floor that hadn’t already been cleared, making sure no civilians were left behind, and report back via radio to the command post in the lobby—if they could reach their superiors, which often they could not. They would ascend as close to the fire floors as possible. With the elevators out of service, they knew this could take hours.

The Lieutenant’s “handy-talkie” radio suddenly crackled to life. “Ladder 389. Report position.”

It was Pete Ganci, the chief of the department, the highest-ranking uniformed officer in the FDNY and one of the first to arrive at the scene. The Lieutenant was surprised to hear him, but not surprised that Ganci was in the thick of it, directing his troops.

“We’re on ten heading to eleven,” the Lieutenant answered. “All present.”

“Ten-four,” the chief replied. “Stay in touch. Use this channel.”

The Lieutenant turned to Sal. “You know the radios in here didn’t work during the ’93 bombing. I hope they fixed them.”

“I hope so too, Lou,” Sal replied. “The higher up we go, the more interference we likely will get .”

Ladder 389 moved up through the fifteenth floor with little to report. These floors of the North Tower were deserted.

“Hey, Lou, there’s nobody up here. Seems like everybody has gotten out already,” Peter yelled to the Lieutenant.

Peter was starting to get a bad feeling in his gut. His mind was racing. *What are we really doing here? He kept his thoughts to himself. He didn’t want the other men to think he was weak in the knee, not on his first real fire.*

Peter’s unease about the mission only grew as he saw police officers race down the stairs as he and the guys from his unit continued their ascent. Some of the cops didn’t even bother to stop to share information.

Peter blocked the path of one cop on his way down. “Hey, what’s your hurry? Where are you guys going? Isn’t the fire up that way?”

The descending cop tried to push past Peter and gave him a look as if to say, “Buddy, if you want to die in here, that’s fine. Not me.” Other cops were jumping down the stairs two at a time. Their NYPD captain stopped briefly. “We made it up to twenty-five. A Mayday to evacuate all first responders came over about five minutes ago. Didn’t you guys hear it? I’d get your guys out of here if I was you. They said the building might come down.”

Peter thought the cops were acting like wusses. No way was he heading *away* from the fire. Can you imagine trying to live that one down? The biggest fire in the tallest building in the city and he was going to leave before he even opened up a nozzle or saw a flame or, at the very least, make a rescue? No way. Just because the cops were leaving didn’t mean that the FDNY should be doing the same. The cops weren’t trained for this. The FDNY was.

“Thanks for the intel,” the Lieutenant said. “We’ll hang around a bit longer.”

Still, Peter thought, if a Mayday had been called, why didn’t they hear it on their FDNY radio? An order like that would be across the board—for every first responder to get out as quickly as possible.

The Lieutenant turned to Peter and the other guys. “Let’s keep going,” he said, trying now to reach the chief again on his radio. If there was a Mayday, he was certain the chief would have tried to reach him.

“This is Ladder 389 to Command Post. Ladder 389 reporting. Please acknowledge. K.” The “K” meant Lou had ended his transmission. He waited patiently for a response but heard only static.