

AN UNKNOWN WOMAN

CHAPTER ONE

“What’s that noise?” Anita sat upright in bed, blinking blindly in the dark.

Ed rolled onto his side, dragging the duvet with him and groaning, “What noise?”

“That banging.”

Ed insisted, “I can’t hear anything. Go back to sleep.”

But Anita knew she hadn’t imagined it. She willed it to come again.

“There!” She grabbed at it, her lungs so tight with fear that she could barely breathe. “Someone’s trying to break in!”

“No.” All attention now, Ed was up on his elbows, staring at the ceiling. “It’s coming from the loft.”

Then a shrieking sound pierced the silence, relentless, heart-stopping, almost paralysing. The sideways leap from burglar to what else this might mean was almost too much to take on board. In disbelief, Anita asked, “Is that -?”

“It’s the smoke alarm.” Already on his feet, Ed commanded, “Get up!” His hands were fists. Perhaps he imagined an intruder might have deliberately set the alarm off, intending to draw them downstairs.

She saw a drift of air, cloudy and powder-grey, nothing so substantial that it fitted the description of smoke. Anita followed Ed out onto the landing. The door of the spare room was edged with a reddish glow. Before she could yell “Stop!”, Ed had reached for the doorknob. He yanked his hand away, shaking it violently, cursing loudly. Just as he hid it in the opposite armpit, the door swung inwards on its hinges. Slapped in the face by a fierce concentration of heat, they stepped back. The sight of flames devouring the wall was mesmerising, the sounds of snapping and popping surreal. A lungful of toxic black smoke escaped, then the door sucked closed. There was a moment when all she could do was blink, then Anita found herself being pushed in front of Ed, ordered downstairs.

“Passports and birth certificates,” Ed said.

“I’ll get those.”

It seemed so urgent, the need to make the right decisions about what to save. At the foot of the staircase Anita grabbed her handbag from the banister, shrugged on her coat. Venturing into the dining room, she checked that her route to the French windows was clear. Her laptop lay on the table. She had worked late into the evening, until her eyes protested. Anita ripped out the lead, ready to pick up on her way out. About to pull out the plug, she stopped short. An inch more and she would have been touching the live electrics.

Calm down.

Think.

How long did she have? A minute, perhaps. She checked over her shoulder: Ed was going between

the front room and the hall, throwing things out of the front door.

“Shut the door!” she yelled at him.

“What?”

“Oxygen feeds fire.” Didn’t everybody know that? “Go out the front and shut the door behind you.”

On hearing a slam, she bent over the oriental chest. In it, household documents were stored in manila folders, their edges torn from regular use. Ed thought her filing system obsessive, but they never had to search for passports. She found them quickly.

“Anita! Anita! You need to get out!”

Christ! Ed was still inside! Where, a minute ago, there’d been a doorway, she saw a wall of thick black smoke. “So do you. I’ll go out the back!”

“I can’t hear you! Where are you?”

Important documents stowed in her handbag, she clutched her laptop under one arm. *“I said, I’ll go out the back!”* She instinctively covered her nostrils and mouth as she skirted the table. Black smoke rolled the length of the ceiling, determined to ambush her. Memory urged: crouch low.

Moments later she was standing on the patio, relieved to find herself breathing untainted air, marvelling at the miracle that was the night sky. It would have been a good night for star-gazing. Ed pointing and spouting facts about distant constellations whose names Anita would forget; trying to explain that they were seeing light from stars that no longer existed. “How can we see something that doesn’t exist?” Anita protested against a concept so mind-bending, though she enjoyed Ed’s enthusiasm, seeing his eyes light up. But tonight there was no time. “You need to keep moving,” she scolded herself.

Anita’s shoulders jerked violently at the sound of a heavy thud against the French windows. Ed must still be inside! “Christ!” Thank God the stars had held her attention for a moment. There was an orange glow in the dining room now. She pulled a coat sleeve down over one hand and tugged at the handle. Another thud and the door flew open. Ed staggered out, one hand reaching, the other clutched to his chest. His face was smudged black. “Why didn’t you go out the front?” Anita demanded, angry that he’d been so stupid.

“I thought you were trapped...” He doubled over, hands on his knees, winded. “Give me a minute to catch my breath.”

“We don’t have a minute.” She made him straighten up, trying to offer support. He snatched his burnt hand away and returned it to the safety of his armpit.

“Anyway,” he rasped, his head angled towards her, “what were you doing, standing there?”

“Looking at the light from all the dead stars.”

“You *were* listening!”

“Just because I can’t get my head around what you’re telling me, doesn’t mean I’m not listening. Come on!” she insisted.

They stood in the road watching as flames billowed from an upstairs window. Even in the darkness, the air shimmered. Lit from below, a swell of dense black smoke obscured the crescent moon. The night was alive with ungodly sounds: sharp shouts, the rise and fall of screaming sirens, a sickening crackling. To Anita’s right, an explosion of glass drove home just how narrow their escape had been.

Thick, acrid-tasting air turned her throat to charcoal. Her lungs protested. The fire harnessed hypnotic power. With her gaze welded to the spectacle, Anita was only vaguely aware of the neighbours who had drifted out of silent homes. They were knotting belts of dressing gowns, hoisting up waistbands of tracksuit bottoms, looking for the cause of this unwelcome disturbance. Entranced, they grabbed the arms of partners, joined the vigil. Seeing that the fire’s progress was merciless, some went in search of assurance that their loved ones, houses and possessions - “Christ, has anyone seen the cat?” - were safe. As liquid flames licked the eaves, lips silently thanked lucky stars - or whatever god they believed dwelled in the heavens. This was someone else’s misfortune.

Ed pulled Anita closer as another volley of coughs wracked through her chest. Flames shot out of the

letterbox, dulling the sheen of recently polished brass. She made no complaint. Pain felt like an appropriate response. Watching the paintwork blister, it was easy for her to think of the house as having a skin.

“Is there anyone inside the building?” a fireman demanded.

As Ed appointed himself spokesperson - “No, just the two of us live there” - Anita pressed the laptop she had been clutching to his chest like a shield, moved forwards onto the path and began to pick up stray cushions that were strewn around the garden. They were damp and muddied, and she doubted they could be salvaged, but she stowed them in the boot of their Mini - the only place that seemed safe from the hosepipes.

The discussion continued without her. “No pets?”

“None.”

More firemen pounded up the path - kept on running, it seemed - armed with axes and sledgehammers. She returned to Ed’s side. In Anita’s initial flush of relief, it had felt comforting to hand responsibility to someone else. But now, though logic told her that the firemen were risking their lives, Anita tensed at the sight of them breaking down her front door, hacking it into splinters. She had painted the door twice, first British Racing Green and then, after the fitting of new brass locks, a glossy black. What had seemed substantial proved flimsy. Shifting her feet, Anita felt cold wet grit press into her soles. There’d been no time for shoes. She was dressed in what she had been wearing in bed - pyjamas would be a generous description for her tired yoga pants and camisole - topped with her winter coat. Her mother insisted on calling it her ‘good winter coat’, but it was Anita’s only coat and she was glad of it. Despite the waves of intense dry heat that stretched the skin taut over her cheekbones, cold rose up through Anita’s bare feet, into her marrow.

The smoke was blacker than she had thought possible; the flames redder, cutting through the night, wrapping themselves around the guttering, licking the darkness, crawling on the concrete roof tiles Ed had always wanted to replace with terracotta, but Anita hadn’t minded terribly much. Her mind conjured shapes within the writhing flames. Hellish beings with forked tongues. Demonic shadows. She saw a silhouette that looked remarkably like hers standing at an upstairs window.

Another violent explosion of glass. Anita’s breath caught. She tore her focus away from her ghost. Debris was falling now. Flaming things hit the ground and burnt themselves out. She watched the leaves of a rosebush turn from glossy green to black and then disintegrate, dropping away to nothing.

In spite of its ferocious heat, the fire was magnetic.

“We need to get back,” Ed encouraged in an altered voice.

Anita pulled away from his embrace. “Shouldn’t we move the car?” Her feet shifted of their own accord. The drive was awash with a soup of water and soot.

“Come away from there! For Christ’s sake, Anita! It’s too late!”

“But we haven’t finished paying for it...”

“It’s just a bloody car.” Fingers handcuffed her wrist. Hauled backwards, she was encircled and rocked. His frantic tone took her aback. “None of this stuff matters. Not compared with having you safe.”

Anita knew Ed was trying to say the right things. He unbuttoned her coat, lending her his body heat. She settled against his shoulder, numbed by impotence, but knowing how wrong he was. Contained within those four walls was their fifteen-year history. Every Sunday morning lie-in they’d shared. Cosy evenings. Conversations shaped. Baths run. Culinary triumphs - and disasters. Every history book she’d ever read. Every Christmas, every birthday. That terrible party they’d held in celebration of their tenth anniversary, when friends and family had clearly expected an engagement announcement. The results of every hour of every trip to every flea market or antiques fair.

Ed was asking, “Aren’t you going to put them on?” Paired next to her feet were some wellington boots, cheerful things with a floral design.

This small kindness made Anita tearful. “Where did they come from?”

“Someone from up the far end, I think. I didn’t recognise her.”

Anita swiped what grit she could from her feet, grabbing Ed’s arm for support before stepping

unsteadily into the boots. They were a poor fit, no good for walking in, but at least her feet were no longer bare. "How will I get them back to her?" Anita scanned the cul-de-sac for a sign of recognition, but the scattering of neighbours seemed determined to look anywhere other than at her.

"She didn't seem terribly worried."

Anita returned her attention to the house. Fingers of orange, liquid like lava. Prometheus was said to have stolen fire from the gods. They appeared to have been angered again. Anita couldn't decide which was more persistent: the flames or the jets of water firemen aimed at their home. It was a battle from which no victor would emerge. Everything they possessed would be destroyed by one element or the other. A fireman was standing in her flowerbeds, crushing the plants that she had watered and pruned under the soles of his rubber boots. It was impossible to voice an objection while flames lit the night sky like an erupting volcano, but Anita's splayed fingers objected; her fingertips objected.

"I've always hated those roof tiles." Ed returned to a favourite theme, but Anita didn't want fake cheerfulness, pretence that there was a silver lining. From the cathedral of flames and the great chutes of water, the skeleton of their home emerged. It had always worn its timber beams - its bones - on the outside. Anita watched one of the timbers in the porch as it was overcome by flames, and thought of Joan of Arc. The firemen would sacrifice their home in an attempt to save the houses on either side. Ed had always complained that the house to the immediate left had been built too close, its tall chimney perching territorially at the very edge of the roof.

A man with a microphone. She clutched Ed's arm asking silent questions: Who was he? And when had he arrived?

"It looks as if he's from the local radio station," Ed said, following her gaze, almost as if they should expect someone to show up and record the destruction of their home.

She could hear the manager of the fire station saying, "Upon arrival, my crew was faced with a severe fire in the back bedroom of the detached property. It had already spread to the roof space. Firefighters wearing breathing apparatus are tackling the blaze with three hose reels and one main jet. The room that the fire started in has been completely gutted, together with much of the rest of the property."

"And the cause?"

"Impossible to tell at this stage."

"But if you had to hazard a guess?" The microphone thrust forwards once again.

"That's our house they're talking about?" Anita said.

Ed cradled her head to his shoulder. "They're just doing their jobs."

She delved into her handbag for her phone - an automatic reaction.

"What are you doing?" Ed asked, incredulous.

"I should give Roz a ring. Let her know I won't be in first thing." Her throat burned with the effort of speaking.

"Work is the *last* thing you should be worrying about!"

"I have to be there. It's the opening of the new exhibition, remember? It's my job to introduce the speaker."

"Not dressed like that!"

Looking down at herself, Anita confronted an indisputable fact. She would walk away with only the clothes she was dressed in and what she carried, nothing more.

Underneath the fire's perpetual roar was a second layer of sound, a steady clap, like applause at a cricket match. The firemen were struggling to make their shouts heard, but somewhere beneath the chaos, a third layer emerged - a place of stillness - and it was there Anita sought refuge. The calm of knowing that nothing would be salvaged, nothing would remain. But even braving this inevitability, Anita wasn't aware of the full extent of what she was losing. News reports and insurance settlements wouldn't reveal the whole picture. It would be some months before the true tally of what she had lost in the fire finally emerged.