

The Sense of Reckoning

An Ann Kinnear Suspense Novel

Chapter 1

1947

The seven blasts of the fire horn that signaled the evacuation of Bar Harbor rang in Chip Lynam's ears. He turned from the Express Office where he had been headed toward Great Hill, which was framed by the buildings along Cottage Street, and gasped.

Flames licked at the trees at the top of Great Hill, jerking and cracking in the wind that suddenly careened into town. For a moment the sky above the flames was clear, and then black smoke billowed over the crest of the hill. The wind-whipped October leaves were now mixed with black ash, spinning up into funnels where the air rushed around the buildings.

As Chip gaped at the sight, the town, which just moments before had been muffled by a tense quiet, sprang to frantic life. A woman who had stopped on the sidewalk to tie her little boy's shoe snatched up his hand and dragged him in the direction of the athletic field, the town's evacuation rally point, the boy stumbling and tripping over the loose lace. A teenage girl just stepping out of one of the stores raised an arm to her face to ward off the swirl of smoke and grit, not noticing when the wind snatched her straw hat from her head and sent it tumbling down the street. An old man carrying a battered leather suitcase picked up his pace, hobbling to his car where he tossed the case into the backseat, jumped in, and sped down the street to disappear around the corner.

Chip wondered how far the old man would get. If the fire closed the roads, they might be forced to evacuate by water from the town wharf. He didn't envy anyone who had to leave Bar Harbor by boat—the gale-force winds that had blown the flames toward the town had also whipped the water around Mount Desert Island into a white-capped frenzy.

But his mind wasn't on the residents of Bar Harbor—they had town officials and the soldiers from Dow Field to take care of them. His thoughts were with the captive at the grand house on the hill.

Chip scrambled to his truck, slammed it through a three-point turn, and headed back toward the flames, Great Hill, and The Lady.

Chapter 2

Ann Kinnear watched her dead dog disappear into the woods outside her cabin, following his dead master.

She used to catch glimpses of them fairly regularly, when she was chopping wood or sipping a glass of wine on the dock on Loon Pond, but it had been several days since she had last seen them. It had been even longer since Beau had come to the cabin, and Ann had never

seen the old woman come that close. But Ann could hear her clearly—hear the occasional whistled commands coming from the woods, commands Ann had taught Beau.

Part of Ann was glad that her abilities allowed her to see her dog's spirit, but part of her wished their relationship had ended as such relationships usually do: the dog dies, the person mourns and then moves on. But in this case, it was Beau who was moving on—bonding with the spirit of the ancient woman who had been instrumental in Ann's survival.

She should be happy. Her role in exposing Philadelphia society scion Biden Firth as a murderer had boosted the demand for her particular kind of consulting services. The fact that she had been able to receive messages from Biden's murder victim had marked a leap forward in her ability. And the assurance of her fellow senser, Garrick Masser, that Biden's spirit did not haunt Ann's Adirondack cabin should have enabled her to slip comfortably back into the peaceful existence she had enjoyed before the spirit of Biden's victim had grabbed her hand and dragged her toward the one piece of evidence that would implicate Biden Firth in the crime.

But Ann was not happy. She found excuses to turn down the consulting engagements that her brother Mike, as her business manager, proposed. She avoided places and situations that might call upon her to apply her newly expanded sensing skills. And the cabin she had loved before Biden tried to kill her in the kitchen, gunning down Beau instead, was no longer a refuge. It was a lonely place, becoming more lonely as her dead dog withdrew from her and turned instead toward his new, ghostly master.

With a sigh, Ann turned from the porch where she had been standing. She hitched up her jeans—she had lost weight over the last months, her usually slender frame now running toward gaunt. She pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket, checking for an email or a missed message from Mike, although he had called only the day before. There was nothing. Cradling her mug of coffee against the chill of the October morning, she re-entered the cabin's kitchen.

The floorboards had been replaced where the bloodstains—hers, Beau's, and Firth's—had proven impossible to scrub clean, even for her friend Helen Federman. Now the new boards stood out in raw contrast to the rest of the scuffed floor. The cheerful striped curtains that Helen had hung to replace the burned remnants of their predecessors distracted the casual observer from the charring still visible on the ceiling above the window.

Ann contemplated her options for passing the day: explore the Adirondack Park for flora she could photograph as subjects for the paintings she sold in the local art galleries; go to her studio a few minutes away to work on one of the paintings she lately had a tendency to start but not finish. She could go down the hill to the small dock on the pond ... and do what? She should get a boat. She briefly thought about pouring herself a glass of wine but decided it was a bit early even for her, although she had begun to pay less attention to such social niceties lately.

She resigned herself to the less enjoyable but more necessary option of unloading the dishwasher.

She was removing glasses from the top rack, questioning the wisdom of having gotten a dishwasher—she used so few dishes that it sometimes took her a week to fill it—when she noticed a red smear on the wine glass she held. Putting the glass down, she opened her hands and saw a slice across one of the fingers on her left hand, oozing blood. She had a queasy and disorienting moment while she tried to make sense of blood in the midst of such a banal activity, but then she noticed the crescent of glass missing from the rim of glass she had been holding, the edge so sharp she had not even felt it when it cut her.

"Damn!"

Now the cut was starting to sting. She grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around her finger then, going to the bathroom, rummaged through a shoebox of first aid supplies. There weren't any Band-Aids, so she cobbled together an awkward bandage from gauze and tape, managing to stain a white hand towel with blood in the process.

"You've got to be kidding me ..."

She ran cold water in the bathroom sink and sloshed the towel around in the water, realizing too late that the result would be to impart a pinkish hue to the entire towel.

"Oh, come on!"

She took the sodden towel out of the sink, dropped it in the small washing machine across the hallway from the bathroom, dumped in some detergent, and clanged the washer door shut on its tiny load. She had to get out of the house, just as soon as she finished unloading the stupid dishwasher. She returned to the kitchen.

She plunged her right hand into the utensil basket and a dagger of the most exquisite pain she had ever experienced shot up her arm.

"Goddamn it!"

She jerked her hand back. Dangling from under her middle fingernail was a stainless steel paring knife. She jerked it out, bringing a strangled cry to her lips and a gout of blood to the floor. She staggered back to the bathroom and, pulling the mate of the delicately stained towel out of the cupboard, wrapped it around her hand where a bloom of blood immediately appeared.

She collapsed onto the toilet seat and bent over, squeezing her newly wounded hand between her torso and her thighs. It hurt so much she wanted to cry, but it hurt too much to cry. Her stomach roiled.

Gradually, the jagged daggers of pain were replaced by a violent throbbing and the red stain on the towel halted its advance. Trembling, she unwrapped her hand to examine the damage, then quickly rewrapped it when she saw. She stumbled into the dining area off the kitchen and, locating an almost-full bottle of Macallan, poured herself two fingers of Scotch, the neck of the bottle chattering on the rim of the glass.

Holding the glass in her less-injured hand and the bottle under her arm, she went back to the bathroom and found a bottle of aspirin which she wrestled open, taking two, then two more. Aspirin seemed laughably inadequate but it was the best she had. Aspirin and Scotch.

She made her way a bit unsteadily to the sitting room and lowered herself onto the scuffed leather couch. She ran a finger along a scratch that Beau had left when he had been awoken from a nap by the sound of Walt Federman's pickup and had rocketed out the door to greet his friend. Her throat tightened and she took a sip of Scotch, surprised when it emptied the glass. She poured herself a refill.

She needed to rest, then she'd feel better. She carefully placed the bottle and glass on the floor next to her and checked to make sure the towel had staunched the bleeding, then lay down. She pulled a mohair blanket from the back of the couch, suddenly cold, and as she drifted off to sleep she thought she heard a ripple of cruelly amused laughter.