



## CHAPTER 6

FEBRUARY 20, 2003

Every Thursday night was family night at our house. My mother would cook a big pasta dinner and she would have everyone over. Sometimes there would be 15-20 people there.

I had taken that day off to spend some time with my kids. It was school vacation week, and since it had just snowed a couple days earlier, I thought it would be fun to take them sledding. My sister and her two boys, Dylan and Ryan, joined us at nearby Cranston High School West. It was cold, but we had a great time riding plastic sleds down the snow-covered hills that afternoon.

We did things like that together all the time, whether it was rollerblading, bowling, or some other activity. It was always something. Our kids were close with their cousins, just as we had been with our extended family growing up. There is nothing like the closeness of a big family.

Fred had to work late, but the rest of us gathered for a big dinner that evening. I did what I could to help my mother prepare the meal, though in her kitchen she was in charge and did not usually dole out responsibility very easily. When it came to food or anything in the kitchen, it was her domain entirely. But I mixed the salad and set the table. It was a lot of work but having everyone together made it all worthwhile. And next Thursday, we would do it all over again.

Fred joined us later, coming alone without his kids, who sometimes joined us. His son was being punished for something that night and his daughter was with her mom. The other kids missed Brandon and Nicole, but it was okay because Fred and I had plans to go to New Hampshire that weekend with our kids and they were really looking forward to it.

I remember Fred was in a great mood that night. He arrived wearing his work clothes and smelling of paint. I could smell him coming a mile away, and I knew he was there before I even saw him. He got out of his truck and spotted Alex and Nicholas. He immediately initiated a snowball fight. I heard the commotion and went outside. I laughed, seeing my three boys playing together.

A neighbor waved to Fred and she asked how he was doing.

“What a great day to be alive,” he said, dodging a snowball.

It didn't seem like much at the time, but I'll never forget those words.

A ceasefire was eventually declared, and everyone came inside to dry off and have some coffee and dessert.

After everyone left that night, Fred and I were hoping for a night out alone before our trip up north. I asked my parents if they would watch Alex and Nicholas for a few hours. My mom agreed, so now all we had to do was decide what we were going to do. We quickly agreed on a movie and rushed to the theater, but when we got there, we found that it already started. We didn't want to miss the whole beginning and we didn't want to see anything else, so we drove to his house to regroup and try to come up with alternate plan.

It was around 9 p.m. when Fred went online to see if there was anything interesting happening that night. That's when he opened an e-mail link from The Station, a local rock-and-roll club that we had been to together a number of times. When he saw that Great White was playing there that night, he asked me if I would be interested in going to the concert.

I hesitated. I wasn't a big fan of the group. Plus, we didn't have tickets. And because it was getting late, I told him I thought it might be better if we just stayed in. He didn't seem to be disappointed, so we just sat down on the couch and started to watch TV. Flipping through the stations, there wasn't a whole lot that interested us.

Around 10 p.m., Fred turned to me and asked again about seeing Great White at The Station. Before I could say anything, he called The Station to see if the concert was sold out and was surprised to hear that there were still people coming in. When he learned that Great White wasn't going on until eleven, I could see that he was starting to get really excited. Seeing Fred's enthusiasm, there was no way I could let him down.

Of all the clubs we had been to together to listen to live music, The Station was probably the one that we visited the least. The last time we had been there was to see *Human Clay*, a Creed tribute band, who were breaking up and performing together for the last time in the area.

In the nine months we spent together, we had been to some great concerts, as well as a few not so good ones and everything in

between. From Journey, one of my all-time favorite bands, to a Rick James concert. REO Speedwagon to Alice In Chains. Tesla was a band that Fred and I really enjoyed seeing perform. I had already been familiar with their music, but Fred was the one who reintroduced me to them, and they've had a major influence on my life ever since, not just as a fan, after establishing personal relationships with some of the band members.

Considering the musical gamut we'd experienced together, I thought to myself, *what the heck, why not Great White?*

I told Fred if we were going to get there on time, we'd have to leave right away, and we would only stay for a little while. Fred immediately called his cousin, Rene Valcourt, who he facetiously called *Ugly*, because Rene was actually quite handsome. He got his cousin's voice mail and left a message for him.

"Hey, Ugly," Fred said. "We're going to The Station tonight to see Great White if you want to come meet us. But we're not going to stay long."

At 10:30 p.m. we walked out the door. Fred's house was just down the street from the club, just a couple minutes drive. We got there with time to spare, so we stopped at the bar to order a drink from Julie Melini. It was a quarter to eleven then because I remember someone asking Fred what time it was as we were standing there and he was paying for the drinks.

Then we began heading closer to the stage to get a good spot to watch the show. There were definitely a lot of people inside The Station that night, but strangely there was plenty of room to move around easily or stand comfortably. Along the way, we stopped briefly to chat with a few friends before winding up right in front of the stage. I remember saying hello to Linda Fisher who was selling merchandise for the bands. Fred went to the men's room and when he got back Doctor Metal was tossing WHJY caps and shirts into the crowd. We were standing so close that he just reached down and handed me a T-shirt and Fred a hat.

The excitement of the crowd had slowly been building. You could sense it. The energy level at any concert always ramps up just before the featured act comes on. It was really high that night, which was remarkable for such a small venue.

It was after 11:00 p.m. when Great White was introduced and the band came out. Jack Russell screamed something that I

couldn't hear over the crowd noise and the band took up their instruments, launching right into their opening song.

As fireworks went off behind Russell, a roar rose from the crowd and it was hard not to get caught up in the excitement.

Fred recognized right away that something was wrong with the fireworks even before there was any fire. He pointed it out to me, gesturing toward the displays. They were throwing out a lot of sparks and it didn't seem as if they were ever going to stop. A moment later, the first flames appeared.

"Look," Fred said to me. "The walls are on fire."

He didn't say anything more. He just grabbed me firmly by the shoulders as flames began to work their way up the walls around the drummer's alcove. I put my drink down on the stage, right beside the feet of Jack Russell, who was singing as if nothing was wrong. Most of the audience appeared equally unconcerned as Fred guided me to a door along the right side of the stage, just a few paces from where we were standing. We were immediately confronted by a bouncer, who stepped in front of us and prevented us from leaving the building.

"We need to get out right now," Fred said.

The bouncer held his ground and shook his head. "Not this way. This door is for the band only. Club policy."

The man repeated this mantra after Fred yelled that there was a fire and the building needed to be evacuated. The bouncer may not have been aware of the flames, positioned as he was around the corner from the alcove, his view obstructed by a wall of speakers, but he did not believe us, either. I don't know if he thought we were making all this up in order to become stowaways on the band's bus out back, but he would not take us at our word, remaining adamant about not letting us pass.

Fred was incensed, to say the least, by this man's behavior. It was a pivotal moment beyond anything he could ever have imagined at that point. Just a few feet away from Fred was the rest of his life, but this very large man was standing in our way. What would have become of both of us had we gotten through the door at that moment is hard to say, but we certainly would have not been numbered among the victims or casualties of the horrific fire that hell was giving birth to behind us.

Fred was not a violent person, but if he had known that getting through that door would have been the difference between life and death, he would have found a way to get by, or through the colossus standing in our way. But Fred could not see even one minute into the future. He only wanted to get me out of the club before it went up in flames, and he thought there was more time. He had no way of knowing just how fast-moving this fire would be when he turned to me and said, "We can't stay here and argue with this guy. We have to get out of here."

Fred believed it would be faster to just make our way to the front door and escape that way. We had experienced no resistance, after all, getting inside and moving through the crowd a few moments earlier.

Fred turned away from the bouncer and wrapped both his hands around one of my wrists, pulling me with him through the club.

As we moved forward, we passed people who were dancing and singing along with the music, even with the alcove now visibly on fire. They could only have thought that it was all part of the show. The smoke was dark and had nowhere to go, so it began to fill the room. It was inconceivable that anyone would delay exiting the building, and I didn't think to say anything to them as I was whisked past them.

With the stage engulfed in flame and the fire continuing to advance quickly across the ceiling, the band suddenly stopped playing. It seemed that everyone became aware that their lives were in danger all at once. The sound of shattering cocktail glasses and beer bottles could be heard all around. There was no panic. People just dropped their drinks and moved quickly away from the fire. Almost all of them headed toward the front door.

Then the lights went out and the screams and shrieks of terror precipitated a stampede, snaring Fred and I in the middle of it. The crowd, which had seemed so sparse and navigable just moments before, congealed at once and our progress slowed to a near stop. It was pitch black. I was coughing from the smoke. Everyone was body to body. There was nowhere to go.

I began to get pushed and shoved violently from all directions as people became more panicked and scared, desperate to escape. I could feel Fred's hands on my back, urging me forward the

whole time, guiding me and keeping me on my feet. I realized that we had gotten close to the inner set of swinging doors near the ticket booth, which was just inside the main entrance.

“GO! GO!” Fred screamed behind me. I was hardly aware that a fire alarm had been blaring until I realized that I could hardly hear him. Still, to this day, I can clearly hear Fred yelling this in my ear. These were the last words he spoke to me.

The crush of the bodies was squeezing us apart, and then Fred gave me one last massive shove. Right after this, I felt his hand slip from my back. I immediately turned and looked behind me, but he was gone.

I could no longer see the flames. They were blotted out by the heavy smoke, which continued to drop lower and lower to the ground. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. From this death cloud an alien molten rain fell, dropping down from above like “black rain.” I could hear light bulbs explode and large glass windows being broken. I caught brief glimpses of the people closest to me. Their heads were all on fire. I didn’t appear that they even realized it. I did not know that my own hair had ignited and was burning at that moment. Like me, they were scared and just wanted to get out of this inferno. The heat was overwhelming and the gas was suffocating, but adrenaline kept everyone pushing forward.

I felt no pain. As odd as that may seem, it just wasn’t registering. Whether my body was going into shock or if some kind of survival mechanism had kicked in, I couldn’t tell you. I had never been in a situation like that before. Never have I been in fear of my life, facing the reality of my own death. Such thoughts of mortality, always fleeting at best, never seem real. It was creeping closer to me now, and I could not dismiss the reality of my situation.

It was surreal. People were running off in all different directions with their clothes and hair on fire. Some, realizing that their path was blocked, turned and headed in another direction. But there was nowhere to go. We were all trapped. People were calling for help. I was yelling Fred’s name, but I could not hear the sound of my own voice over the screaming.

I could only get as far as the ticket counter but reversing directions against the tide of people to explore other avenues of

escape in the darkness and closer to the fire was not an option. The front entrance and cool fresh air were in sight, I just could not get there. All movement had stopped completely. It was a total bottleneck. People were scrambling so frantically to get out through the main doors that some were pushed or fell to the floor in the threshold. In the frenzy, they were trampled and could not get back up. As others tried to scramble over them, they too became wedged in a tangle of bodies that resembled a living, kicking and screaming human wall. The exit quickly became plugged completely, preventing anyone else from escaping and dooming the rest of us still inside.

With forward progress stopped ahead, the pressure from behind was increasing as people tried to force their way out. It became a struggle for me just to stay on my feet. I knew I couldn't resist this force forever, and that once I was on the ground, I would have no chance whatsoever. If I wasn't crushed or burned, I was simply going to run out of air. My breathing had become more and more labored as the fire continued to burn out of control, consuming all the oxygen with it. I struggled to get enough air into my lungs. I felt like a fish out of water. I thought, *this is it. This is where I'm going to die.*

It was very strange, and hard to describe now. I hadn't given up, but it I knew I was close to death and I might not make it out. At that moment, my mind just seemed to accept this as inevitable. As if preparing me for that fate, all I could think of was Nicholas and Alex. I saw their faces and I prayed to God for them to have a good life and to allow them to forgive me for dying this way and leaving them without their mother. I remember feeling very peaceful, and as this calmness washed over me, I fell. I don't know if I was pushed or if I blacked out, but my head struck the floor and that was it. It seemed to happen in slow motion. I remember it clearly, the feeling on falling and the impact of my head on the hardwood. I thought I was dead.