

Breakpoint — Excerpt

Sunday, March 8

0730 Eastern Standard Time
Off the New Jersey Coast

The yellow flame leaped into the air where the ocean hit the land. It was followed by a boiling, churning blue-black cloud, climbing up around the now orange-red fireball. The cloud kept growing, forming into a pedestal shape above the water's edge.

"Atlantic City, Atlantic City," the pilot said calmly into his chin microphone, "Coast Guard forty-one ten. We see what looks like a gas pipeline explosion at our ten o'clock position about fifteen miles ahead. Estimate position of flare as Pine Harbor. Over."

From the flight deck of the USCG 4110, an old twin-engine Casa 212 maritime patrol aircraft flying over the New Jersey coast, the plume had stood out against the dull-gray Sunday-morning sky. "Roger, forty-one ten. Proceed Pine Harbor for a visual and report," the radio cackled. "We'll check with Ops at headquarters to see if they know what happened."

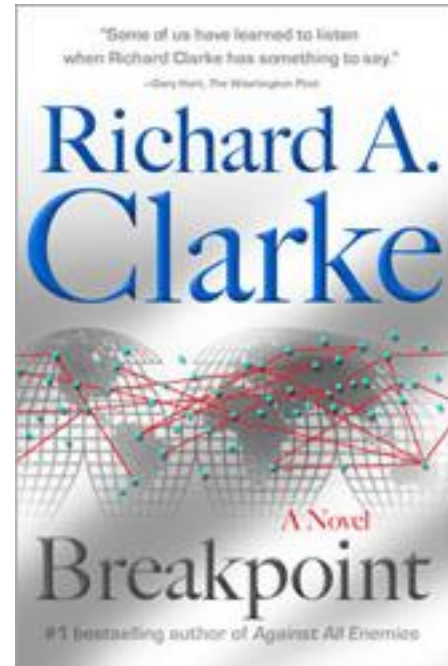
Lt. Anne Brucelli had been out of the Academy for five years and loved flying, loved being part of the Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security.

She was looking forward to her new assignment in the vertical liftoff Osprey aircraft, but for now she was happy just to be in command of an old Casa. It got her up in the air, over the sea, and looking at things from a perspective that most people never had the chance to enjoy. Her copilot today was an Academy classmate, Lt. Chuck Appleton. He flipped down her visor and tapped it for telescopic mode. "Jesus, Anne, there's another flare way out there at our two o'clock," Appleton called. "That's over by Banning Beach." From the low cruising altitude of five thousand feet above the coast, the visual horizon was almost eighty miles. The second flame seemed to be coming from somewhere on western Long Island.

Before they could report the second flare, they heard a crackling and then: "Coast Guard forty-one ten, this is Atlantic City, cancel. Proceed south instead to Miller's Hook and perform low-level surveillance on white blockhouse at the end of point. Copy that? And, Anne, this one came to us from Department Ops, Homeland Security."

Brucelli pulled the bright red striped aircraft into a tight bank to reverse its direction of motion, reaching the waters off Miller's Hook in four minutes. Appleton looked again through the visor that showed him the image from the aircraft's nose-mounted cameras. He zoomed in on the end of the point of land in front of them. "Got a visual on a small white building, no windows. Got a fence around it. White truck next to it." He moved his head slowly to the right and examined the road on the Hook. "Two bikers driving inland pretty fast; otherwise it's pretty empty out there." The aircraft continued its rapid descent toward the narrow promontory.

The pilot flicked the toggle to report in. "Atlantic City, Coast Guard forty . . . Holy shit! Hang on, Chuck." A yellow-red tongue filled the cockpit windshield with flame, as she pulled the plane into a steep left



bank. A klaxon sounded loudly and then a recorded female voice replaced it over the speaker, saying calmly, "Left engine fire. Fire in the left engine requires your attention."

Brucelli hit the big red fire-suppression button above her head and struggled to right the spinning aircraft. As she did so, Lt. Appleton spoke clearly into his chin mike, "Mayday, Mayday. Coast Guard forty-one ten. Going down half mile off Miller's Hook, request SAR support." The problem, he knew, was that the unmanned aerial vehicle that would normally have been on patrol over the Jersey shore was down for maintenance. They were the search-and-rescue patrol that morning and they were going to crash.