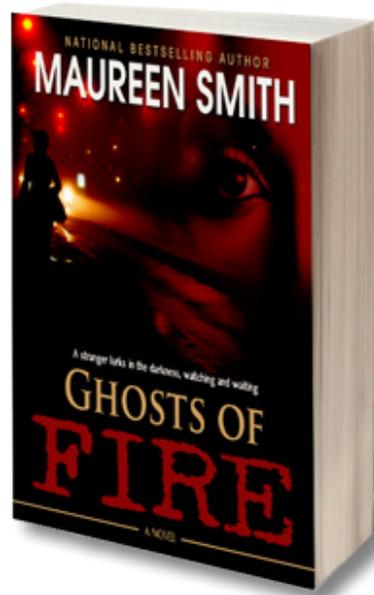


# MAUREEN SMITH



## AN EXCERPT FROM **GHOSTS OF FIRE**

### **Excerpt from Chapter One**

The explosion sent him staggering backward, shielding his face from the violent flames. In a matter of seconds, white-hot flames had engulfed the building. Thick, acrid smoke curled toward the dark early morning sky, ghostly fingers touching the heavens.

Blazing heat seared the stranger's lungs and he coughed, swearing violently as he swayed before the magnificent sight. Embers erupted from the melting structure, ablaze with crimson, shooting yellow flames. Black soot filled the summer air, blurring his vision.

He swiped at his stinging eyes, taking a moment to admire his handiwork. In the distance he heard sirens, faint but growing near. His heart pounded, a deafening roar in his ears.

He turned and started across the parking lot, a figure cloaked in black, silhouetted against the wrathful inferno. One foot slipped as he ran,

spilled gasoline stuck to the rubber soles of his boots. He kept running, lungs burning, until he disappeared into the dark thistle of forest.

\*\*\*

It was four a.m. when the phone in Rachel Calloway's tiny apartment rang.

It seemed that her head had just touched the pillow when she was jarred awake by the intrusive sound. Groaning in protest, she blinked in groggy confusion at the alarm clock on her nightstand. Who on earth could be calling me at this ungodly hour? she wondered.

But then another memory, never far from the surface of her mind, seized her, and she hurriedly reached for the phone. Her father's voice sent icy chills down her spine, much like it had many years ago on another fateful morning.

"Rachel...Sorry to wake you, baby..."

Rachel bolted upright. "What is it, Daddy? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's the restaurant, baby." Robert Calloway's voice shook with restrained tears. "There's been a fire. Everything...it's all been ruined."

The blood drained from Rachel's head. "A fire?" she repeated faintly. "How...?"

"I don't know, baby. The police called me after someone reported it. By the time I got there..." His voice hitching, he coughed. Rachel's heart constricted as he continued brokenly, "There was nothing left, Rachel."

“Oh, my God,” she breathed.

“I didn’t call to upset you, baby,” Robert hastened to add. “I just thought you should know-”

“I’m on my way,” Rachel cut him short, throwing back the covers and lurching from the bed.

Her father sputtered in protest on the other end. “Now, Rachel, that ain’t necessary. There’s nothing you can do, and it’s four in the morning!”

“I don’t care, Daddy. Now please get off the phone before I have to hang up on you.” Barely waiting for his compliance, Rachel flung down the phone receiver somewhere in the vicinity of its cradle and spent the next two minutes scrambling around her bedroom like a madwoman, opening dresser drawers and throwing on clothes. When she left her apartment, she gave no thought to the fact that her shoulder-length black hair stood in all directions, or that her gray sweatshirt-the first thing she’d grabbed-bore coffee stains from the all-nighter she’d pulled the previous night, trying to catch up on work. All that mattered was reaching her father, being there for him as he’d always been there for her.

As she raced through the quiet pre-dawn streets to his home, her mind’s eye replayed scenes from the day he first came to her with the idea for the restaurant. She had just started her new job at the personnel management association where she had now worked for six years, and her father met her for lunch. Bearing a picnic basket with his famous Cajun fried chicken, his eyes brimmed with excitement as they strolled hand-in-hand to a nearby park. Rachel was intrigued, for it had been a long time since her father expressed excitement over anything. Since his wife’s death, Robert Calloway had not been the same.

But there was a new light in his eyes that summer afternoon. Rachel was delighted when he shared his good news, and she eagerly volunteered to design the menus and create promotional flyers to distribute throughout the community. He knew exactly how he wanted the restaurant, right down to naming special sandwiches after Rachel and her mother. She'd laughed, and they spent the whole hour brainstorming over names. Calloway's had seemed like the natural conclusion for the rustic, family-style establishment that quickly amassed rave reviews from patrons and the local media, including the Washington Post and the Washingtonian magazine.

In the years that followed Calloway's successful debut, Rachel came to cherish her time spent at the restaurant. After putting in ten hours at her own job, she thought nothing of coming in to fill in for a sick waitress or to help with closing. Sharing a cup of creamy coffee with her father after the evening dinner rush proved to be the highlight of her day. Sometimes they sat and talked quietly in their favorite booth overlooking the flower garden; other times they just basked in the lingering sounds of satisfied diners and the comforting clink of glasses and silverware.

And now, by some cruel stroke of fate, all of that was gone.

Lights burned low in the two-story brick rambler Rachel had grown up in. Hurrying from her car—a maroon Camry that had been a surprise college graduation gift from her father—she had barely reached the front door before it swung open.

One look at her father's haggard face and it was all Rachel could do to stem the tide of bitter tears that rushed to her eyes. "Oh, Daddy," was all she could manage, gathering him fiercely into her arms.

"You shouldn't have come," Robert Calloway admonished her gruffly, patting her back the way he'd done when she was a child and needed comforting for a scraped knee. Even when she'd disobeyed his orders and climbed the tree with the neighborhood boys.

“You know better than to tell me that,” Rachel mumbled into his sturdy chest. The acrid stench of smoke clung to his clothing. When he drew away, his walnut-colored skin looked ashen. His light brown eyes shone with tears.

“You’ve always been too stubborn for your own good,” he grumbled without rancor. “Just like your ma, Lord rest her soul.”

Rachel was too distressed to defend herself. “How are you?” she asked gently, drawing an arm around his waist and steering him toward the plaid sofa in the living room.

“I’m holding up okay, I suppose,” he answered, lowering himself down- gingerly, as if his whole body still resonated with the aftereffects of shock. “Just trying to figure out what coulda happened. I was there until closing. Nothing seemed out of order when I left.”

“What did the police say?” Rachel asked, sitting beside him and taking his cold hand in hers.

“They have to conduct a full investigation -the Fire Investigations Unit, that is. But the detective on-call said it wasn’t electrical or anything like that.” He raised fearful eyes to his daughter’s face and added in an ominous tone, “He thinks it was something else, baby.”

A fine chill swept through Rachel at his words. She waited for him to continue, her heart pounding in her throat. She’d never before seen that look of foreboding in her father’s eyes. Never. And then came the words she’d never expected.

“He thinks...it wasn’t an accident. He says it looks like someone deliberately set the fire.”