



CHAPTER 1

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

Donny Robertson leaned forward in the captain's seat of Pumper Six and peered at the smoke coming from the house up ahead. To a firefighter, smoke was the body language of a fire, and Donny didn't like what this smoke was telling him. It should have been some shade of grey: lighter if it was mostly ordinary combustibles, darker if there were a lot of plastics and synthetics. Heavy, chocolate-brown smoke meant the possibility of a deadly backdraft explosion.

This was a curious red-brown haze, the colour of clotting blood. It had to be some kind of chemical. Pesticides? Fertilizer? People kept all kinds of crap in their garages and basements. Whatever it was, Donny's instincts—instincts that had been honed over twenty-seven years as a firefighter—told him it wasn't good.

Officially he was Captain Donald Michael Robertson. Most people knew him simply as Donny or "Wedge." He was a tall, thin man, with a narrow chin and protruding Adam's apple. Gawky in his youth, he had filled out some in middle age, thickening at the waist, but he still qualified as "wiry." His brooding blue eyes and wide brow,

topped with curly copper-coloured hair (now flecked with grey at the temples), were a testament to his Celtic ancestors.

Donny reached for the truck radio's mic. "Toronto Fire, this is Pumper Six Captain. We have smoke visible on approach to Homewood Avenue."

"Roger, smoke visible," the dispatcher confirmed.

Donny snugged the shoulder straps of his SCBA, the self-contained breathing apparatus nestled in the bracket in the back of his seat. The SCBA was a comforting burden, as familiar as the "race-horse in the starting gate" rush of adrenalin he felt sharpening his senses. His fingers brushed over the medallion of St. Florian he kept in the pocket of his bunker coat—the patron saint of firefighters. The house was only a block away now. He took a deep breath. He was ready.

Beside Donny, in the driver's seat, loomed Moose—six foot six, a man of enormous strength, fierce loyalty and deep compassion. Moose scanned the street ahead for a hydrant. The two firefighters in the back of the truck craned their necks to get a look at what lay ahead. Eddy "The Ladle" Moleiro sat in the senior man's seat behind Donny. He was a tough, skilled veteran, short, dark-haired and broad-shouldered. Baby-faced Patrick "Scout" Thompson, with just under a year on the job, rode the junior man's seat behind Moose.

"You want a line off the back or the side?" Eddy asked Donny over the wail of the siren.

"Let's go off the side—straight in." Donny's SCBA pulled free of its bracket in the seat back with a metallic "pop." He swivelled to face his rookie. "Scout, I want you to ..."

"I know, I know: hook up the hydrant."

Donny's mouth tightened. In the old days an attitude like that would have earned the kid a smack upside the head.

"Hey, Cap." Moose hit the brakes and killed the siren. "We got a blue canary down." It was an old joke among firefighters—cops getting a whiff of smoke and going down like the proverbial canary in the coalmine.

Donny spun back around. The cop was on his knees, coughing and spitting, half hidden by the scraggly weeds clinging to the patch of dirt in front of the house. "Get the oxygen, Scout. Moose can get his own hydrant."

Moose nodded, shifted the truck into pump gear and jumped down from the driver's seat. He moved with surprising lightness and precision for such a big man.

"Pumper Six arrived seventy-nine Homewood Avenue," Donny radioed. "I need medics right away. We've got an injured cop." He grabbed his red captain's helmet from the dash and hopped down.

Eddy was already pulling the preconnected fire hose from the transverse bed on the side of the truck facing the house. Moose dragged the larger, heavy suction hose from the back of the truck to the hydrant.

Donny hurried to the cop. Scout retrieved the first aid kit and oxygen from a compartment on the side of the truck and followed.

"My partner," the cop gasped, "inside."

The wind swirled the smoke towards them, and Donny caught the sharp smell of ammonia. "Drug lab?"

The cop nodded. Scout put down the first aid kit and fitted an oxygen mask to the cop's face.

"Where is he?" Donny asked.

"Not sure. I tried ..." The cop collapsed in a fit of coughing.

"Forget the hose, Eddy," Donny called over his shoulder. "It's a lab. There's another cop inside."

Eddy dropped the hose. They both knew a drug lab would contain reactive and toxic chemicals. Blasting them with high-pressure water was a bad idea.

Donny sized up the situation. No two fires were alike, but this was a unique challenge. Facing him was a detached, two-storey frame house, probably ninety, maybe a hundred years old. The flaking paint on the window frames and the islands of moss on the roof shingles spoke of years of neglect. Unlike most of its neighbours on this

downtown street, this house had yet to experience the fairy godmother touch of gentrification.

Fine, he'd been in hundreds of run-down houses. But now, in addition to the usual hazards of decay and bad wiring, this was a drug lab. The foul reddish haze that bled from the open side door betrayed its poisonous contents. And there was the possibility of booby traps. The gangs that ran these places had fertile and deadly imaginations when it came to protecting their operations.

Worst of all, they would have no hose line. The hose wasn't just a means to put the fire out—it was a lifeline. If things went bad, they could always follow the hose back out, the way they had come in. Or they could shove it out of an upper window like an improvised fire escape and slide down.

All they would have this time would be the thick quilted bunker suits they wore and the air in the SCBA on their backs. At least the cops had left the side door open. They wouldn't have to break in.

The size-up took only a second. Donny keyed the mic of his portable radio. "Toronto Fire, this is Pumper Six Captain. We have a working fire in a two-storey frame, detached; a drug lab with residential exposures. Requesting a second alarm and a HazMat response. We have a report of a cop down inside. I need additional medics. Pumper Six Captain is mobile command—primary search. We're going in dry."

"Roger."

"Scout, get this guy to the medics when they arrive." Donny slipped the face piece of his SCBA over his head. His voice became tinny inside the mask. "Take him back to the truck for now, then lay out a line for decontamination."

"Aren't I coming in with you? Why am I always stuck ..."

"I told you what I want. Now do it!" Donny's anger flared. Times and attitudes had changed since he was a probie, but the fireground was still not a debating society. Orders needed to be followed quickly and without question. Lives were at stake.

Scout turned back to the cop. Donny shook his head. Eddy shrugged.

Donny pulled his flame-resistant hood up over his head to the edge of his mask, then donned his heavy leather firefighting gloves. He was completely covered from head to toe. Chemical vapours and carcinogens would still seep through the fabric of his gear, but it was the best he could do. Whether you breathed it or not, all smoke was toxic—this was just especially so. He had accepted long ago that a career as a firefighter meant decades of slow poisoning.

He reached behind him and turned on his air tank, double-checked that his gauge showed that the tank was full, then clicked the regulator onto his face piece. Eddy did the same. Fresh air flowed into their masks, but the sour chemical taste of the smoke lingered in their mouths.

“What were the cops doing, trying to take down a drug lab with just two of them?” Eddy asked at the side door. “That’s a major operation.”

“Who knows? Cops.” Donny shook his head. “You ready?”

Eddy nodded. The smoke enveloped them like a thick, rusty fog as they stepped through the door. Blinded, they dropped to their knees and crawled, working by touch, sweeping their hands in front of them.

Donny made a mental map of their progress. Three stairs up from the side door. Left turn into some kind of a hallway. One metre, two, now three ... He kept tabs on Eddy’s position behind him, listening for the “Darth Vader” sound of Eddy’s breathing. Donny’s hands brushed along the walls on either side of them. Suddenly his left hand waved in the air. “I got a door. Going left.”

“OK.” Eddy waited by the door, marking the exit, while Donny circled the room.

“Never mind. It’s a closet.”

“Time you came out anyway,” Eddy said.

“You never get tired of that one, do you?” Donny started back down the hallway. “What happened to all that sensitivity training they gave you?”

“I stopped taking the anti-rejection drugs.”

No matter how grim the situation, Eddy always found a way to relieve the tension with his quirky sense of humour. It was one of the things Donny loved about his senior man.

Donny’s radio crackled with the arrival messages of other crews. Perimeters were being established, hose lines laid out to protect the neighbouring houses, decontamination and entry control zones set up—all the components of a major operation. Donny filed it all away in the back of his mind. His attention was focused on searching the house as quickly and efficiently as possible. The cop’s chances were fading with every second.

Another doorway, wider, and the acoustics were different this time. “Big room here, Eddy. You go left, I’ll take right.”

The voice of District Chief Joe “Ratzo” Razzolini cut through the radio chatter. “Chief Forty-one on scene, assuming command. Pumper Six Captain, what’s your situation?”

“Primary search, ground floor, par two. It’s shit soup in here, Chief.”

Donny’s report told Ratzo what they were doing, where they were, and that there were two of them. That was important. While it was equally informative, the colloquial part of Donny’s report made Ratzo scowl. They had been classmates in the Academy and were still friends, but Donny had a knack for straining the relationship, especially when it came to rules and procedures.

Donny crawled forward, his right hand keeping contact with the wall beside him, his left sweeping in wide arcs, groping for the cop’s body. He patted a large, round, heavy object in front of him. He couldn’t see it, but he recognized the shape as a forty-five-gallon drum. At one time, this was probably the living room, he thought; now it was a chemical warehouse.

“My armpits are burning,” Eddy said from across the room.

“It’s the ammonia. It reacts with water. Try not to sweat.”

“Don’t sweat? I’m Portuguese. You want me to stop breathing too?”

A glowing rectangle appeared through the smoke in front of Donny—another door, with fire beyond. Maybe the kitchen? “Looks like the fire’s through here. I’m gonna check it out.”

Donny’s hand caught on something as he swept through the door—a trip wire.

There was a flash in front of him, a deafening roar, and a shock wave that smacked him in the face. He dropped onto his stomach, momentarily stunned. A warm wetness soaked his pants. Had he been cut? There was no pain, and he could move his legs. Damn, he had pissed himself. Otherwise, he seemed unhurt.

Donny raised himself back to his knees and cautiously reached his hand out in front of him. There it was, the long, round profile of a shotgun barrel, rigged as a spring-gun trap.

A sound penetrated the ringing in his ears. Yelling. It was Eddy’s voice. “Donny, I’m hit! *Jesus Cristo, filho da puta!* I’m hit!”

Eddy! How had he ...? Donny put the pieces together. The gun had been aimed to hit a standing man in the chest. Donny being on his knees, the buckshot had gone clear over him, spread out, and hit Eddy on the other side of the room.

“I’m coming! Keep talking.” Donny crawled towards the voice, forcing his own fear and shock down. “Where are you hit?”

“In the hip. I can move, but aw shit, it hurts like a bastard.”

“Pumper Six Captain, this is Chief Forty-one,” the radio squawked. “What the hell’s going on in there?”

“Booby trap, Chief. We’re coming out.” There were more enquiries, but Donny ignored them. He reached Eddy’s side. It was impossible to tell how bad the wound was. He couldn’t see anything in the smoke. “You need help? Can you make it?”

“You lead,” Eddy grunted. “What about the cop?”

“We tried.” There was no choice. He could feel the heat from the fire growing, pressing in on them. The shotgun must have hit one of the drums of flammable chemicals. They had only a minute

or two before the whole house flashed over. Without a hose, they were defenceless.

He felt a different type of burning in his crotch—the ammonia reacting with his urine-soaked bunker pants. “Come on, let’s go.”

Donny crawled, trying to stay as low as he could under the heat. He retraced his path through the big room, sweeping his hands warily in front of him, feeling for the trigger of another booby trap. Eddy followed, keeping a hand on Donny’s heel.

Donny’s hand brushed against something. He pulled back and froze, then gingerly reached out again. It was soft, solid and heavy—the unmistakable bulk of a human body. “I got the cop here.”

“Sorry, man, I can’t help you.”

“Can you make the door?”

“I think so.”

“The hall’s straight ahead. Left, past the closet, then right, down three stairs and out.” Donny said, reading his mental map. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Eddy grunted and crawled away.

Donny felt around until he located the man’s arms. The fire was building rapidly. The higher he raised himself, the more intense the heat, but he needed a better grip. It was probably too late to save the cop, but there was always that faint hope. And he couldn’t leave the body behind to the flames. Not if he could help it.

“Donny? Where are you?”

He recognized the voice of Suzie Kozarovitch. Two years ago, she had been assigned to his crew as a probie, fresh out of the Academy. Now she was a member of the HazMat team. “Over here, down the hall on your right. I got the cop.”

Suzie met him at the doorway to the hall. “You all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. Where’s your crew?”

“We met Eddy at the side door. Captain Cooney and Bugs are taking him to decon. What the hell happened?”

“I’ll tell you later. Here, take an arm.” Together they dragged their limp burden the last few metres and staggered out the side door.

Behind them, a solvent container erupted with a deep “whump.” Donny and Suzie flinched as broken glass tinkled to the ground and flames leapt from shattered windows. Neighbours stopped on their porches and stared, then hurried away, shepherded by police and fire crews.

The Haz crew took the cop from Donny and Suzie and carried him to the sidewalk, towards the decontamination pool. It looked like an oversized child’s wading pool. They needed to wash off as much of the toxic residue as possible before the paramedics could begin their work. The pool would catch the contaminated runoff.

Eddy stepped out of the pool as the cop was brought over. The late-summer warmth of the afternoon had faded. Eddy stood naked, wet and shivering, having stripped off his contaminated gear and clothes. Rivulets of blood ran from his right buttock down his leg. A team of paramedics helped him onto a stretcher, wrapped him in blankets and wheeled him to an ambulance.

Donny watched the Haz crew lift the cop into the pool and cut away his clothes. Scout held the decon hose over the cop’s body, while Moose scrubbed quickly with a long-handled brush. Then the medics took over. They laid the cop on a stretcher, attached electrodes to his chest and started CPR. An airway and intravenous line were inserted, then they hurried towards a waiting group of ambulances.

“Mind if I go next?” Donny asked Suzie. “The friggin’ ammonia’s burning my balls.”

“Be my guest.”

Donny stepped into the pool and stripped off his fire coat and bunker pants. He took the nozzle from Scout and shoved it into the waistband of his trousers.

“Are you OK, sweetie?” Moose asked Suzie.

“Yeah, fine,” Suzie smiled up at him. She and Moose had been living together since shortly after she had transferred to the Haz.

Sighing contentedly as the stream of cool water washed over his crotch, Donny reflected on how the department had changed during his twenty-seven years. Not that fire-hall romances were entirely unknown in the days before there were women on the trucks.

Donny saw Ranzo making his way towards them from the ambulance staging area. "The medics say anything about Eddy?" Donny asked.

"Looks like he took two pellets in the ass. It's not too bad. The bunker suit gave him some protection." Ranzo looked at the hose Donny had jammed in his pants.

"What? It's the ammonia," Donny protested.

"Whatever. Strip down and report to the medics. You need to get checked out after being in that crap. You too, Q," Ranzo said, calling Suzie by the nickname Eddy had given her as a probie.

Donny stripped down to his briefs. Moose scrubbed. The house blazed behind them. Hose lines protected the neighbouring homes and kept the fire from spreading, but no one else was going inside to fight this fire.

Donny stepped from the pool, wrapped himself in a silver Mylar emergency blanket and walked towards a pair of ambulances.

The cop they had found in front of the house sat on the back step of an ambulance, wearing an oxygen mask. Two paramedics and another cop tried to get him to climb into the back, but the cop in the mask wasn't budging. He simply stared after the ambulance that carried his partner as it receded into the night. He looked over as Donny approached.

"Christ Almighty, what took you so long in there?" the cop asked, his voice still raw.

Donny stopped and glared at the cop. "Excuse me?" he replied slowly.

"He doesn't mean it, buddy," the other cop replied. "We know you tried. Come on, Ericson, you need to go to the hospital."

Ericson tore the oxygen mask off his face and threw it down. “Yeah, thanks for trying. Great job,” he croaked. “Randy’s dead. Thanks for everything.”

“You can thank yourself, fuckwit.”

Ericson stood up and stepped towards Donny. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. What the hell were you doing trying to take down a drug lab by yourselves? You some kind of cowboy?” Donny felt foolish, arguing with the cop while standing half naked, wrapped in silver Mylar. It only made him angrier. He clutched the cheap plastic blanket around himself with one hand and jabbed a finger at Ericson with the other. “Now I got a crew member that’s been shot and that’s on you, asshole. That’s on you.”

Ericson sprang at Donny, and the two of them fell to the ground. Everyone else was momentarily stunned as the men grappled and rolled. Moose sprinted over, grabbed Donny, and pulled him free. The other cop grabbed Ericson and yanked him to his feet. A small crowd of paramedics, cops and firefighters began to gather.

“What the hell is going on here?” Ratzon yelled as he ran towards the commotion. A police sergeant trailed close behind.

“That man’s under arrest, Sarge,” Ericson rasped, pointing at Donny. He swung his arm to include Moose. “Both of them—I want them both arrested. Assaulting an officer.”

Staff Sergeant Daya Singh looked at the two firefighters, then turned back to Ericson. “And what about all the procedures you violated here? Shall we write those up while we’re at it? Now get your ass in the ambulance. You’re done here.” She turned to look at Ratzon.

Ratzon nodded. “Moose, get your captain back to his truck.”

Donny opened his mouth to speak, but Ratzon cut him off with a glare. “Not a word, Robertson, not a goddamned word. We got enough trouble here. We’ll sort this out later.”

Sergeant Singh turned back to the other cops who had gathered. “We got people wounded and two whole blocks to evacuate. Let’s get to work.”

Donny sat in the captain's seat of Pumper Six. The truck hummed beneath him, its engine pumping thousands of litres of water into a tangle of hoses aimed at the fire. He clutched the tattered shreds of his plastic blanket around him and shivered. He was wet and cold, but mostly he shook with the residue of adrenalin from the fight and the frustration of watching the house burn in front of him. He hated losing. This evening, he had lost on virtually every front.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Donny turned away from the fire. Ranzo was standing at the front corner of the truck, his expression a mixture of anger and concern.

"The guy was a complete dickhead." Donny climbed down from the cab of the truck and stood facing his district chief.

"Maybe so, but you seem to attract them, don't you?" Ranzo said. "You are a magnet for shitstorms, Wedge, a friggin' magnet."

"I'm sorry. It's just ... Eddy, and ..." Donny swung his arm to encompass the whole scene.

"Yeah. Well, you still need to get checked out."

Scout and Moose were standing by the pump panel. Ranzo dug a set of keys out of his pocket and tossed them to the younger man. "Take the Tahoe and drive Captain Robertson to the hospital. Find Q and take her too. She's over by the Haz."

Donny followed Scout towards the HazMat truck.

"And try not to get into a fight with the nurses," Ranzo called after him. "Most of them would beat the crap out of you anyway."

Donny let the hint of a smile cross his face. At least they were still friends.