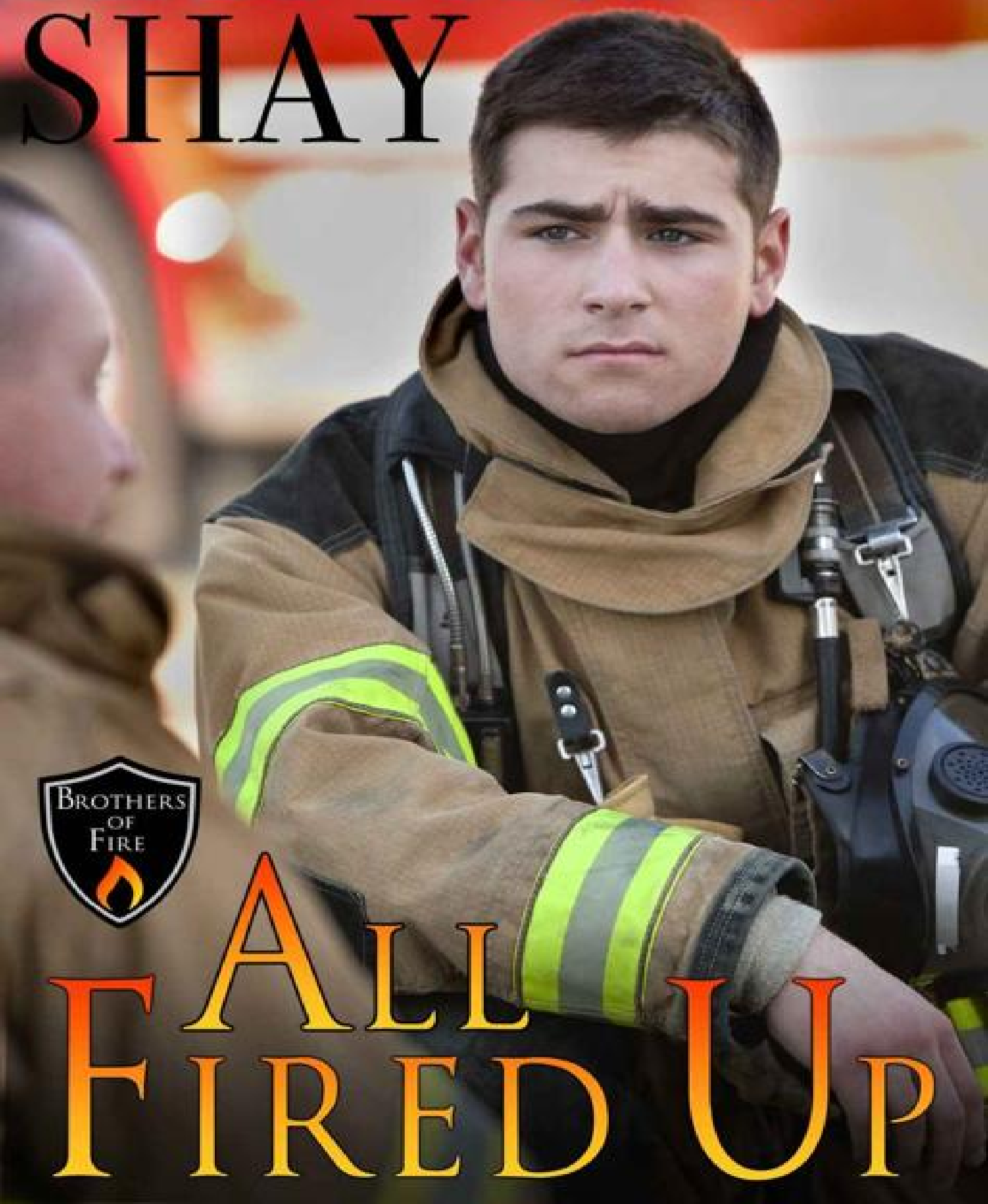


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATHRYN SHAY



FALL FIRED UP

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ALL FIRED UP

Brothers of Fire

Book 1

Kathryn Shay

All Fired Up

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Cast of Characters

Main Characters

Jared Zenko Captain of Engine 4

Lacey Roth Psychiatrist at Memorial Hospital and Eastside Clinic

The Brothers of Fire with Significant Other

Captain Jared Zenko (Lacey Roth)

Lieutenant Noah Keaton (Chloe Logan)

Captain Tim Daniels (Ava Daniels)

Lieutenant Tom Mancini

Captain Adam Stark (Beth Stark)

Captain Carson Taylor III

Sisters of Fire

JJ Jensen Barrows (Dr. Nick Barrows)

Tess and David Ashford

Trish Mackenzie Mitchell (Nathan)

Jarek's Family

Mother— Ada Zenko “Matka”

Father—Alek Zenko “Pa”

Brothers

Mikoilaj Zenko (Julia)

Henryk Zenko (Sofia)

Bogdi Zenko

Lacey’s Family/Friends

Mother—Marion Roth

Father—Marshall Roth

Brother—Linc Roth

Cousin—RuthAnn “Ruthie” Price

Ex-Fiancé—Pierce Patterson

Jarek’s Crew on Engine 4

Firefighter Big Joe Early

Firefighter Suzie Raycroft

Firefighter Eric Woo

Firefighter Ronny Harmon

Lacey’s Patients

Holly/Hannah Sorenson

Mila Lopez

Locations

Wink's Bar

Brothers&Sisters Crystal City Country Club

Crystal City Diner

Magnolia's

Connor's Restaurant

Lakeview Restaurant

The Elmwood Inn (The Grand Hotel)

Harris Hill

Prologue

“So, are you a good biker boy or an arrogant creep?”

Jarek Zenko turned to look at the speaker of the unusual question. He recoiled. Not in a bad way. The woman who'd dropped down on the stool next to him at the bar was... stunning. Blonde hair rippling down her back. Wide eyes. Perfect features. “Now that's one I haven't heard before.”

Her unlined brow furrowed. “One what?”

“Pick up line.”

Instead of being insulted, she laughed. “Not tonight, buddy. I just got burned.”

“By an arrogant creep?”

“Yep.”

“What'd he do?”

“Cheated on me.” She held out her hand. “No more ring here.”

“You're married?”

She shook her head. “Engaged. Past tense.”

“Let me buy you a drink.” He held up his hands arrest style. “No strings attached.”

She watched him. Dissected him. He knew he wasn't exactly attractive. But he had okay features, big gray eyes, a

decent haircut, longer than he used to wear in Afghanistan but still short.

“Sure. I’ll have a…” a slight hesitation as she glanced at his bottle “...a Molson’s.”

Signaling the bartender, he ordered her drink. The band had stopped playing so it was quiet enough to talk. And the crowd had thinned, but there was still a low buzz of conversation. When her beer came, he turned back to her. “Did he at least do it gently? In a private place.”

Now her face lost its sassiness and turned sad. “No to both. We were having dinner at The Lakeview Restaurant. Over our wine, he told me he was tired of me.”

“Tired? Of *you*?” How could a man get tired of that face? He took a quick peek. From what he could tell under her shirt, her body was great, too. “He’s gotta be nuts.”

“Go figure.” But the tone was self-effacing. She forced a smile. “I threw the drink in his face.”

“Good for you.”

“He found somebody who was more exciting. Younger.”

“How old are you?”

“Biker boy, you don’t ask a woman that.”

“We’re way past niceties, biker girl.”

She laughed at what he called her. “Thirty-five. You?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Are you married?” she asked.

“No.” A deep frown. “I wouldn’t be flirting with you if was.”

“You’re flirting with me?”

“Yep. And you’re flirting with me.”

“I guess.”

Now the smile was genuine. He noticed the raisin color lipstick on her mouth. It looked...tasty.

“How’d you get involved with such a jerk?”

She sipped the beer. “The bastard and I grew up in the same neighborhood. We started dating and were on and off many years.”

“How come you didn’t tie the knot sooner?” he asked her.

“Neither of us was ready.”

She studied his face. “Why aren’t you happily wed?”

“I was. Or so I thought.”

She said, “Oh.”

“What?”

“Did she die?”

“No, just her feelings for me. I was in...never mind?”

“In, what? Come on. We’ll never see each other again.”

He guessed he could tell her some. “She sent me a letter while I was out of town. It was awful. A lot like getting dumped by text.”

Reaching out, she touched his arm. Her fingers were long with unpainted nails.

He turned his body more to face her. “How’d you end up here at Harley’s?” A local biker bar.

“An advertisement about the auction was left at my work.” She glanced away for a minute. “How about you?”

“A buddy of mine in our biker group had a son who died from an overdose. He has these benefits periodically.”

Her gaze dropped to his black t-shirt. It sported a huge white eagle on the back with a tire in the middle. Running through it was a purple ribbon with Larry Thomas Memorial Poker Run. Below the eagle was a quote, *Your light shines on us*. The sleeve had a small purple ribbon folded over itself like the pink ones used for breast cancer.

“Love the shirt.”

“Yeah? You want one?”

“I do!”

He reached over into his backpack which sat on the floor. Produced another shirt. She took it, stood, shook out the tee and poked her arms and head into it. She was tall but slender and the thing dropped to her knees. She sat back down. “Thanks.”

Now his smile was genuine. “You, lady, are something else.”

“Nah, I’m boring, remember? The bastard said so.”

“Nah, you’re fascinating. Hang around awhile?”

“If we stay anonymous.”

“You’ll be the gorgeous woman I met at a bar.”

“And you’ll be the guy with animal magnetism that I met at a bar, too.”

She thought he had animal magnetism? Nobody ever told him that.

She lifted her beer. “To bikers.”

“To beautiful, feisty women.”

Their eyes met as they clinked their bottles. A kick of electricity shot through him at the look they exchanged.

Chapter 1

The gathering for officers in the department was hosted by Tim Daniels at his house-an ordinary Victorian in a middle-class neighborhood on the south side of Crystal City. Available were drinks, snacks and a big-screen television to watch the baseball game.

Tim said, “Before the game starts, I’d like to talk to you about something.”

Carson Taylor, a captain at House 5 smirked. He was a handsome guy, with thick, dark hair and ice-blue eyes. “I knew you wanted something, Daniels.” He looked around. “And the group? Not all officers are here. Those of us who are don’t usually hang out.”

“You’re too busy with your harems, Taylor.” Tommy Mancini made the remark about Carson’s well known playboy rep. Tom was the nicest guy in the department and a standout firefighter, but he was always getting dumped by women. He seemed cursed.

“I admit it. I like my women.” Carson popped a corn chip into his mouth.

Tim picked up on the previous comment. “We *don’t* usually hang out. That’s what I want to address.” Tim was an honest guy, a good guy all around, and his engaging personality seemed to have sway over the whole department.

“I’d like a truthful answer to this question. How many of you have ever been jealous of the Sisters of Fire?”

Noah Keaton, a new lieutenant, said, “I know I’m scared to death of them.”

They all laughed.

Adam Stark, a by-the-book officer busied himself cutting off a piece of pizza then stated blandly, “I’m not scared or jealous. They follow the rules, are good firefighters, so I don’t care what they do in their spare time.”

“They got Trish Mackenzie out of a messy relationship last year when her ex practically went berserk.” This from Jarek. The news of the shooting that night had affected the entire department. And the cops even more.

“Come on, Adam,” Tim said. “Don’t you ever wish you had somebody to unburden yourself with?”

He finished chewing a bite. “Maybe I could have used some support when me and Beth split.”

“That’s exactly what I’m getting at.” Tim smiled. “I bet my badge that all of us have had things in our lives, things we’re doing, where it would be good, *beneficial* to have a group of guys support you.”

“I think it’d be great.” Tommy again. “Maybe you could give me tips on dating, Carson.”

“Sorry Cap,” Jarek Zenko said. “But are you asking us if we want to form a group like them? Because I can’t see me baring my soul to you guys while we sit around drinking wine.”

The guys laughed again.

“But you have a soul to bare, Jarek. I know you do, most significantly about being a soldier. Far as I know, you won’t talk about it.”

“I don’t *want* to.”

“I understand.” He scanned them all. “Listen, I picked you guys because I have an intuition about you. And because I think we—all firefighters actually—could use some friends to let down with.”

Tommy asked, “Does Chief Redman know about this?”

Joe Redman, the chief, was a good leader and open to new ideas.

“I told him about the concept. No names, though. He said to go for it. He loves the Sisters of Fire.”

Carson frowned. “I don’t know. We got our groups at the firehouse. We’re like family.”

“Ah, there’s the key point. You’re all officers. When you’re put in charge of the group, become a captain or a lieutenant, you’re really relegated to the outside of the family. Anybody dispute that?”

“I don’t dispute it. I just don’t mind the distance,” Adam said. “Being friends makes it harder to leave for another position.”

“Which is exactly the point. So, what I’m proposing is the six of us, officers, get together periodically to watch a game at Brothers&Sisters,” the firefighter pub “or Wink’s Bar and

Grill. It's quieter there. We can also do some activity. Like bowling. Have a basketball pickup game. Ax throwing."

"Hey, the girls went to ax throwing." This from Carson. "Brooke Remington said they had a great time."

Noah seemed interested. "If we're doing stuff, we won't talk."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I know that before I became an officer, I used to meet my buddies at a bar, catch a game and eventually talk about myself. My family. My issues."

"You got no issues with Ava and the kids," Tommy quipped. "Your life's perfect."

"You'd be surprised at what we all keep hidden."

"How often would we meet?" Carson asked.

"We'd decide. Though I'm thinking once a month."

"I got four kids under eight." Noah had it tough as his wife died a few years ago. "Even getting away once a month would be hard."

"My girls are in high school." Tim had thought of everything. "We won't let them formally work so they can concentrate on school. But they babysit. And if you can't afford it, I—"

"Nope, I could afford it. Babysitters just don't stick around for long."

"Your kids are great. They're just little boys."

"The baseball game's starting soon," Stark pointed out.

“Okay, we’ll stop. What I’d like from all of you is to think about forming the Brothers of Fire. For a trial period of six months. If it doesn’t work, so be it.”

“By when?” Carson asked.

“By the end of this week. And please guys, give it a shot. I, for one, have been mighty jealous of those women sisters. And I’m guessing if you’re really honest with yourself, somewhere way down deep, you are too.”

The invitation hung heavy in the air while they watched the Yankees kill the Mets.

* * *

Lacey Roth watched Malcom Johnson start to twitch as soon as he entered her office. She bolted up from her chair and over to him, grabbed him by the arms and wrestled him to the floor. Then the spasms began. She pressed a button on the front of the desk. “I need someone! My patient is seizing.”

A nurse, and her friend, Claudia Yates, entered her office and dropped down beside her. “What can I do?”

“Call 911. He needs the hospital. His lips are already blue and he’s unconscious. I can tell the seizure is going to last more than 7 minutes.” The rule for calling an ambulance for this kind of attack.

“Sure, Lacey. I got it on speed dial.”

She heard, “We have an unconscious patient who’s spasming. He has a bluish color on his lips, tongue and face

and is gasping for air. We need help.” She gave the address and disconnected. “They’re on their way.”

Since Crystal City was small, they’d probably get the fire department instead, as the stations were within 3-5 minutes of the section of town they cover and ambulances serviced a larger area.

To make Malcom more comfortable, she placed a blanket under his head and Claudia covered him with another. Due to cost, the small room was sparsely furnished so there was no couch to place him on. The space held only the desk, its chair and another in front of it. But sunlight streamed in through big windows, making it pleasant.

She and Claudia stayed on their knees in case something else happened. “He’s using again?” Claudia asked.

“Yes. I could tell he was high right away.” Her heart bumped in her chest. “I can’t seem to get through to him.”

“If *you* can’t nobody can. Our success rate has skyrocketed since you came to Eastside.” The Eastside Clinic serviced a downtown area with free medical care.

“I wish I could work here more, but I need to be at Memorial three days a week.” She was a double board-certified child/adolescent psychiatrist and headed the psychology department at the hospital. She thought that was what she wanted until she took some clients here and saw how much help was needed.

She checked her watch. Four minutes passed when they heard footsteps; firefighters arrived at the door. They were

dressed in navy blue T-shirts and trousers, not the bulky gear, as it was summer and this wasn't a fire.

She stood up. Took note of the first guy. The tattoo on his arm was familiar. And she'd never forgotten those shoulders. When she got to his face, she said, "Oh, my God."

"Um..." The firefighter backed up a step. Stared at her. Rightfully so. Finally, he got out, "I'm Captain Zenko. The paramedics are right behind us."

In just a few seconds, they elbowed their way through the group, one with the ACL bag and one carrying a portable gurney. As the first dropped down—her nametag read, *Trish Mackenzie*. She asked, "What's his name?"

"Malcom Jones."

"Tell me what happened."

"He came in stoned for our appointment. I could tell he was high when he started to twitch, then seize. I'm not a practicing *medical* doctor, but I knew what to do."

While the medics took his blood pressure and examined his eyes, listened to his heart, the sexy firefighter who'd made her scream in a hotel room months ago asked, "What *are* you?"

"I'm an adolescent psychiatrist."

Mackenzie stood while the other one raised the gurney. "We'll take the patient." She looked at the captain. "Two of you can help."

Two of the guys came fully into the room and picked up the boy's torso on one side and feet on the other and moved

him to the gurney. Dead weight was heavy.

“Thanks, Doctor,” Mackenzie said.

“You’re welcome.”

When they left, Jarek turned to the crew. “I need to talk to the doc for a minute. Head out to the truck and wait. I won’t be long.” They left, with Claudia following them out.

Lacey just stood there staring. Jarek closed the door and leaned against it. He held her gaze.

She’d scraped that mass of steel-blond hair off her face, but he remembered how silky it felt spread out across his chest and...other places. His body tightened at the thought.

“So, biker girl, you’re a bigshot psychiatrist. Not sure I can even spell that word.”

“No bigshot. I work at this clinic two days and at the hospital three days.”

“What do you do there?”

“I help teens there, too.”

Jarek had thought about her a lot over the last two months. He’d visited Harley’s a couple of times, but she never showed again. He shook his head. “I’ll see you around, biker girl.” He pushed off the door and started to turn. She grabbed for his arm.

“Jarek.”

He blew out a heavy breath but didn’t face her. She tugged hard enough to bring him around. God, she was pretty. Up close, in the daylight, her eyes were a beautiful blue. And her skin was flawless.

“My name is Lacey Roth. And now that I’ve met up with you, I’d like to see you again. What about it?”

“Sorry ma’am. But you’re way outta my league.”

* * *

Jarek knew his face was flaming when he reached the truck. Not much got to him these days in civilian life, but this woman had.

His crew had mounted the fire engine. He hopped up into the shotgun seat and Big Joe started to drive. The other team members settled in the back two benches.

“What was that all about?” Big Joe asked. He’d come to Engine 5 in his third year as a smoke eater and had been there for more than a decade.

“What?” Often, it was best to deny.

Suzie Raycraft snorted. From a family of firefighters, she’d entered the academy at eighteen and was now a ten-year veteran. “Men! They act as if nothing happened and think everybody’ll believe them just because they said so. I’m betting you got the hots for the doc. How’d you meet her? She doesn’t seem the type to own a motorcycle.”

“That’s none of your business.”

Big Joe looked in the mirror. Jarek turned slightly to see Raycraft and Harmon and Eric Woo shake their heads.

He didn’t react. He’d wait till they got back to the firehouse. The rest of the drive was made in silence.

Once the truck was in the bay and taken care of, he led the way into the kitchen. “Sit, everybody. We’ll debrief out here.”

They sat.

“Before we get into the mechanics of the call, I want to know why you were all shaking your heads in the rig.”

“You know why.” This from Suzie.

“Is this about that confiding shit?”

“It isn’t shit.” Suzie again. “You know everything about us, but we know nothing about you.”

“You know I’m a vet.”

“Only because you had a nightmare that woke us up in the bunkroom.”

He had. In the dream, he’d been pursued by Afghan rebels, and they caught him just as he awoke. “I’m the officer of the whole house. I have to...stay apart.”

“Bullshit.” Big Joe rarely participated in this kind of talk. And nobody swore at the captain.

“What?” he said staring down Big Joe.

“You know what.” Christ, his gruff voice, which matched his girth, turned soft. “You never talk about your personal life. Like that lady we just saw. Somethin’ happened between you two, we could tell.”

“I’m not confiding in you about that.” He said the words carefully. “And if being your captain isn’t enough to keep my distance, you know there are two kinds of vets: those who *can’t* talk, and those who *have* to talk. Needless to say, I’m the first.”

Big Joe sat back and folded his arms across his chest.

So did the others. All except Eric Woo. He doled out personal information about his life in bits and pieces so his expression was neutral.

Finally, Suzie said, “It’s about that woman, Cap. Not about war.”

“My stance holds true in all areas of my life.”

But he could tell they were disappointed in him. What could he do, though? Tell them he picked up a sexy blonde at Harley’s, had a one night stand that blew the top of his head off, and he never even knew her name? Fine example that’d be.

* * *

Lacey looked over at the girl, at the clinic for her third visit. So far, she hadn’t gotten much from Mila Lopez. “How are you today, Mila?”

She shrugged. She’d been shrugging and looking away every session.

“Today, you’re going to have to tell me why you came here.”

“I-I said I feel bad all the time.”

“But you won’t tell me why. You go off on tangents, I think intentionally.”

The girl's face flushed. She was pretty, with her black hair in a braid over her left shoulder. "I—" She bit her lip. "I got five brothers and sisters, all littler than me."

Ah. "Do you take care of them?"

"I have to."

"Why?"

Her hands clenched. "My parents work night shifts. I come home right after school and take care of them."

"Until when?"

"They get home around midnight."

Lacey frowned. "Are the kids in bed by then?"

"Yeah. Though the baby wakes up for a feeding."

"How old is the baby?"

"Six months."

Geez. "How old are the others?"

"Three, six, eight and ten. But the ten-year-old would have to babysit them if I didn't."

Lacey had to tread lightly. Interfering in family dynamics was iffy. She tried to keep her voice normal. "Do they pay you?"

"Madre and Padre say it's my contribution to the household. They can barely make ends meet." She looked away. Fidgeted. "They fight about money, anyway."

"Did you ever ask them to take a different shift?"

She nodded. Her eyes were bleak.

“What happened?”

“Mama got really mad. She told me the overnight shift paid the best. And that I was selfish and stupid. But I’m not stupid. I got asked to be in Math League and Science Scholars, but I couldn’t go to after-school meetings.”

“Does that make *you* mad?”

“No, just sad. And Mama apologized afterward. She even cried.”

“If you can’t change the situation, we might want to develop some strategies so you’re not so depressed.”

“There’s no other answer, Doctor Lacey.”

The girl sounded hopeless. Lacey hurt for her.

Later, still thinking about the young girl, Lacey walked into the country club where *her* parents, Marshall and Marion Roth, waited for her. A beautiful dining room spread out before her with tables covered with white cloth and dark napkins.

She crossed to them. “Hello.” She kissed her mother’s cheek when it was offered and squeezed her father’s shoulder. Then she sat in one of the two empty chairs.

A frown from her father. “Lacey, you know the dress code here.”

“Yes, Daddy, I know. But you insisted I come right from work.”

“You wear that to the hospital?” her mother asked with raised brows.

Lacey looked down at her beige cargo pants and the navy and white top she wore with it. “I usually dress up there, but I worked at the clinic today.”

Her mother rolled her eyes. The gesture made Lacey angry.

“As I said, you insisted I come right from work.” She started to push back her chair. She’d had a long day and was worried about Mila. She didn’t need their criticism. “But I can leave now.”

Her father jumped in. “No, don’t do that. I...apologize.”

She sat back down.

Her mother sniffed. “I still don’t understand why you work there.”

“Yes, you do. Underprivileged people need mental health services.”

Her father’s face turned incredibly sad. “Working with that ilk got your brother killed.”

At the mention of Linc, Lacey’s heart thudded in her chest. Her beloved brother was a member of the Crystal City police force. He was murdered by a drug dealer. She missed him immeasurably. And so did they.

Give them a break, Laceyjane.

Pasting on a phony smile, she said. “Let’s not talk about my job.” Or Linc. “Daddy, how’s work?”

Before he answered, a waiter came over. She noticed her parents already had cocktails. “Hello, George. I’ll have a dry martini with olives.”

“Coming right up, Dr. Roth.”

“Okay, Daddy, the job?”

“It’s tiring.” Now she saw lines on his face that weren’t there the last time she’d seen him. “I’m getting too old to deal with the younger lawyers.”

“But you have a lot to teach them.”

His blue eyes beamed. “Maybe.”

“Mother? How about you?”

“I’m planning the summer cookout for the club.”

“Is it fun to plan it?”

She sighed. “Sometimes. But it’s hard work, Laceyjane.”

“Of course, it is.” She dropped her gaze. “That dress is pretty. Is it new?”

“Yes. Why don’t you and I shop for clothes for you this weekend?”

“I have a closet full of clothes.”

George returned with her drink. She sipped it. The strong taste of gin moved through her veins. “This is very good. Thank you.”

“How’s the hospital?” her father asked.

“It’s going well. I’m finally able to do some counseling. The department is in good shape.”

“Did you hire more doctors?”

“Yes, two. And two social workers.” When Lacey took the job, she’d changed the department significantly.

“Hmm, interesting mix.”

“It is. There was an article in *Psychiatry Today* about staffing mental health divisions with psychologists and social workers as well as psychiatrists. When they decided to expand the department, I consulted with Pete Lincoln, another psychiatrist who works at Memorial. He thought it was a terrific idea. And I ran it by Nick Barrows, too.”

“Isn’t he a heart guy?”

“And my good friend. We talk to each other as he’s the head of cardio.” She had to smile every time she thought of Nick these days. He’d married a firefighter who saved his life and had a one-year-old. He was deliriously happy.

“I’m sorry Pierce can’t join us.” Her mother again, picking at that wound. Pierce Patterson belonged to the club as did his parents, who were good friends of the Roths.

She’d feared this conversation but forged ahead. “Pierce and I aren’t seeing each other anymore.”

“*What? Why?*”

If she didn’t tell them the truth, they’d push for a reconciliation. “I’m sorry to say he was sleeping with other women.”

“I’m astounded.” A deep frown. “Was it because you didn’t have enough time for him?”

“I had plenty of time, Mother. He said he was tired of me.”

“What? You’re a fascinating woman.”

Now that surprised her. “Thank you, Mother.”

“And lovely.” This from her father. “What more could he want?”

“I guess diversity.”

She sipped her martini again. Cold and smooth, it went down easy. “Let’s table this. I feel bad about it.” *Bad enough to have a fling with a firefighter that made me forget my name.*

Her mother reached over and took her hand, which no longer sported the two-caret ring. “I’m sorry, darling.”

“Me, too.”

Her father signaled the waiter for menus. He came immediately. She opened the red leather-bound book. “I’m in the mood for seafood.”

“I am, too.”

“Not me. Steak for papa.”

They all smiled. Thankfully all the contentious discussions came before dinner. And she was suddenly starving.

* * *

Jarek no sooner walked through the door when a little bundle of energy came running to the mud room and threw herself at him. “Uncle Jay.”

He adored this child and lifted her into his arms. “Niece Magdalena.”

She held him tight around the neck. He let her hang on as long as she wanted. When she scrambled down, she asked, “Will you play the Memory game with me?”

His brother wouldn't let her have a tablet at only seven so she collected a lot of games. Mikoilaj joined them. "I thought that was you. Maggie, give Uncle Jarek some breathing room."

The men hugged. "How are you, Mikey?" Jarek was the oldest boy. Mike was next.

"Hanging in there."

"Julia good?"

"Come on in and see for yourself."

They entered the kitchen. His mother stood at the stove, her back to them. The house he grew up in had been too small for four boys, but they managed. His parents still lived in it. He knew that today they were having Schabowy, a kind of a pork chop, coated in egg and breadcrumbs, and fried in hot oils with onion. She always served it with the classic sides of grated beetroot or sauerkraut and mashed potatoes. It smelled heavenly.

He crossed to her. "Hello, Matka."

She turned and gave him a sun-bright smile. It cheered him immensely. His family always did that for him. She held out her arms.

Her scent was the same when he hugged her. She must have dabbed the rosewater behind her ears. Tall, like all the boys, she was strong and sturdy as a mother should be. She drew back. "You look tired, *mój syn*?"

"A bit. I've been on nights."

"Ah, those are hard. You work hard."

“I do, like the whole family does.”

“Hey, is the hero here?” His brother Henryk entered the kitchen. All three of them looked alike with dark hair and grayish blue eyes. Henryk’s hair was short, like his, as he was a cop.

“Cut it out, *brat*.” Though it was the Polish term for brother, the American meaning of brat fit Henryk, too.

The boys got beer from the fridge and even Matka drank the *Zywiec* lager when she cooked. Jarek brought the women wine in the living room so he could say hello.

“Where’s Pa?” he asked when he returned.

“Taking a nap.”

Jarek looked his watch. It was eleven. “He didn’t sleep well?”

“His back is bothering him. He was helping Krzysztof.” Mike’s son was building a racecar for scouts.

“Mikey’s all thumbs, huh?”

Mike smiled. “Can’t do anything with wood. Or electronics. Now, if you wanted your 401 K looked at, I’m your guy.” A whiz at math, his brother had become a successful investment broker.

“So, any new girls on the scene?” Henryk asked Jarek, leaning against the counter.

A sudden flash of smooth skin, covered in lotion that smelled like heaven, invaded his mind.

“When there is, I’ll let you know.”

Dinner was at one. When Pa came to the table, he seemed a little stooped, but he was a big burly guy who always made them feel as if he could take care of the family.

Everyone took chairs, the boys on one side, the girls on the other. His sisters-in-law, Sofia and Julia, dark-eyed with mounds of hair, sat side-by-side. Because of Henryk's question, he had another flash of Lacey Roth sitting at this table. Of course, the image didn't fit.

“Could everyone please bow their heads.”

Every single one of them turned sober and looked down. “Bless this meal and the woman who made it. Bless all my sons and keep them safe. And we remember Bogdi, as we always do, with love and remembrance.”

The youngest son, Bodgi, had followed in Jarek's footsteps and joined the army at eighteen. Only he never came home from the Middle East. Everybody at this table knew how bad Jarek felt about that, how he felt responsible for his brother's death.

No one blamed him, but himself.

Chapter 2

“Knock, knock.” Lacey looked up at the doorway to find Nick Barrows. “Want a break?”

“I can’t.” She glanced at her watch. “I have a counseling appointment at ten. Come and sit for a few minutes, though.”

Nick strolled in and sat. “That should make you happy.”

“It’s when I’m happiest.”

“Yeah, I know.” His blue eyes twinkled. “Outside JJ and the baby, I’m happiest in the operating room.”

“Why did we both become department chairs?”

“I ask myself that every day. But we should put up or shut up. Either stay in the job or be a surgeon in my case, a psychiatrist in yours.”

“Did you want something specific?”

“Just to see if you followed up with the biker boy.”

After that night with Jarek, she’d been satisfied but exhausted when she came into work. Nick recognized the look of an all-nighter in bed. So she confessed.

“I have an update on that. Turns out he’s not only a biker boy.”

“And you’re not a biker girl.”

“He came into the clinic when we had an emergency. He’s a firefighter.”

He grinned, as he was married to one of America's Bravest. "Were you glad to see him?"

"I was."

"What'd you do when he came in?"

She shook her head. "We were both startled. We both mumbled something. He asked his team to leave and we talked. I told him I wanted to see him again but he said no."

"I can't imagine. He didn't even know about your money?"

"Right. To him I was just a psychiatrist. Maybe because of my degree?"

"Or he's crazy."

"For all I know he could be that too." What she was sure of was how much she liked the slow, simmering way he crawled down her body, with kisses and nips, then worked his way back up.

Hell!

Her phone buzzed. "Holly Sorenson is in the waiting area of the private entrance."

Nick stood, waved goodbye and Lacey got up, locked the hospital door and opened the other. The girl appeared demure today. Tall and blonde, she carried herself like the model she was, even at this young age. "Hello, Holly. Come and have a seat." She pointed to the furniture grouping. While Holly settled in her usual chair, Lacey sat on the couch. "How are you today?" she asked.

"Shaky. Hannah fronted last night."

Holly Sorenson suffered from schizophrenia. She'd been diagnosed recently at a facility that treated the disorder. Instead of admitting her as an inpatient, her parents chose to seek her outside help. The facility had recommended Lacey.

“And what did Hannah do?”

“That's just it. I don't remember.”

Sometimes, when she woke up with a boy, or in her own bed in fancy clothes, feeling like shit, she knew Hannah had taken over. It was a frightening disease.

“All right. Let's start with how you felt when the fronting was coming on...”

* * *

The crackling of the PA woke everyone. *Engine 5 and Rescue Truck 1 go into service.* Five firefighters bolted up from their beds, instantly awake at five a.m.

“Let's go everybody.” Jarek was the first out of the bunkroom. In the fleece shorts and T-shirts they slept in, they raced to the bay.

Jarek poked his legs through his turnout pants, donned the suspenders and slid into his boots. With his coat and SCBA in the truck, he was the first to climb in. The others followed and in about four minutes they were on their way.

The siren blared into the still pre-dawn day. Big Joe honked the horn and slowed down at each intersection but they didn't see any cars out this early. The dispatcher came on the

radio. “Structure’s a nighttime daycare. Neighbor said the kids sleep on the first floor.”

The situation conjured another scene that flashed through his mind. Two children had died, one being the little victim Jarek had brought out. He remembered sitting with that child on his lap outside...

“Cap. You okay?” Big Joe asked.

“Yeah.”

“How do we handle this kind of fire?” Ronnie Harmon, the youngest member of the team asked from the back seat.

“We’ll douse the fire, find a kid, and hightail it outta there.” Though Jarek knew fires were full of surprises. “Stay on your toes, though.”

Once they reached the site, they bounded out of the truck. They were met with a lawn full of play toys and a two-story playhouse. Smoke billowed out the windows of a fully involved second floor. The air stunk like charred wood.

“Early and Raycroft, get out the four-inch and the three-inch hose. Harmon and Woo, lay the ladders in position up to the two dormers.”

His group sprang into action.

The Rescue rig screeched to a halt behind theirs. Adam Stark leapt out and crossed to him. “Zenko, what do we have?”

“Fully involved second floor. It’s an exterior breach for the fire. But there are kids in there on the first floor. Follow me in with your team.”

Big Joe kicked in the front door and Jarek stepped inside. “Looks like no fire down here, just lots of smoke. “I can make out four rooms off the hallway. Two firefighters for each room. Let’s get in and out quick. Everybody grab a kid. There should be adults down there, too.”

The firefighters fanned out.

Jarek headed to the last room. From the doorway he saw it was pitch black in here with smoke. He unstrapped the thermal camera from his side and held it up. Two beds. After stowing the camera, he dropped to his knees and felt his way over to bed one. Pressed the mattress. One body. Standing, he scooped up the kid, who was very light. Placing him over his shoulder, he gingerly moved to the next bed. Another one. He slid one arm under the second child and lifted him by grasping him under his armpit and dragging him along. *He* was heavy.

Jarek’s muscles screamed at the awkward angle but he got both of them to the exit. Once outside, he stepped away from the building into the clean air.

“Give him to me, Zenko.” A medic who he didn’t know took a kid, and a second took the other.

Jarek whipped off his helmet and dropped to his knees.

When he finally could move, he stood and saw that two Rescue guys carried out kids and Adam had a tiny one at his shoulder. A pair of firefighters transported a woman covered in black soot. She wore one of their SCBA masks. They headed to the Med Truck, which had just arrived.

Stark came up to him. “You okay, Zenko?”

Jarek nodded.

Adam smiled. “I got a baby out.”

“Great feeling, isn’t it?”

“I sent one of my guys in to recheck the whole floor. It’s empty. No need to go back.”

Big Joe approached them. “We cleared the three upstairs rooms. No kids or adults. Fire’s out.”

He looked at the second floor. Broken glass, seared timber at odd angles could be seen in the morning light.

Jarek turned away and strode to the Med Truck. An ambulance had come in, too. The medics had put oxygen on all five kids. Trish Mackenzie slammed the door. “They’re all alive. At least the kids are. I’ll let you know what happens to the two adults. You did good, Zenko.”

He hoped so. He didn’t want a repeat of Afghanistan.

* * *

Lacey awoke early Saturday morning. For a few moments she stared up at the ceiling fan and oriented herself. Eventually, she slid out of bed, put on a robe, used the bathroom, then went out and switched on the Keurig. Through the big windows of her kitchen, she saw the signs of spring. Yellow daffodils competed with purple irises and white crocuses. Like always, they made her smile. She took the coffee outside onto her small porch and sat on the teal cushioned swing. The Crystal City River bubbled before her.

She thought about the day ahead. Spring Fling was always fun. Booths were set up for all different kind of health care concerns: the Eastside Clinic offered information on their services. Another booth was staffed by employees of the YMCA hoping to entice patrons into better fitness. Representatives of other organizations lined Main Street: a small health food store, a yoga studio, a private ambulance company looking for more employees and a nutrition center. The fire department took up all the space at the end with their trucks and their tables. Sometimes they offered the *Stop, Drop and Roll* drill and Lacey tried to catch it each year. The kids were adorable. Firefighters also gave tours of fire trucks.

Most importantly, Mrs. Mancini prepared treats from her bakery for each booth. The older woman was a gem.

After finishing her coffee, Lacey went back inside, and before she made breakfast, she turned on the news. A male announcer was speaking. “And on the happy side of our broadcast, here’s firefighter Jarek Zenko early this morning at a particularly bad fire in a night-time care facility. Lacey stared at him as he came to the doorway, a kid over his shoulder and his arm supporting one other. She gawked. Damn, could anything be more attractive?

But he’s not interested, her inner voice warned.

Well, he hadn’t said he wasn’t interested. He’d said she was out of his league. *That* attitude could be changed.

She made quick work of eating, showered, and put on denim capris with a sleeveless blue blouse and a sweater. She slid funky earrings into her ears, grabbed her minimalist purse and left her condo.

Driving down the road to Main Street in her sporty BMW, she lowered the windows and took pleasure in the sound of the birds chirping, a dog barking and, once in a while a parent calling out for her child. She drove into a space in the vendor parking lot, took out three large boxes of information for the clinic and set each on the sidewalk next to her car. She'd just closed the trunk when she heard a loud roar. She looked over and saw a motorcycle turn into the parking lot and stop on the other side of her. Still on the bike, he removed his helmet and smiled across the hood. "Need some help with that?"

She studied him. He was dressed in that damned navy t-shirt and navy slacks. "Hi."

He held her gaze. "Hi."

"Sure, I'll take some help." She smirked. "From the hero of the night. You're all over the news."

"Yeah, the guys are gonna raze me about the coverage. I don't care though." A smile that would make any woman swoon, spread across his face. "I had a save."

"Two saves. I still don't know how you carried them both."

"Adrenaline."

"Ah."

He got off the Harley and came around to her side. They each picked up a box and walked to her booth. "You start setting up, Lacey." He said the words as he squeezed her arm. "I'll get the rest."

"Thanks, biker boy."

Those gray eyes simmered. Hmm, he hadn't forgotten. "No problem." He didn't add biker girl and she was disappointed.

When he returned with the other box, he nodded. "Have a nice day, biker girl."

Smiling into his eyes, she said, "You, too."

"If you, um, get a break, come see the firetrucks and our exhibits."

Hmm, mixed signals. "I'll be sure to do that."

She watched him walk away—and sighed at the view of his very nice ass.

As she put flyers on the table, she wondered at her attraction to him and why she thought about him so much in the last couple of months. She'd had contact with him, so maybe that was why. Or maybe because the sex she'd had with him eclipsed anything she ever had with Pierce.

A teenager delivered Mrs. Mancini's treats. "Hello, Izzy."

"Hi, Dr. Roth."

"You're volunteering?"

Her smile was as bright as the sun. "The whole family is."

"How's your mom?"

"Good. Chases Abby around all the time."

"She's what, two?"

"Uh-huh."

Lacey liked Tess Ashford. "Ask her to stop by and say hello."

“I will. Enjoy the cookies.”

“Want one?”

“Chocolate chips *are* my favorites.”

The darling girl took one then left. Most vendors had opened. Even from here, the scents of beef and barbeque sauce and bread baking fill the air.

The crowd began to filter in. A couple came up to the booth. “We want to see the information you have on drug education. You hold classes, right?”

“Yes.” She handed them a packet labeled *For Parents*. “Do you have any questions?”

“Our first son will go to the high school next year. We want him to be prepared for any negative things going on there.”

“Good idea.”

They moved on.

A receptionist from the clinic came up to the booth, out of breath, hair askew. “Lacey, I’m so sorry. I overslept. The baby kept us up all night.”

“Ah, time for some sleep training.”

“There is such a thing?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you about it when there’s a lull.”

He still seemed distressed.

“You’re fine, Brad. I could handle it till now.”

He sat down. They talked to four teenagers, a minister who ran a boys’ group at a local church, three teachers. Claudia

Yates, her friend and colleague, arrived around ten.

Then she heard, “Hey, Laceyjane.” She recognized the voice of her cousin. Ruthie Price was and still is her best friend. Their two families got together often, so they grew close. And stayed close. Her hair was back in a braid, which she always wore. Her clothes were flowing and simple. They seemed nothing alike, but they *were*.

“Hey, RuthAnn.”

“How’s the fair going?” she asked.

“Good. Where’s Patrick?”

“Andy is taking him to daycare and he’ll meet me here later. We needed a day off.”

“Smart of you to take it.”

She glanced around and saw there was no one near them. “I read that the fire department is here. Any chance Jarek is?”

“Yes. He’s here. Go down to their space and say hello. Say that I told you to come and say hi.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Okay. Don’t forget, we’re going to a movie Monday night.”

“I won’t. Meet for dinner?”

“Uh-huh. Text me when and where.”

“Anybody need a break?” Claudia had come up to her booth again.

“Lacey does.” Brad shook his head. “I was an hour late.”

“The babe?”

“Yeah.”

Claudia said, “Lacey, go walk around.”

“I could use another cup of coffee.”

“It’s free at the fire department exhibit.”

“Oh, yeah.”

When she reached the spacious area, Jarek was lifting a little girl out of the truck. She watched his muscles flex as he took her weight.

After he set her down, he caught sight of Lacey and closed the distance between them.

“Hi. I came for coffee.” Impulsively she added, “And because you asked me to stop by.”

“Come with me.”

He led her to the pot. He wore some woodsy cologne which set off memories of that night in the hotel. “Are a lot of people coming to the clinic booth?”

“They are. You?”

“Tons. Firefighters are popular.”

“Firefighters are heroes.”

Just then, the captain from House 5 joined them. “I heard what you said, pretty lady. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jarek said, “This is Lacey Roth.”

“Oh, I know.” Carson’s face sobered. “I knew her brother.”

“That’s an understatement. Carson and Linc got into all kinds of mischief when they were little and right through their teens.”

She noticed Jarek didn’t question her about the use of past tense.

Instead, he told Carson, “I think I’ll take a break and walk around with Lacey.” He grabbed a cup of coffee.

“Sure, go head. See you around, Lace.”

“Bye, Carson.”

“You don’t like Carson?” she asked because his tone was curt.

“You know, he’s smart, a nice guy but in my opinion, he doesn’t treat women very well.”

“So they say.”

“Lacey, whatever happened to your brother, I’m sorry for it.”

“Linc became a cop. He was working in vice and a drug dealer he met undercover shot and killed him.”

Jarek stopped. “That’s terrible.”

“It was. I really miss him.”

“I know the feeling.”

Something about his tone. “How do you know?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s go see what treats the other booths have. I heard a rumor about cinnamon rolls.”

“That’d be a nice morning snack.” She leaned into him. “And you know I like your company.”

“Come on. I’m hungry.”

* * *

Jarek bit into the sweet treat and sighed. “These are great.”

“They are. Not real healthy but everything in moderation, I guess.”

He blurted out, “Not everything.”

Damn it. Why was he flirting? Sure, he’d love to jump back in the sack with her—especially since she took her sweater off and reveal her toned arms and more of the smooth skin. And she was good company.

“Tell me something about yourself. Something important.”

He looked at her mouth. Reaching over he swiped some frosting off her lip. Her eyes dilated. *Jezus!*

“Something important, huh?” He let out a heavy breath. “It’s hard for me to talk about myself.”

Now those eyes widened. She covered his hand on the table. “Did you have a bad experience in life that made you that way?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. You have memories, bad ones.”

“Yeah, they come, sometimes in flashbacks.”

“Oh, no. Those can be treated, you know?”

“Yes, doctor, I know. Okay, your turn. Something important.”

“Hmm. I run the psychiatry department at Memorial Hospital, but I’d rather be working more at the clinic.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Long story.” She reached over and touched his cheek. “You cut yourself shaving.”

While he was thinking of her, he nicked his jaw. “Distracting thoughts.”

She sighed. They chatted some and then she stood. “I have to get back. I was only supposed to take fifteen minutes.”

He stood, too.

“It was nice spending time with you, Captain.”

“You too, Doc. You, too.”

Jarek watched her head back to the booth. He didn’t know why he asked her to walk around with him. Yeah, he didn’t like Carson flirting with her. But there was something more.

He was just about to leave when he caught sight of her sweater on the back of her chair. Without thinking about what he was doing, he picked it up and carried it back to the fire department booth. After he stuffed the sweater into his backpack, he went back up front. They were organizing their class on Stop, Drop and Roll. Kids were already filling in the seats. “Hey, George. You need a volunteer?”

“Yeah, nobody else wants to do it. They just want to socialize with the crowd.”

“You can count on me.” He already socialized too much today.

In a few minutes, he dropped to the ground with the fake fire blanket on and screamed, “Oh, no. Oh no,” and rolled.

But still, in the back of his mind, hovered Lacey Roth. What the hell was he going to do about her?

* * *

Carson wondered what the story was with Jarek. He acted so differently around Lacey. Not that she wasn't a knockout. From the time she entered school she was always the prettiest girl in the room.

But shit, she reminded him of Linc. His best friend's death had leveled him.

Lacey had knocked on his door...

He opened it. “Lacey, what's going on? Are you coming out with us?” He'd been waiting for Linc to pick him up after work.

“No. C-can I come in?”

“Yeah, sure.” Something was wrong. Lacey wasn't easily rocked. They sat. She took his hand.

“Carson, Linc's dead.”

The stark words didn't register. “Linc?” He shook his head wildly. “No, no.”

“I'm sorry, yes.”

He felt his eyes tear. “H-ow.” He barely got the hoarse word out.

“He was undercover making a buy from a drug dealer. The guy shot him. We don’t know why. From what I could tell, he died quickly.”

“You saw the body?”

“I identified it. My parents are destroyed. They couldn’t go.”

“I could’ve gone with you.”

“You should have. I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. He was a brother to you, too.”

Carson laid back on the couch pillows. “I can’t believe it, Lace. Linc was always so...he laughed, cried and lived in the moment.”

Now she started to cry. He sat back up, took her into his arms and she sobbed in his shoulder. He mumbled, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about him.”

“It’s not that. I’m just so sad.”

Carson knew in that instant that he’d be sad the rest of his life over this loss. For days, he couldn’t eat or sleep. He took leave from the fire department and drank. It was Lacey who dragged him out of his spiral. Gradually, the pain diminished. He couldn’t be around her anymore, though. She reminded him too much of Linc.

At that point, he vowed never to care about somebody like he loved Linc. Ever again. No best friend, no wife, no kids and

his parents were dead. He'd live on the surface so he never had to hit bottom again.

A realization came to him. Lately, though, he was tired of living this way. But it was too late to change. Then...he remembered Tim Daniels' words...

I bet my badge that all of you have had things in your lives, things you're doing, where it would be good, beneficial to have a group to support you.

* * *

On Sunday, Lacey volunteered to work until noon at the clinic. She had an appointment with Mila Lopez so she left the door of her office open. At eleven, the girl walked in. Her eyes sported big circles around them and her pretty black hair was limp and hanging loosely. "Mila, hello."

"Hello Dr. Lacey." The girl sat.

Lacey said, "You look very tired."

"I am. Miguel is teething and I was up with him all night. I felt so bad for him."

"I feel bad for you, honey. This responsibility is hard on you."

"Mama got up at eight. This is her day off, so I don't have to watch him or the others all day."

"What are you going to do for fun?"

She shrugged a shoulder. And looked sad. “I don’t have any friends.”

“None?”

“One girl from school, maybe. I sit with her sometimes at lunch.”

“Do you feel comfortable calling her?”

“I guess. Elena gave me her phone number.”

“Why don’t you call her right now? See if she’s free today. If you need a ride, I’ll drop you off. You’re my last patient.”

As luck would have it, Elena was available. They agreed to meet at the Teen Center.

“I can walk from here.”

“Let me drive you. Are you excited about seeing her?”

“Nervous.”

Kids shouldn’t be nervous about spending time with their friends. “Just get to know each other. That’s all. Then try to make another time to do something with her.”

“When?”

“On one of your parent’s days off. Or at school, ask to have a standing date for lunch with her.”

She fidgeted with the strap of her purse. “Do you think I should?”

“I know you should. I have a best friend and she’s my confidante.”

“Maybe.” She looked out the window where the sun shone, then back at Lacey. “Okay, you can take me.”

Buoyed by some progress, Lacey happily headed to her car to take the girl to the east side of town.

Chapter 3

In the privacy of his home, Jarek picked up the navy-blue sweater Lacey had left on her chair at the Spring Festival and brought it to his face. And sniffed. *Cholera!* He was acting like a kid. Or pervert. She'd left the thing behind and was out of sight before he could call her back. He thought he'd return the sweater before the fair was over, but he'd gotten involved at their booth and forgot about it.

Now, he had a dilemma. Did she leave it behind on purpose? No, that didn't seem like her style. And besides, she'd made her position clear at the clinic...

"My name is Lacey Roth. And now that I've met up with you, I'd like to see you again. What about it?"

"Sorry ma'am. But you're way outta my league..."

And she'd been receptive at the Spring Fair...

"Let's go see what treats the others have. I heard a rumor about cinnamon rolls."

"That'd be a nice morning snack." She leaned into him. "And you know I like your company..."

So he'd initiated *that* contact. Enough for her to leave something behind so she'd have an excuse to see him?

You're so full of yourself, Zenko.

Was he?

Sick of this vacillating, he headed to the big room that he'd added on. He'd chosen a house off the beaten path—a dilapidated one—and after he'd remodeled the existing structure, he and his firefighter buddies put on this addition. The electrical and plumbing had been completed over the winter with plans to finish it this spring. The drywall was halfway up.

He wondered briefly what he pictured this space as? He didn't really need it. Maybe master-bath and a nursery? Shit, he never planned to bring kids into a world that destroyed them so easily. Did Lacey want kids?

Arrgh!!!! He put on his goggles and poured spackle into a bucket and mixed it. The scent of cement distracted him at first. Then he started filling in the nails on the sheetrock. It was tedious work so when his mind drifted back to *her*, he let it go. Hell, the racy images of her straddling him, beneath him, all over him were the last thing he needed.

* * *

Lacey went to get a sweater and as she looked at the shelf where she kept them in her dressing room, she noticed the blue one was missing. The blue one she wore to the Spring Fling. The blue one Linc had given her that last Christmas. Oh, no! Had she lost it? Her heart clutched.

Don't panic yet. She retraced her steps. She visualized herself putting it on, driving to town, but she'd taken it off to bring in the boxes. She'd donned it again when she took her

break. Had coffee and cinnamon rolls with Jarek. Oh, damn, she saw herself removing the pretty knit thing in the sun where the table sat. Had she left it there? Had Jarek found it? Did he think she left something behind intentionally to see him again? No, he probably brought it to lost and found. Or returned to the booth after she'd left. She'd opened the clinic's booth and Claudia closed it.

She phoned the woman. "Hey, Claudia. It's Lacey."

"Hi, there."

A pause. "I can't find my navy-blue sweater."

"The one Linc gave you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, dear. I didn't see it anywhere when I packed up."

"Nobody returned it to the booth?"

"No. I can call the guy in charge of the clean-up crew. See if they saw it."

"Just give me his number. I'll call him."

The clean-up crew guy told her, "We got a stuffed rabbit, some jewelry, a fleece coat and one shoe—go figure. No sweater though."

She sat down and put her face in her hands. Should she call Jarek and ask him if he saw it after she left? No, she couldn't keep chasing him. But to lose a treasure because she'd be embarrassed? Never. That was a dilemma.

So she grabbed a bottle of water, sat outside on the swing overlooking the river, and watched it flow. Hell, what was she going to do now?

* * *

“Hey, Carson.”

“Jarek. What can I do you for?”

“I’d like to drop off a sweater that Lacey Roth left on the chair when we had coffee.”

“I noticed she had on the navy blue one.”

Jesus, did he have a thing for her after all?

“Her brother gave it to her the Christmas before he died.”

Her brother died. So did his. He pictured Bogdi’s face when he joined up. Heard him say, *I’m going to be just like you, big brother.*

“Zenko, did you hear me?”

“Sorry, yeah. I did.”

“She’ll be devastated thinking she lost it.”

“Would you bring it to her?”

“No can do. I’m out at Keuka Lake in a boat. With a babe.”

“Call her then.”

“No, you go drop it off to her. 56 Riverview Dr. Look, I gotta go. But remember, she’ll be miserable right about now.” And he hung up.

Man, fate was really working against him.

Go on, Jarek. You know you can't stop thinking about her anyway.

Hell.

He'd already showered and shaved, so he jumped in his truck and punched the address into the GPS. Hmm, the Riverview Condos were relatively close to him. Good, he wouldn't have time to change his mind. Putting the truck in gear, he took off.

Soon, he stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell of a first floor one facing the water. No answer. He rang again. Huh. He didn't see anywhere to leave the package. He couldn't leave the sweater anyway. It was too precious. He turned to go back to the truck to write her a note when he heard, "Jarek. Is that you?"

He pivoted around. She was standing on the porch in a short white skirt and red sleeveless blouse. Her sandals matched the top. "Oh, my God, is that Linc's sweater?"

"Yeah, it is. Once I found out how important this was from Carson, I brought it over."

She rushed to him. Took the sweater and put it to her face. "Oh, God, I thought I lost this."

"You left it on the chair. Sorry I didn't get your number first instead of coming over." Maybe he could get out of here without having to go inside.

"Well, I'm glad you have it." Again he turned to leave.

"Hey." This time she grabbed his arm. "You have to come in. Have something to drink. Let me make you dinner."

“You don’t need to do that.” *Please don’t do that.*

“I have to do something to thank you!” She practically dragged him into the house. He could have stopped her physically, of course, but just like at the bar, he was being pulled emotionally, too.

Once inside, he looked around. The place was as pretty as she was. Big open spaces. Hallways off to the left. And a room he could see from the foyer straight out back. “Want a drink?”

He’d better keep a clear head. “I’ll have coffee.”

The kitchen was at the end of the hallway, off to the left. The big space had a fancy island in the center, a table to eat at and a lot of windows. “I like that,” he said gesturing to the fireplace.

“Yeah, me too. I’ve also got one in the bedroom.”

“I’ll remember that.”

She gave him a stellar smile over her shoulder. “You’re flirting again.”

Ignoring her comment, he asked, “How long have you lived here?”

“Since they finished the complex. I had a house and I sold it. I didn’t need that much space and it was...cold.”

“This isn’t. It’s warm, like you.”

As the Keurig gurgled, filling the space with its pungent scent, she turned and leaned against the counter. “There you go again.”

“I can’t seem to help flirting when I’m near you. I’m never like this.”

“So you said at The Marriott.”

“Huh. Did we talk at all?”

A sexy smile. He didn't know whether he was sucked in by her face, her body or by how happy she seemed that he was here. So he decided not to think about any of that or insist that he shouldn't have come.

Sitting on stools next to each other, they both sipped coffee. At one point she turned and put her feet on the bottom rung of the stool. He faced straight ahead but shot looks at all that skin revealed by the skirt. Twice, he went to reach for a knee. Or a thigh. Oh, fuck! He scraped back the chair, stood and drew her up.

His mouth came down hard on hers but her lips were so soft, he gentled the pressure. Explored her and reveled in the familiar taste of her. He cupped her neck with his hand and angled her head for better access. Still that wasn't enough. He nipped, sucked, laved her mouth.

At one point, he drew back and slid his arm under her knees and the other around her back and lifted her. She nuzzled into his chest, as if she belonged there. He took long strides to the living room and dropped down on the first couch he came to. He plastered her against him. Their mouths met and mated again. She clung to him. He liked that in a woman. She scraped her nails down his back and he cursed the shirt he wore. Easing back, her hand explored his chest. He did the same. She was full and firm. Both of them breathed like bellows. And he knew he couldn't stop.

But she did. She gentled the kiss and slowly drew her mouth from his. She sat up straight but stayed on his lap. His

hands dropped to her waist. He noticed her lips were swollen. “That was wonderful, Jarek. But I’m not going to do what I did last time.”

“No?” he said, absurdly disappointed.

“Nope. I want to, but afterward, you’ll go back into *I’m out of your league* or some other silly excuse. I won’t live my life from booty call to booty call.”

“Wow! That’s harsh.”

“Jarek, I like you. I want to see you again, often, but not with your hesitance. Your reticence. After the disaster of my last relationship, I need a man to want to be with me, to share my life. I’m looking for honesty and openness. If you can’t give me that, I’m afraid we can’t have...this.” She motioned to the two of them.

Because she was baring herself to him, he couldn’t joke or take advantage of her attraction to him. “I...I’m not a very open person.”

“So you said at the Spring Fling.”

Images of his brother’s young face swam before him. “There are things I can’t talk about.”

“That’s okay. But you’ve got to be able to share yourself somewhat with me, or I won’t have a relationship with you.” She slid off his lap. Stood, and held out her hand. “You have to leave now. No more kisses as I’m already aroused. Think about what I said. Either way, let me know what you decide.”

He’d never dated a woman who was so honest. “All right. I will.”

He turned and got halfway to the door when she called out, “Jarek?”

He turned back. “Thank you so much for returning the sweater.”

“You’re welcome, Lace. Very welcome.”

* * *

Lacey couldn’t wind down. Okay, she was turned on. Nicely so. And she missed sex more than she thought. Or maybe sex with Pierce hadn’t been as good as it was with the man who just left her.

What to do on her day off? The house had been cleaned by a service. She didn’t much like to cook. She opened the refrigerator. No food. At all. Her question was answered. She scrounged up her purse and headed for the Food Mart—the best grocery store in town.

Once there, she pushed her cart to the fresh food section. Loaded it with vegetables, fruit, cheese, yogurt. Then she went to the meat area and picked out some chicken, lean ground beef and at the seafood counter, asked for ahi tuna.

Looking down, she maneuvered the cart to leave and bumped into someone else’s. “I’d recognize that skirt anywhere.” A dimpled smile spread across Jarek’s face.

She couldn’t help returning it. “Nice seeing you.” She checked her watch. “Only an hour later.”

“Yeah, I um, was restless so I did chores.”

She laughed. “I was *restless* too.”

He glanced at her food. “Healthy eater, huh?”

“Yeah. Always.” She looked inside his. Chicken wings from the deli. Fresh pizza. She laughed out loud. “I guess you prefer junk food.”

“When I’m at home. We have to eat healthy at the firehouse, so when I’m on my own, I treat myself.”

She picked up a carton of his ice cream. “Hey, I got this kind, too.”

“Guess we do have something else in common.” Reluctantly, he added, “Have a nice night.”

Man, she wanted him to say he changed his mind. “I will, biker boy.”

Jarek watched her go in that sexy skirt that drove up his blood pressure. And wished she hadn’t asked so much of him. Damn it, what would he do? He bought a few more necessities and headed to the checkout.

At the front of the store, he heard, “Hey, Jarek.”

“Noah.” His eyes widened when he saw the cart. It was bursting with food. “Man, that’s a lot.”

“I got four boys.”

“I know. How are they?”

“Still wearing me out.”

“Maybe you should take Tim Daniels up on his offer of babysitting.”

Now where did that come from?

Noah scowled. "I'd have to be one of his Brothers of Fire. Hell, what is he thinking to suggest such a thing?"

"That we all need help."

"I guess." Noah studied his face. "You call him yet?"

He looked at the young man with deep lines around his eyes and mouth. "No. We got one more day."

"Huh."

"See you around, Noah. I'm doing self-check-out."

"Lucky you."

Jarek paid for his food, and walked out to the car, holding only one brown paper bag. Poor Noah. He could really use some help. Somewhere to let down, unburden.

You have to be able to share yourself somewhat with me, or I won't have a relationship with you.

He wondered if joining the brothers of fire would satisfy the ultimatum she gave him. Damn it all. He took out his phone.

* * *

Two days later, Noah Keaton entered his house to find it a disaster. God, he was tired. They'd had a big fire during the night so he got no sleep. His sister came into the room. "Hi."

"Hi." He gestured to the floor, littered with toys and some cereal boxes.

Deana shook her head. “Oh, hell. I told them to clean up before they left for school.

“Where are they?”

“The little one’s sleeping in your room; the twins and Liam are getting ready for school.” She walked to the staircase of the old house he and Sara had bought when they married eight years ago. “Liam, Bobby and Brady, finish up there in five minutes and get down here and clean up. Your dad’s home.”

They trundled down the steps in three. “Dad,” they all yelled as they rushed over. They hugged him from each side and the front at once.

He smiled and ruffled some hair. “Hi, guys. Good to see you, too.”

“Did you catch any fires?” Liam asked. He’d already picked up some firefighter jargon.

“Yeah, one. A bad one.”

Billy’s brows shot up. “Did anybody die?”

“No, son.”

“You’re really smelly, Dad.” Bobby scrunched up his nose.

He remembered Sara taking his clothes to the laundry area in the basement and once, when he went down after her...

“Sorry they smell so bad, honey.”

“Not so bad.” She was a petite woman with an easy demeanor.

“I took a shower, but hell, I think there’s smoke in my pores.”

“I don’t care.” She lifted her chin. “You smell like you.”

He slid his arms around her. “How about if you hop up on that dryer?”

She giggled. They were childless then. “Okay...”

“Dad?” Brady asked. His sensitive guy had caught Noah’s mind wandering.

“I’m good, honey. Now, pick up the room.”

“Do *all* of it, you guys,” his sister emphasized. Then she got a good look at Noah. “You’re dead on your feet, little brother. Go on in, take a shower and I’ll get them on the busses.

“You’re a lifesaver, Deana.”

He practically crawled into his room. Sure enough, Casey was asleep. At two, he still took naps in the morning and afternoon.

Quietly, he found clean clothes—thank you Deana for that, too—and tiptoed out to the bathroom they all shared. Before Sara died, he’d bought all the stuff for a second one, off of their room. Now, the materials sat in the garage in the spot where she used to park.

He took a scalding shower, put on fleece shorts and collapsed into bed.

Casey let out a wail. God he was tired of his life. He needed help. As he struggled out of bed, he remembered Tim’s words.

I bet my badge that all of us have had things in your lives, things you’re doing, where it would be good, beneficial to

have a group to support you.

Hmm, he was going to say yes to that.

* * *

That same night, Adam Stark went to the kitchen of his apartment—that he hated—and searched for his phone. He had to check some stats from the firehouse. When he heard a knock on the door—the bell was broken—he headed to the entry, phone in hand.

He was shocked to see Beth standing on his doorstep. She was still pretty at forty with dark hair that had no gray, wide brown eyes and a lush mouth. In the year they'd been divorced, she'd never come here.

“Hi.”

“Adam. I need to talk to you. Is it okay that I came over? I didn't want the girls to hear me.”

That didn't hold water. His big house, where the three of them lived without him, had plenty of space for privacy.

“I guess.”

She stepped inside. He saw the place from her eyes: minimalist at best. A sturdy couch, recliner, nothing on the floor. The kitchen had a dinette area. Two bedrooms down the hall. One for him, one for the girls.

“This is nice.”

“Please. Not your taste at all.” He looked around. “Not exactly mine either.”

A half-smile. “I heard you let the girls decorate their room.”

He rolled his eyes. “They painted it purple.”

She chuckled.

“Want to sit? I can get you something.”

“Yes, to sitting. No to the other.”

When they took seats opposite each other on the couch, she raised her chin. She always looked people in the eye, even if she was delivering bad news. He hoped there was none. Problems complicated the ordered life he struggled to maintain since their split.

“Janelle is acting up. She failed math.”

A frown. “Janelle’s good at math.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What’s she doing?”

“She snuck out late at night a couple of times. I think she’s smoking outside of the house. And she skipped classes, mostly math.”

“Wow. How long has this been going on?”

“Um...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’ll get mad at why.”

He forced himself to calm. His kid's welfare was at stake.
"Just spill it, Beth."

"You know I've been dating."

He tried to unclench his jaw. "They mentioned it."

"Janelle doesn't like Don."

"I don't know anything about him."

"He's a painter. He's good. He's had exhibitions at the gallery. I met him there." Beth had been an artist when he met her and got a job in an art gallery once the kids got older.

"So?"

"He's...bohemian."

"As in?"

"How he dresses in jeans and flannel. His hair's long. He wears sandals until it snows."

Adam's heartbeat sped up. He didn't want to react to her but he couldn't stop the feeling. "Looks like you found what you wanted out of a guy. Someone the opposite of me."

She looked away. "You know why we divorced."

"Because I'm too by-the-book. Too ordered. Too stern."

"That about covers it. We need someone who can allow us all to be ourselves."

"Is this about me not going to the girls' activities? You know a firefighter's schedule?"

"You weren't always working."

"This is old ground, Beth. The divorce is final."

“I think that’s Janelle’s problem. Gina’s in some ways, too.”

“What?”

“Boy, you can be obtuse.”

“Hell, Beth.”

“They want us to get back together.”

He could feel his frown deepen. “You said unhappy parents shouldn’t stay in a marriage just for the kids.”

“I know I said that. Look, I need some help from you.”

“Exactly what?”

“Talk to them. Tell them that’s not going to happen. Tell them Don is a good guy.”

“That last I won’t do because I’d be lying. But I can tell them we’ll never get back together.”

“Adam, if you could just relax with us. Allow us our lives.”

“As I said, this is old ground.”

She stood. “I should have known better. I just thought because you’ve gone to Janny’s plays and Gina’s soccer games, you might be loosening up.”

“What if I did, Beth? Would you want a reconciliation?”

“Well, no. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Great. You drag us all through a hellish divorce and now you’re not sure?”

She shrugged.

His eyes closed briefly. He didn't want to hear this. "No, I won't go through it again. I'm content here."

"It's a terrible apartment."

"Well, this is all I can afford."

She stared hard at him, then turned to leave. He asked, "Wait. Why now?"

She didn't even look at him. "Because I miss you."

Fuck. He didn't need to hear that.

Just as she left, his phone rang. He barked into it, "Hello?"

"Did I call at a bad time?"

"Yes." He took a deep breath. "Sorry, Tim. My ex just left."

"Boy, I bet you could use some advice on that."

"Huh. Did any of the guys commit?"

"All but you, Stark."

He was shocked. Why? What did they know that he didn't?

"Why don't you just give it a trial run?"

"Maybe."

"We're meeting at Wink's Thursday night. Believe it or not, we're all off work."

"I'll think about it."

"It might help, Adam." His voice had softened. "I hope you'll come." And he clicked off.

Now what did he do? He had to admit seeing Beth again hurt. Her implication about getting back together threw him. Looking at the phone, he wondered briefly what he had to lose?

Chapter 4

Lacey changed into sneakers to walk home and stepped outside the clinic, tired, but satisfied with the help she'd given the kids today.

“Lacey.”

She stilled. It was five p.m. and the still-shining sun dappled the strands of blond hair on the man before her. “What do you want, Pierce?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“You gave up that right nearly two months ago when you dumped me.”

“It's...um, it's about that.” His complexion flushed. She used to like it when he seemed a bit embarrassed.

“I don't understand.”

A kid came up to the door. They had to step off to the side.

“Look, I can't get into it here.” He gestured to the outside of the clinic. “Let's go somewhere.”

“No. I'm heading home.” She started to walk down the street. She hadn't driven to work this morning but took a brisk walk from her condo instead. Now, a warm breeze flowed from off the river, and she wanted to enjoy the end of her day.

He caught up to her. “Can I come with you?”

Shaking her head, she let out an exasperated breath. “I’d prefer to be alone.”

Of course, he didn’t listen. They went a few steps, then he said, “It wasn’t what I expected it to be.”

She turned to him. His face was full of lines and his eyes troubled. “What wasn’t?”

“Being single. Playing the field.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing?”

“Yes.”

She started moving again. They passed the park and she saw a bench there. He wasn’t going to let her go and she definitely didn’t want to have him at the door to her house. “Let’s sit.”

He dropped down uncomfortably close and she caught the scent of the cologne he always wore. Today, it was unpleasant, so she slid away a bit. “Aw, don’t do that.”

“Why not? We’re nothing to each other anymore.”

“I still love you.”

“You loved me while you bed-hopped? Give me a break.”

“No, babe. I do.”

She stared out at the children playing soccer. She’d hoped to have kids with this man someday. “Look, Pierce, you’re lonely. That’s what happens when you don’t build anything with someone you care about.”

“I didn’t know that.” He gave her an impish smile. “I do, now. And I want it with you.”

“Too late. The damage is done. Find somebody else who’ll take a chance on you because I’m certainly not going to.” She stood. “Don’t contact me again.”

He started to stand. “But...”

“And if you come after me, I’ll call the police.”

His mouth dropped.

“Goodbye, Pierce.” She walked away, vaguely insulted.

* * *

The Brothers of Fire gathered at Wink’s Bar and Grill on the outskirts of Crystal City. They didn’t go to Brothers&Sisters, the firefighter hangout, because privacy was impossible there. And this place was intimate, dimly lit, and quiet.

The six of them sat at a round table in the corner with a pitcher of beer. Tim poured mugsful.

“So, what about those Yanks?” Tommy said breaking the uncomfortable silence.

After they talked about the baseball team, they went into uncomfortable mode again.

Jarek broke that tension. “Joe Redman went to some conference about firefighter morale.” They discussed that for a minute. Someone else mentioned the new movie being filmed in Crystal Corners on Harris Hill.

Carson shook his head. “Fuck, this isn’t what we’re here for. How do we start?”

Tim gave them a warm smile. “I suggest we tell each other why we joined the group. I’ll go first. I’m having trouble with one of the guys in my group. He’s lazy.” He took a sip of the brew as he summoned the courage to say words he hadn’t admitted to himself. “But also, my wife is bored with our life. She was a stay-at-home mom and now wants a career.”

“You don’t want her to get a job?” Jarek asked.

“No. The kids are still in high school. We agreed at the outset that she wouldn’t work outside the home until they went off to college.” He huffed out a breath. “And with my schedule, I don’t want extra responsibility.”

Adam frowned. “My wife stayed home, too. But I was relieved when she got a job at an art gallery because it took the pressure off being the sole breadwinner.” Briefly he looked away, then back to them. “It did, however, cause issues that brought on a divorce. It’s what you mentioned, Tim. I wasn’t there enough to pick up the slack and I still expected her to do everything for me and with the kids. I’m here because she came to see me a few days ago. She has a boyfriend.”

“Aw, shit. That’d be hard for me.” Noah shook his head. “My wife never worked either. And now she’s gone.”

“Does us talking about our wives bother you?” Tim asked.

“Nah, I got bigger fish to fry.”

“Tell us,” Tim said.

The low buzz of the tv and a few patrons broke the silence but weren’t interfering with their discussion.

“I’m wrung out by my life. My sister Deana is a godsend. She was Sara’s best friend and after Sara died, Deana lost her

job because of Covid. She offered to help us out...and stayed on. I pay her what she was earning before. But even with her there, the kids have activities, fight for my attention, and take up every second of my free time.”

“What about your days off?”

“I have a two-year-old. And the kids get on and off the bus at different times.”

“That sounds awful.” Carson was a bachelor. He had all the free time he wanted.

“Will Kathy be able to handle them?” Tim had dropped off his daughter to babysit and picked Noah up.

“There’s the thing. When I’m not there, they aren’t a handful. They behave better with Deana and with the few sitters who’ll come to take on my crew.”

Carson watched them. “That’s why I’m single. I’m too selfish to have kids.”

“I’m single because I can’t hold onto a woman.” Tommy always seemed lonely. “Carson, give me some advice.”

“I’ll think about it, Tommy.”

“Do you like being single?” Noah asked Carson. “Because I don’t.”

Carson shrugged. “Contrary to you, I don’t know anything else.” He couldn’t tell them about Linc, that his loss was the real reason why he never invested in people. “But I have some issues at work and they’re personal. And I’m pretty sure a few of my group resent me.”

“Because you got family money?” Tommy again.

“Yeah.”

“And a fancy car. And you’re handsome as hell.”

“Wow, Jarek. You jealous?”

“Nope. I know who I am and my life is just fine.”

“Then why are you here?”

He sighed heavily. “*My* group wants me to open up to them. They say I don’t share things.” He hesitated, then thought, what the hell? “We had a call. A woman I met once works at the clinic.” He looked at Carson. “It’s Lacey.”

Carson said quickly, “We’re not close enough for me to get involved in her personal life.” And it hurt to be around her.

Jarek nodded. “My people got the vibes about us and asked about her. She’s why I came to this group. She doesn’t want a guy who only shares part of himself.”

“Why don’t you share? Because of Afghanistan?” Word of his service sifted through the fire department.

“I can’t talk about the war. It’s even hard to talk about this woman.” He shrugged. “I wish that wasn’t true.”

“So you’re hoping for nudges from us?” Tim asked.

“I guess. And by coming to this group, it’ll show her I’m trying to open up.”

“Glad we can help,” Carson said sardonically.

They finished the beer. “I’ll pay for another pitcher.” Noah still had another hour free. “Anybody’s welcome to stay with me.”

Instead of breaking up, all of them took seats at the bar. Tim noticed they were all talking. The game started and they glanced up at the closest television occasionally.

And Tim knew this was an auspicious beginning.

* * *

Lacey walked into the hospital with a heavy heart. It had been a whole week since she gave Jarek her ultimatum. She wanted him to call and tell her he'd changed his mind, would try to share his life with her. But maybe it had been too soon in their relationship to give that ultimatum. Maybe he didn't like pushy women. Maybe he just wasn't interested.

She passed the nurse's station and Nurse Holcomb smiled.

"Hi, Janet."

"Hi there, Doc. It's your lucky day."

"It is?"

"A hunk of a guy is here to see you."

"Really?" Did she dare hope? "What's his name?"

"He wouldn't give it. But he convinced me to let him wait in your private waiting area. If I made a mistake, I'll get him to leave."

"No, I'll take care of him." Her wording was ominous even to her own ears.

Janet winked at Lacey. "Let me know if I did the right thing."

Lacey headed to the office entrance from the hospital, walked inside, and closed and locked the door, as she always did when she had a patient. Then she opened the waiting area door on the far wall.

And there he was. Standing before an advertisement for her clinic. He wore khaki pants, loafers and a brown dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves.

“Hello.”

He pivoted. And gave her that genuine smile. “Hello.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Is it all right I came here?”

She crossed to him. Put her hand on his arm. “Always, Jarek.”

“Whew! I want to talk to you.”

“I’m here an hour early. Come on inside.”

He crossed into her office. She’d furnished it in neutral tones: a buttery soft taupe leather couch, a sandy colored chair, hardwood floors and furniture.

“Huh,” he said. “I’ve never been in a psychiatrist’s office. It looks like a living room.”

“I guess it does. Take a seat.”

He dropped down on the couch. She took her usual chair.

“So, I came to tell you something.”

A shock of fear rose inside her. Could it be he was done with her?

“I want to try to open up to you. To others, really.”

Her relief was out of proportion. Finally, she managed to say, “I’m so glad.”

“And I have a plan to help the process along. I guessed you wouldn’t just believe me.”

“Of course I would. But what plan?”

“One of the captains in the department recruited five other officers to form a group. Six women in the department already have one. The Sisters of Fire. They all met in the academy several years ago and have been really close ever since.”

“That sounds very healthy.”

“So Tim, the captain, asked us to join a group a lot like theirs. He called it the Brothers of Fire.”

“And?”

“I joined.” He held her gaze intently. “Because of you.”

“Oh, Jarek.”

“The other guys agreed, too. We had our first meeting last night.”

“How did it go?”

“Really good. It was uncomfortable at first, then we relaxed. We weren’t stiff or phony with each other. And each guy talked about himself as an offshoot of what someone said. It was...natural. I think most of us were shocked at how well it went.”

“Do you want to tell me what you shared? Or is it too soon?”

“I got one thing I can tell you as a down payment.”

She laughed.

He smiled. Then it receded. “I...spent two years in Afghanistan. A long time ago, during the war.”

“Oh, dear.”

“I had some bad experiences.” He drew in a heavy breath, his expression bleaker than a February dawn.

Tears sprang to her eyes. “Jarek, I’m so sorry. That must have been awful for you.”

“It was. Still is. I can also tell you the wife who biker boy told you about? She dumped me in a Dear John letter.”

“How could she?”

He shrugged. “It takes a special kind of nasty to break a guy’s heart when he was flying planes into enemy territory.”

“Planes?”

“Hmm. Chopper pilot.”

She knew how dangerous the position was. “Wow. Do you fly still?”

“Not anymore.”

She stood, circled the coffee table and dropped down next to him. He was showing signs of distress. Sweat appeared on his brow. His hands trembled. She slid her arm around him and got as close as possible. “You don’t have to share any more right now. It’s obvious how raw your experience is, how it’s still with you, constantly I’d guess.”

He shook his head. “Talking about it makes me relive it.”

“Yeah. But it’s also cathartic.”

“I know the word. It means to get all the bad stuff out.”

“Uh-huh. Many vets say when they finally talk about what they went through in war, what they did there, the less hurtful it becomes.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“I know. It sounds counterintuitive.”

“Now that word I don’t know.”

“Contradictory to common sense but is still true.”

“I guess.”

She leaned into him. Put her head on his shoulder. “I feel bad making you feel bad.”

“That’s not very psychiatrist-like.”

“I’m speaking as a woman. As a doctor, I don’t feel bad going through negative things with a patient so he can get to the good side of life.”

He leaned back, making her let go. Then he slid his arm around her and kissed her head. “So, we’re a go?”

“We are.”

“How soon can I see you? Take you out.”

“Tonight?”

A beautiful grin. “Tonight.”

“You can pick me up here. I’ll be wearing this,” she said of the gauzy pants suit she’d worn today.

“Yeah. The outfit’s great.”

“I do have jeans in my car. I could—”

“No, you look all soft and lovely in that. I can watch you in it all night. I’ll be here at six. Should I text you or park and come in.”

“Definitely text me. Parking’s a nightmare at the hospital.”

He stood. Pulled her up. “Thanks for helping me with all this.”

“Thanks for taking this big step for me.”

“And for me, Lace.”

She took his hand and they walked to the private entrance. “I’ll see you later,” she said.

“Mmm. Later.”

* * *

“I like Connor’s,” she told him as they walked inside the chic restaurant on Main Street which had been open for two years. Contrary to her worry, the light purple gauzy thing she wore fit in here, fit *her* nicely and when she looked at him, it made her eyes glow.

“I like it, too.”

A hostess greeted them. “Good evening. Reservation?”

“Jarek Zenko.”

“Ah, welcome back Mr. Zenko.”

The hostess led them to the far side of the dining room. White tablecloths and linens decorated the tables and the lights

were dimmed just enough. After they sat, the hostess handed them menus.

“So,” Lacey said with a teasing note in her voice. “You’ve been here?”

“Hmm. Twice.”

She leaned forward, settling her crossed arms on the table. “Tell me who you came with. I want to know all about your life.”

“I brought Matka and Pa here for their anniversary.” A warmth rose within him at the mention of his parents. Briefly, he wondered how they’d take to Lacey. “Instead of telling me it was too fancy and too expensive for them, they delighted in being spoiled.”

“Is that what you call your mother and father?”

“Yes. What do you call your parents?”

“Mother and Daddy.”

“You closer to him?”

Her brow knitted. “In some ways. Who was the other person you brought here?”

“A date. Her name was Cheryl and she talked about herself non-stop the whole time. Needless to say, that was the end of it for me.”

“I’ll remember that.”

He could feel the grin spread across his face. “You could never do that. It’s not in your DNA.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been with you enough time to know you ask me more questions about myself.” He mumbled under his breath, *too many questions.*

The waiter came and took their drink order.

“Now, how many guys have brought you here?”

“My father. It wasn’t fancy enough for my mother. I also came with Pierce, and he didn’t like it either. A few times with girlfriends.”

“What’s your favorite on the menu?”

“The ahi tuna. I also like the filet. And they have a chocolate lava cake to die for.”

“I’m a meat and potatoes guy. But I eat any kind of Polish food.”

“Which Matka cooks, I’ll bet.”

“She’s the best.”

Their drinks arrived; he sipped his bourbon and she some Chardonnay. In between, they talked about their days at work. After a decent amount of time, a waiter approached them. Lacey smiled up at him. “I’ll have the ahi tuna dinner, with jasmine rice and asparagus.”

He looked to Jarek.

“Strip steak, rare. Baked potato. House salad.”

“Thank you.”

After he left, she focused on him. “I know very little about firefighting. When I went online to research it, the information was overwhelming.”

He took another sip of his scotch. So she researched his profession. “No need for that. What do you want to know?”

“Aren’t you afraid when you rush into burning buildings?”

“I think the adrenaline spike keeps us from being afraid.” He was thoughtful. “And we don’t rush in. The plan of attack is well spelled out. Guys with hoses go first and guys without go when the fire’s out or sometimes right behind them.”

“Which are you?”

“The first. We have an engine. It carries water. Trucks bring ladders, tools and man—or woman—power.”

“What’s an engine like?”

“It has two, three and four-inch hoses and one five inch. They take care of most fires. Some also have an aerial.”

“Which is the ladder on a swivel that goes up to high places.”

He cocked his head. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve seen it around town. That truck is monstrous.”

“Yeah, that ladder has saved a lot of lives.”

“Tell me about one of your saves.”

“No. I’m at risk of giving Cheryl competition. Tell me things about you.”

“All right. I love working at the clinic most. I’m hands-on all the time.”

“Don’t you see patients at Memorial?”

“Yes, I do. I feel more in-the-trenches at the clinic because at Memorial, I’m responsible for a ton of paperwork, hiring,

training and follow ups on evaluations. At Eastside, I just work with patients.”

“Tell me about your favorite patient.”

“Mila. I’ve been seeing her for six months. She’s—”

“Laceyjane?” A man had come up to their table. His brows rose up at seeing her.

“Pierce. I thought you didn’t like this place.”

“My friend wanted to come here.”

“Ah.”

He looked pointedly at Jarek, who stood. Held out his hand. “Jarek Zenko.” Though he knew he was being petty, he was glad he was taller and more muscular than the guy she’d been engaged to.

Pierce scowled instead of shaking then asked Lacey, “Can I talk to you alone?”

“Of course not. Now go. You’re interrupting my date.”

He gave her a searing look. And didn’t move.

Jarek did. Just a bit, enough to be mildly threatening. “You heard the lady. But if you didn’t, they have security here which I’ll call if you don’t leave us alone.”

“I’m going.” To her he said pointedly, “But I’m not giving up on you.”

“You already did that, Pierce. Now go.”

The *dupek* left, and Jarek sat back down.

A smile flirted with her face. “The biker boy surfaces.”

He lifted one shoulder. “He does, I guess.”

“Turns me on.”

“Don’t tell me that before we eat, darlin’.”

“Why?”

“I might just drag you outta here. Find the nearest hotel and ravish you.”

“You already did that.”

He burst out laughing. “We’ll have dinner, first.”

“First?”

“Yep, Laceyjane, first. Now tell me about that name.”

Chapter 5

“There?” he uttered hoarsely.

“Yes, right there. Oh, God, Jarek.”

They’d been at this a while and Lacey was enjoying every delicious minute of it. “I love how you’re taking your time.”

Abandoning her breast, he looked up. His finger was still inside her. “Tell me the *dupek* was quick.”

“Efficient is more like it.”

He laughed out loud. That was another thing. Laughing, teasing, talking during sex. Who knew? “Glad to hear it.”

Now she chuckled, then he went back to her breast, and she moaned. He inserted another finger—doubling the pleasure. “I’m going to come,” she whispered.

His lips grazed her abdomen before he answered. “Isn’t that the objective?”

“I’d rather...oh, God *wait*...I’d rather you be inside me.”

“I suppose.” His tone was regretful as he removed his hand; his mouth left her breast.

She whispered, “Let me touch you.”

“I won’t last.”

“Just a little? I don’t want this to be over yet.”

“That’s a nice thing to say. I’ll try.” More humor in his voice.

He laid down and she leaned over him. “I adore your body,” she said and kissed his neck. Nuzzled. Sucked. Ran her tongue over it. His scent was woodsy. Outdoorsy. Soon, his body tightened at what she was doing.

“That feels good, *kochanie*, but you’re missing the most important part.”

“I’ll get there.” She ran her hand over his chest, then tugged on the hair there.”

“Ouch.”

She found his nipples, flicked them. They were already hard. She noticed he gripped the sheets.

Pressing her hand against his hard abs, she moved it lower and into the crease at his thighs. He startled.

“Feel good?”

“Yeah. But... *O Boze*.”

She ran her fingers through the hair that covered his groin. It was coarse and springy. Then she circled the base of his penis with her fingers. Moved them up. And up. She rubbed. When her tongue touched the tip of it—and a drop appeared—she licked it off. “That’s it.” He reached for her. Eased her to the side and scissored her legs. “I want to see your face when you come.”

“Good idea. Then I’ll see yours.”

Pulling her close, he poised himself at her entrance, then pushed inside her. He was big and heavy and hot. He filled her

completely, the sensation new and wonderful.

Gritting his teeth, he went in to the hilt. Then he pulled back.

“Don’t.” The word was near to desperate.

“I won’t.”

He thrust this time. And thrust again. It only took three before the spirals started. They got harder, closer. When they were upon her, she burst into color and light and raw sensation.

* * *

Was anything more beautiful than Lacey in the throes of orgasm? Her face went taut, her eyes glazed over and her lips parted. Right now, though, she was climbing on top of him. He helped her straddle his thighs. But she didn’t take him inside.

“You missed, love.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m just getting into the right position.” She rose up on her knees and he braced his hands on her hips, but she came down on him of her own volition. By now, he was granite hard. Again, she went up then down. Up again but this time, when he helped draw her down, the orgasm exploded inside her—and him.

She kept moving and he kept coming, and soon he couldn’t think anymore. His own pleasure peaked acutely, and his mind went blank.

She collapsed against him. Cuddled him. He banded his arms around her, kissed the top of her head. “It was good, wasn’t it?”

“Really good.” She hesitated. “Special, too, Jarek.”

“How?”

“I couldn’t keep my hands off you. I wanted more.”

“Babe, you got all I had.”

“That’s good.”

Soon, her body relaxed. Much as he hated to let her go, she was obviously sleepy. Spent. He eased her off him onto a pillow and pulled up the covers.

She nuzzled into him and he could smell the scent of her perfume. The scents of sex.

“Do you want me to stay?” he whispered.

“Oh course, silly.” She yawned. “Of course.”

So Jarek closed his eyes. His last thought was this hadn’t gone like he thought it would. He’d practically lost his mind with her. That hadn’t ever happened before. And it was only the second time they got together.

He held her close until he slept, too.

* * *

Lacey awoke. And smiled as she looked over and studied Jarek. Sunlight snuck in through the slatted blinds and lit his face. His hair, a bit longer, was mussed from her hands. His

strong jaw relaxed in sleep. His nose squished into the pillow. Naked, he'd pulled the covers up to his waist.

And something inside Lacey shifted. Something good, and big... and scary. She cared about this man. He'd been back in her life for a month, and most of the time, they were apart. It was too early to feel so deeply about him. Again, she was frightened by the emotions. But it also felt right.

"What's the frown for?" His gray-blue eyes were sleepy when he opened them. Sexy sleepy.

"I was thinking we've only been in each other's lives for a month, but it feels longer."

"It's longer if you count the biker bar."

He held her gaze. "Last night was different from then."

"I think we were both blowing off steam in that hotel room."

He took her hand gently and kissed it. "So, what did we do last night, *skarbie*." He leaned in. "That means sweetheart."

"We made love. For me, it was...meaningful."

He grasped her hand. "It was meaningful to me, too." Cupping her nape, he brought her down for a light kiss. "I know I feel close to you. And not just physically."

"I feel the same, Jarek. It scares me a bit."

"Too fast?"

"Isn't it?"

He levered himself up and held her shoulders. "It is what it is."

“Okay.” She gave him a saucy grin. And pushed on his chest. “Let’s do it again.”

He moved to his back and hauled her over his torso. “Just to be sure it was *special*.”

“Yes, just to be sure.”

But Lacey was sure already. Regardless of his confession, maybe because of it, she was still frightened of the intensity of her feelings.

* * *

Jarek said, “Let’s have breakfast, then we’ll do some training.” He nodded to the bags he’d brought in with him. “Nobody has to cook.”

“Wow.” Ronnie’s eyes were wide.

“It’s family style, so get some plates and open the pans that are inside that bag.”

He watched as his crew went into action. When Suzie tore off the cover of the tins, the scents of bacon, eggs, sausage and biscuits filled the kitchen. Smiling, he sipped his coffee and let them have at it.

Jarek was still riding high from the weekend. He and Lacey spent most of Sunday together, eating out at The City Diner, having ice cream from a local shop and walking around downtown. In the afternoon, they took a nap after they made love, she put on his biker shirt with pants—God she looked cute—and they went for a ride on his motorcycle. When

dinner time was coming up, he said, “I have to go to my parents’ house. A standing Sunday dinner, which I can get to only about twice a month.” He tipped her chin. “I wish you could come with me.”

“No meeting the parents yet. Mine will be a struggle. Yours will be shocked.”

“I don’t know about that. My brothers and their wives are professional people like you.”

“You’re a professional, too. That’s not what I meant.”

He cocked his head.

“Are your sisters-in-law Polish?”

“Yep.”

“I rest my case...”

“Cap? Aren’t you gonna eat?”

“Of course.”

Big Joe gave him a once over. “What were you thinkin’ about?”

His first reaction was to shut down. But he didn’t. “I spent most of the weekend with the doc from the clinic. Her name is Lacey Roth.”

Eric Woo’s brows rose. “I know her from somewhere.”

“She works at Memorial Hospital.”

“That’s it. My kid fell off her bike. We brought her to the ER because she had a lot of bruises.” He rolled his eyes. “Dr. Roth spent time with my daughter then came to see me. She

wanted to make sure Penny wasn't being abused. She asked us a ton of questions."

"Weren't you mad?" Big Joe asked.

"Nope. I'd never hurt my own child, but I'm glad we live in a town that has resources like this. My daughter loved her, by the way."

"Now, back to your weekend." This from Suzie.

"That's all you're getting." He stood and crossed to the counter. "Now I'm gonna eat."

Later he stood in front of the group.

"I don't think I like that look on his face," Suzie grumbled.

"Yeah." Eric's eyes narrowed. "Like he's loving this drill too much."

"Me?" Jarek joked.

"Yeah, you."

"Let's start. It's called Knots."

"Aw, shit." This from Woo. "I've done this before, at another house."

"Great. You can be up first. Before that, though, let's go over terminology." He held up the end of the flaxen rope. "This is the *working end*."

They guffawed.

He raised the other end. "This is the *standing hand*. It makes the loop." Jarek fashioned the loop. "*Turn* means to bend the rope over and the round is the *full loop*." Jarek

demonstrated the action. “*Bight* is the part where one end of the rope touches other parts of the rope.”

Ronnie said, “We learned that at the academy.”

“And you’ll learn more now.”

“Big Joe, you tie the knot. Woo, you give the oral directions.”

The two experienced firefighters got in position. “Go ahead, Eric.”

“Pick up the rope by the working end.”

Joe did it.

“Now, put the rope between two fingers.”

“Shoulda said so.”

“Gimme a break. This is the easy part.”

“Come over the rope and make a loop.”

“With which hand?”

“The only damn one you got free.” Already Eric sounded frustrated.

“Easy, now,” Jarek said.

“Come around with the working hand and bring it through the loop.”

Joe frowned when the loop fell.

The others laughed. Joe grinned when he picked it up.

Eric said, “I’ll show you over again how to make the loop in steps.”

Something else went wrong the next time. And even Eric laughed. When they managed the maneuver, Jarek said, “Not bad,” Even though it was.

Ronnie Harmon was up next with Suzie. In seconds, they both broke down in laughter. Exactly what Jarek wanted. The exercise was a training for knots, but it also built teamwork.

When everybody finished, he heard the doorbell ring. “That should be the donuts.”

Cheering, they rushed to the kitchen, Eric detouring to the door.

* * *

“They listened,” Mila said, excited.

“Your parents?”

“Yeah. I told them I wanted to join the math league after school. Padre frowned. But Madre seemed concerned.”

“How often do they meet?”

“Once a week now. When we got a math league meet coming up, we practice more.”

“Did your parents have a solution?”

Her eyes brightened. “Madre told me later she’s going to ask to go to work two hours later on Thursday.”

“What does she do?”

“Clean hotel rooms. She has a nice boss.”

“Well, since she lashed out the last time, albeit she apologized, this is very good.”

The girl nodded.

“Now, tell me about your time with your friend Elena.”

She came to the edge of her seat. “It was so fun. She’s shy too, but we talked and watched some boys play basketball.”

“That’s so good, Mila. I’m so happy for you.”

After Mila left, Claudia came to the door. “Want to go get coffee? We’re both free for thirty minutes.”

“Sure.”

They walked across the street, grabbed some java and sat on the bench outside. The sun shone brightly at midday and Lacey lifted her face to its warmth.

Claudia said, “You seem happy, Lacey. Dare I ask if the hunky firefighter has anything to do with it?”

“He does.” She could feel her face redden.

“You’re blushing.”

“I am.”

“Give me the deets. I’m an old married lady and need some vicarious fun.”

“Everything was great at dinner...”

“Tell me about Mila now,” he asked after Pierce left them.

“You sure you want to know?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” A pause. “Oh, I get it. The dupek never asked you about the clinic? He’s a loser...”

“Pierce took no interest in my work there. He’d ask about the hospital because of my position. But ignored us.”

Claudia shook her head. “The shithead.”

She just sighed.

“What about the sex?”

“How’d you know?”

“You glow. Tell me.”

“It was stupendous...”

“So you liked that we took our time?”

“Liked? My God, it was fun.”

“Sex should be fun.”

“It was with you, biker boy. Both times...”

She grazed over the details and gave Claudia a summary.

Her phone buzzed. She checked the ID. “It’s Jarek.”

“Go ahead and take it. I’ll stretch my legs these last few minutes.”

“Hello,” she said, unable to control the joy in her voice.

“Hello, Dr. Roth. How’s your morning been?”

“Captain Zenko. I think I’m making headway with Mila.”

“Great news.”

“How was dinner with your parents?”

“Good. My brother’s wife is having another baby.”

“A joy?”

“Very much so. But my other brother and his wife have been trying for a long time to have one. So the joy over the announcement was mixed.”

“I’m sorry for them.”

“Hmm. I thought about you during the whole dinner.”

“I thought about you all night.”

“I wanted to come back when it was over.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I would have liked that. But next time, I’ll remember to ask.”

She heard a buzz from her phone. “Oops gotta go. Another call.”

“Go ahead.”

“Stay safe.”

“I will.”

When she disconnected, she took the other call from a nurse at the hospital. Afterward, she thought about Jarek’s reasoning. He hadn’t come back to her house after the dinner because she hadn’t asked him to. And—oh no—she realized she hadn’t asked to see him tonight after work. She pressed the text button. *I’m free tonight. If you are, want to come over for dinner? And whatever.*

She’d have to wait for a response. He was most likely busy saving lives.

* * *

Jarek wrote back, *I have a better idea. You come to my house. I'll shower here and pick you up. Unless you feel you might want your car for a quick exit.* He'd typed a smiley face. Whimsical, for him. She made him feel all kinds of emotion.

True to his word, he showered at the end of his shift—not during it as an example to his group—and was at Lacey's by 6:30. He went to the door and it opened before he could ring the bell. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Watching him, she finally said, “Oh, hell,” and threw herself into his arms. He hugged her tightly right out there on the porch. Kissed her head.

“That's better.” When he drew away, he scanned her. “You look cute.” She wore cropped jeans and a sleeveless white top.

“I'm glad you think so.” She gave him the once over. “And back at you in those jeans. Oh, God, and a fire department navy t-shirt.”

“Why *oh God?*”

“I've got a thing for men in t-shirts.”

He winked. “I'll remember that.”

After she grabbed her sweater off the foyer table, she closed and locked the door. “Don't you need a purse?”

“Nope, ID and money in my pockets. Key will fit there, too.”

“Boy, you really are low-maintenance.”

“I hope so.”

He held her hand all the way to the car. Once she was inside, he shut the door and soon they were on their way.

“Where are we going?”

“To the north side of Crystal Corners.”

“How long have you lived there?”

“All my life. But I moved out of my parents’ house when I got a real paycheck, bought a fixer upper two streets over from them.”

“Is it all fixed up?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’ll never be done.”

She laughed and he put his hand on her knee.

The house was only fifteen minutes from hers. He pulled into the one car driveway and shut off the engine. “Here we are.”

She scanned the structure. “It’s done on the outside.”

“True.” His home rose up two stories. He was proud of the beautiful gray siding with black trim.

“Pretty big for a bachelor.”

“Yeah, I know.”

When she reached for the handle, he stayed her arm. “One thing... this might go against your feminist feelings, but could you wait until I open your door? Matka would kill me if I let you do it.”

“Of course, if that’s what you want.”

They went into the kitchen from the side door. “This is beautiful.”

“I like it. This room took the longest so far.”

“Nice layout.”

“There’s a firefighter over on 4 who had a half-moon bar facing the living room. JJ. You might know her husband from the hospital.”

“Yeah. Julie Jenson. I know Nick well.”

“I was tempted to copy her kitchen, but basically, I drew up my own design. Still, the whole layout is similar.”

The counter was part of a rectangle which jutted out, went across the front and angled back to the wall. A sink and cooktop had been added to the front-facing part, and behind him stood a big refrigerator, more counters and a stove. “It’s lovely.”

“I like it. Want something to drink?”

“Sure. What do you have?”

“Beer and wine.”

“Wine.”

He poured them glasses and they took them out the sliding door to the patio. Big slate pavements formed a large circle, with a grill, awning and table and chairs. Out in the sun sat two chaises.

“Oh, my goodness. This is wonderful.”

“A buddy of mine and I did it. He retired at forty-five and built a pavement business. He wouldn’t let me pay him so I

ordered the pavement myself and got him gift certificates to local restaurants. Nowhere near what it would cost to hire a professional.”

“How sweet. I love how firefighters take care of each other.” They sat at the table. “And look at those trees. They’re so big.”

“Yeah, this is an older neighborhood.”

She sniffed. “Did you just cut the grass?”

“Uh-huh.”

Her hair was back in a ponytail making her look like a teenager. Her eyes sparkled when she directed her gaze at him, which turned him on but, more so, warmed his heart. He lifted his glass. “To another date.”

“Another date.” They clinked and drank.

“Now tell me about your day.”

How had he not known having someone ask about his day felt pretty damn good?

“I set up some training for all the shifts. It’s a knot drill.” He was in the middle of telling the story and had her laughing out loud when they heard the gate open.

“Hey, there, buddy.” Jarek turned to see Henryk had come into the yard. “Sorry. I didn’t know you had company. The door was unlocked and no car in the driveway.” The guys knew not to come inside if the door was locked. It meant Do not disturb!

Lacey stood and held out her hand. “I’m Lacey Roth.”

Henryk's dark eyebrows skyrocketed. "I'm Henryk. Roth? I...I knew Linc. He was quite a cop." Then he frowned. "I'm sorry for your loss. The entire department mourned his passing for a long time."

"So did we. You're a policeman?"

"Uh-huh."

"Want a beer?" Jarek asked.

"No, thanks. I'll be on my way. Nice to meet you. See you later, bro."

Jarek watched him leave then faced her. "I apologize. It's too early for that."

"Not to worry. If we keep this going, we'll meet each other's families."

"If?"

"Well, I want it to. Obviously." A cute smile that reached her eyes. "I retract the if."

He shook his head. "Hmm. Not enough." He stood, scraped back her chair and grasped onto her shoulders, he pulled her up and close. The kiss was fast and hard and... claiming, he guessed.

She grinned afterward.

So did he.

Chapter 6

“Hey, thanks for coming.” Tommy Mancini was already at the bar when Carson arrived. He’d called the guy and asked to meet him at Wink’s for a beer.

“I told you I’d be here.”

“Yeah, but I get stood up a lot. Let me buy you a drink.”

As they waited, Tommy studied his friend. He looked like a taller, bigger Clark Gable who Tommy had seen in the old movies he watched. And his eyes were silver, though, an unusual color. He dressed like a clothes model.

When the bartender put down two bottles of Millers, Carson headed to a table in the corner of the bar and Tommy followed. This was a slow night so seating was available. A low hum of rock music filled the silence.

“So,” Carson said, “You want some advice about women.”

“Uh-huh. I attract them pretty easy. But nothing pans out.” He took a sip from of his beer.

“What kind of woman do you like, Tom?”

“All kinds.”

“Maybe that’s part of it. Tell me what you want in a woman.”

“Somebody nice. Somebody hot. Somebody who likes to do the same things as me.”

“What do you like to do?”

Tommy thought about that. “Go see old movies, horseback ride, and I’m a Dungeons and Dragon fan. But I never find women who appreciate all those things.”

“Have you tried online dating?”

Tommy frowned. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

Carson’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand. What kind of guy?”

“Sleazy pickups aren’t my thing.”

“Online dating *can* be sleazy, but if you want to meet someone with the same interests, you’ll find women who like what you do and not somebody looking for a pickup.”

“Huh. Which one?”

Carson gave him a few suggestions, then leaned in. “Now, we gotta talk about men things. How are you in the sack, buddy?”

“Pretty good. I got older brothers. When I had my first girlfriend, they explained to me what to do to please a girl. Gave me books with diagrams. I got better and better at it. Honest, Carson, no woman has ever complained.”

“That’s a big plus.”

“I know.” He sighed heavily. “But it hasn’t been enough.”

“Then I go back to my original point. You need to try for a different kind of woman. If you’re interested in the same things, it’ll go better.”

“I thought you were going to tell me not to be so nice to them. To be a bad boy like you.”

Carson recoiled. The comment...stung. “Is that how you see me?”

“I don’t know you, Carson, but you got a rep.”

“Well, we got that Brothers thing in a couple weeks so we’ll all get a better bead on each other. In the meantime, give the online thing a shot.”

“Okay.”

Carson left Wink’s an hour later and walked to his snazzy Corvette. He slid inside and started the engine. Tommy was an attractive enough guy but needed a good haircut. His clothes were okay, but not expensive. His height and girth were good. He should be doing fine with females.

But it was Tommy’s comment that stayed with him as he drove home. After he walked through the door, he went to a drawer in the corner of the kitchen and took out a cigarette. He didn’t smoke much, only when he was feeling down. Stepping outside, he lit the thing then dropped into a chair.

Because Carson didn’t commit in a relationship, he did have a lot of dates. And women did flock to him. So, in essence, he did have a rep. He just never saw himself as a bad boy. The old Carson, the one before Linc’s death, surfaced. He didn’t like that Tommy might be right.

* * *

Lacey had just settled down for a quiet evening with a new dystopian young adult novel. She'd put on a pink summer lounging outfit. Jarek would be stopping over after his captain's meeting.

She'd just opened her kindle when her cell rang. She recognized the number of the free phone she'd gotten for Mila. "Hello, Mila."

"I-I don't know what to do." Raised voices rang out in the background. No wonder her voice was shaky. "Please, help me." Lacey heard glass breaking. "Madre and Padre are fighting."

"I'll come over. But go into your room and lock the door."

"I can't. The kids are upset and crying."

"Take them with you. I'll stay on the phone while you get to safety."

More yelling. She heard, "Come on guys, come with me." Less noise. "Now get on my bed and stay quiet..." Into the phone she told Lacey, "I'm here."

"Did you lock the door?"

"Yes. Don't call the police."

What to do? "All right. I'll be there in ten minutes. Stay in your room." She got Mila's address before the girl disconnected, grabbed her keys and left the house. Once in the car, she found herself in a dilemma. She should take someone with her. Ruthie? No, she wouldn't put her friend in that kind of danger. Same for Claudia. Wishing she had a mother or father who would help her, she punched in Jarek's cell and began to drive."

He answered right away. “Lacey?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your meeting. But I’m on my way to Mila’s house. Her parents are fighting.”

“Call 911.”

“No, no police. Can you meet me there?”

A hesitation. “All right.” She gave him the address. “Promise you won’t go inside till I’m there?”

“I promise.”

She knew she’d probably made trouble for him at work, but it couldn’t be helped. She drove to Mila’s and soon pulled up to the curb in front. Headlights shone behind her. Jarek.

She exited the car and met him at his.

“You sure this is the right thing to do?” he asked.

“My gut tells me it is.”

“All right.” They walked up crumbling pavement and rang the bell of the bottom apartment.

“I can kick it in.”

“If they don’t answer.” She pounded on the door.

Finally, it opened. Mila’s mother frowned. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lacey Roth, a friend of Mila’s. She called me because she’s scared.”

Her face paled, accenting the bruise on her cheek. “Go away. This is family business.”

“If you don’t let me in, I’ll alert the police to a domestic disturbance.”

The woman turned and said to somebody in the room, then, “She says she’ll call the cops.”

Something in Spanish. The woman responded. Back and forth. Finally, she drew the door further open. “Come on.”

They entered the kitchen. She said, “This is a friend of mine, Jarek Zenko. He’s a firefighter. I thought it best not to come alone.”

The mother looked abashed. The father turned away and stared out the window. Lacey became aware of the scents of spicy sauce and saw tacos splattered on the floor, the ceramic dish broken in pieces.

She cleared her throat. “I’d like to see Mila.”

“Good ahead.” She gestured to a hallway.

Lacey and Jarek followed her direction and heard kids inside a room. Lacey knocked. “Mila, it’s Dr. Roth. Let me in.”

Mila opened the door. “I’m sorry I called you.”

Lacey turned to Jarek. His face was set in stern lines. “Let me talk to her alone. You can wait out here or go to the kitchen.”

He nodded. “Good luck.”

Once Lacey was inside, Mila started to cry. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Lacey took the girl into her arms. “They’ve stopped fighting. You can come out. But kids, stay in here.”

Mila spoke to the boys, seemed to comfort them, then walked out of the room with Lacey.

When they reached the kitchen, she found Jarek sitting at the table with the parents. He was talking quietly to them. When they saw Mila, both stared at her, both wearing expressions of shock and regret. Her mother got up, crossed to Mila and hugged her. “I don’t know what to say.”

Her father was not so sweet. “You shouldn’t have called them.”

“I’m sorry, Papá, but I didn’t know how to stop you.”

“I’m sorry, we scared you, *mija*. Very sorry.”

A good time to intervene. Lacey put her hand on Mila’s shoulder. “I’m a trained counselor. Let’s all sit so you can tell me what happened.”

The mother, Mila and Lacey sat down. The father stayed by the window but faced them.

Her mother sniffed. Her eyes were red. “I...I...it’s my fault,” she said. “I told José that I’m working two hours less a week. For Mila to have free time.” Her eyes teared. “He got mad.”

José frowned. “We need the money, *querida*.”

“Two hours won’t make that much difference in pay.”

“*Santa Maria*, we scrape every month to pay our bills.”

Lacey intervened. “Let me make some suggestions.”

He nodded.

“You can apply for assistance from the government.”

The man’s eyes widened.

“José is too proud.”

Lacey zeroed her gaze on him. “José, your daughter is depressed. I’m worried about her. Don’t you want to help her?”

“Si. But...”

“José, please.” Her mother pleaded with him. “Then she can have a more normal life.”

“No welfare. I’ll get another job in the mornings.”

Lacey suspected he’d work himself to death.

“No, no.” Mila shook her head vigorously. “Never mind. I’ll be here. Madre doesn’t have to give me two hours.”

Lacey laid her hand on the girl. “Mila, you’re depressed. You need the adults in your life to help you.”

The girl started to cry again.

Jarek spoke up. “Mr. Lopez, I come from Polish immigrants. At first, they balked at applying for aid. But they had to take care of a big family. So Pa swallowed his pride and agreed.”

“How long were you on it?” José asked.

“A year.”

“No. I’ll get the job.”

“And this...” Lacey waved her hand around the room. “Will happen again.”

“Anita and I love each other. We will be better.”

They were at a stalemate. Finally, Lacey played her trump card. “Then I’ll have to phone child welfare and tell them the situation in your home isn’t safe for her. And the others.”

Anita briefly clapped her hand over her mouth then said, “Those people take children away from their families.”

“Not always, but yes, you risk losing all five of them.”

José grumbled again in Spanish. Finally, he blew out a heavy breath. “All right. I will do as you say but I don’t know how to go about this.”

“I’ll meet you at nine at the Social Services Building on Main Street tomorrow. I’ll help you fill out the paperwork.”
And make sure he did what he said he’d do.

She glanced over at Jarek. His face was still stony. Well, this was a difficult situation.

When they finally left the house, he didn’t say anything.

She moved in close and he didn’t take her hand. “You all right?”

“Get in my car before you leave so we can talk.”

She slid into the front seat and he turned to her. “Don’t you *ever* do that again.”

Shocked, she drew back. She’d never heard that tone from him. Or seen the now-furious expression on his face. “I’m sorry I got you out of a meeting. I know that’s—”

“It’s not the meeting. You put yourself in danger. And you were going to do it alone.” By the end, his voice had raised.

“Don’t yell at me.”

His jaw dropped. “I didn’t mean to yell. But I meant what I said.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “If you asked to talk about this, tell me you’re worried about me, and how I might have made the wrong decision, I would have listened. But I will *not* have a man in my life who thinks he can order me around.”

“Order you around? I’m concerned about your safety.”

“*I* make decisions about my safety.” She reached for the door handle.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to my car.” She opened the door but didn’t leave. “Please don’t follow me home. I don’t want to be with you now.”

She pushed open the door, slid out and walked to her car. Blanking her mind of Jarek’s behavior, she thought about Mila and how she helped the family. Damn him. She did the right thing.

But when she got inside her car, she burst into tears.

* * *

Jarek was pissed. But she didn’t leave right away so he stayed too. She was probably trying to calm herself. Too bad he couldn’t do the same. When she finally pulled out, he started his engine. What a fucking mess. He pounded the steering wheel. Damn her, she could have been hurt...or worse. He headed home and had just pulled in his driveway when his cell rang. His heart sped up. Was it her?

It wasn’t.

“Hey, Tim.”

“Hey. I’m just calling to see if you’re all right.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Dear Lord, what happened?”

“Aw, hell, Lacey and I got into a fight.”

Tim nearly snorted. “Join the club. Before I left for the meeting, my wife and I had a row, too, about going back to work at night.”

“Women.”

“Wanna meet me at Wink’s? We can commiserate.” His voice was hopeful.

“I could use some advice.”

“I can do that, too.”

“See you in fifteen.”

“Sure.”

Before he disconnected, Jarek said, “Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for checking on me.”

Wink’s was relatively busy when Jarek entered. People grouped at the bar, toasting each other. All the tables were taken, but he saw Tim wave him over to one in the corner. He crossed to his friend. “Hey.”

He noticed they both still wore their uniforms. “I ordered you a Molson’s.”

“Great, thanks.”

Jarek sat across from him and blew out a heavy breath.

Tim waited.

“Lacey got me out of the meeting because one of her young patients called her. She was crying and scared. Her parents were having a big fight. She heard glass break in the background. The girl begged Lacey to go over there instead of calling the police. Lacey called me to go with her.” His hand fisted on the surface of the bar. “At least she did that. It all worked out for the family in the end, but fuck it, Tim, she could have easily gotten mixed up in something ugly. Something harmful.”

Tim took a bead on him. “But she did call you.”

“They could’ve had weapons.”

“Did they?”

“No. But that doesn’t matter. She put herself in real danger.”

“For what it’s worth, I’d be mad, too.” He cocked his head. “Does she get mad about you walking into burning buildings?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Or maybe she’s just keeping it to herself.”

He frowned. “Maybe.”

Tim leaned forward. “Do you see what comparison I’m making?”

“No, I’m missing it. My head’s all over the place.”

“Lacey sees the possible danger in what she does for a living as part of her job. Just like you do. You might have to

learn how to keep those overprotective inclinations to yourself.”

“I didn’t this time.” He shook his head. “And it wreaked havoc.”

“You could go over to her house now. Tell her you realize you had no right to get mad. Make the firefighter connection if you have to.”

“I can’t go tonight. I’ll lose my temper again when she defends what she did.”

“Then tomorrow.”

“Yeah. We’re off duty again.” This time, he took a bead on Tim. “What happened with your wife... What’s her name?”

“Ava. All of a sudden, she resents my night meetings.”

“Why?”

“Same reason. I’m not home enough. My priority is the fire department over her.”

“You said she wasn’t always like this?”

“No, she wasn’t. Something’s going on with her. I can’t figure out what.”

“She hasn’t...no I shouldn’t ask.”

“Found somebody else? It was my first thought. I’m... afraid to ask her.”

“I’d want that one out of the way. Then you can drill down into her issues.”

“God, I don’t want to do that.”

“Hell, what do I know? I’m not doing so well in the female department either.”

* * *

On his way home, Tim thought about Jarek. Of all the guys he asked to be in the Brothers of Fire, Tim had a sense that Jarek would be the easiest to open up. Looked like he was right. And he had some good insights into Tim’s life.

He thought hard about what he’d do if Ava said she had indeed found another guy. He didn’t think he could handle it. His pulse quickened at the notion of her leaving him for someone else.

So, when he got home, he went straight upstairs. Both girls were in their rooms with the doors closed. He found Ava sitting in bed, watching tv. She wore a Buffalo Bills football jersey and looked cute. “Hi.”

He walked to her side of the bed. Sat. “I gotta know something, Ava. Is there some other guy now? Someone who makes you unhappy with the status quo?”

“Another guy?” She laughed, but it wasn’t humorous. “No, Tim, there’s no other guy. But I get unhappier every day with you.”

“Why?”

“You didn’t even ask if I had something to do tonight before you took off for *your* meeting.”

“You could have gone out and left the girls.”

“13-and-14-year-olds shouldn’t be left to their own devices for a whole night. Besides, both of them needed help with their homework.”

He deflated. He wasn’t making any progress. “You’re right. *Did* you have somewhere to go?”

“Yes. But that’s not what matters.”

“Let’s talk about this, then.”

“Not tonight we’re both tired.”

He just stared at her. He expected her to make the first move. After fights, they usually had sex. But she didn’t indicate anything of the sort. Instead, she pressed the remote and the volume came on the TV.

Fuck. His life was falling apart.

* * *

The next day, Lacey sat at the breakfast nook, sipping coffee, all wired up. She had the morning off, but she couldn’t make herself do anything. She’d slept poorly, tossing and turning, dozing, then dreaming of Jarek. She felt horrible about what happened last night.

Then call him. Go see him.

What would she say? He was wrong to tell her what to do or not to do. Even if they were further into the relationship, she couldn’t be with a man who...

Wants to protect you?

“Shut up,” she said to her conscience. In reality, though, those were his feelings. He was a soldier, a firefighter, after all. But he had to respect *her* wishes.

In her heart, though, she knew if she couldn't accept his failings, they were done as a couple. She didn't want to end their relationship. Could she live with that flaw?

She got up, showered, and dressed for work. But it didn't help. The sadness wasn't going away. “I'll make the first move.” She grabbed her purse and opened the door. Jarek stood before her, looking haggard. “Oh.”

“Hi. Going out?”

“Yes, I was coming to see you.”

He leaned back on his heels. His face was drawn from lack of sleep, too. “Thanks for telling me that. You didn't have to.”

She gave him a half smile. “I don't play games.”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.” She stepped back.

Once inside, she led him to the kitchen. It was filled with the scent of coffee. “That smells good.”

“Want some?”

“Yeah, I didn't sleep well.”

Placing her hand on his arm, she admitted, “I didn't, either.”

She poured them both cupsful, brought them to the counter and came around to the stools. He scraped his back and pulled

her to his lap. Once there, he nuzzled her neck. “We had our first fight.”

Her arms locked around his neck. “I know. I feel terrible.”

“I’m miserable.”

“Let’s talk about it.” She slid off his lap and sat on the stool. They faced each other.

“I’ll start. Do you worry about me fighting fires?” he asked.

“Of course. But it’s your job. I understand you love your work. You were born to save people.” She sighed. “But Jarek, I don’t need saving.”

“I know that here.” He touched his head. “But not here.” He laid a palm over his heart. “Do you at least understand why I was worried?”

“Of course. But I made a judgment call and tried to mitigate the risk by asking you to come.”

“Yes, you did.”

“So?”

“So, I guess I have to work on being over-protective.”

“That’s fair. And I can try not to put myself in danger. But when it comes to my patients, I need to be there for them.”

“You said you mitigated the risk. Will you promise to always do that?”

“I can promise to try.”

He watched. “I know I can’t help taking risks myself. But for the record, firefighters mitigate risk on every call. Our

protective gear saves us from a lot of harm. We know what we're doing. And honey, if the fire's fully involved, or we get a mayday, we exit the building, even if there are people who will die inside. My old Cap said we leave to save people another day."

"Smart man. And I'm relieved by all that."

"Yeah." He sipped his coffee. "Are you off today?"

"This morning."

His brows arched. "What time do you have to go to work?"

"Noon. At the clinic. What about you?"

"Our day shifts ended. We have three days off then go on nights." He checked his watch and looked back up at her. His eyes were still sad. She still felt sad. "It's only nine."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

He stood. Took her hand. And led her to the bedroom. There, he undressed her, she undressed him and they slid onto the mattress.

"One more thing," he said leaning over her. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

They faced each other, like the first time.

He touched her most sensitive spots.

She did the same to him.

"Now, love."

"Yes, now." Poised at her entrance, he pushed inside her. Soon, she started to spiral. They came together, calling each

other's names.

Afterward, he held her close. Kissed her head. God, she wanted their relationship to stay this way.

* * *

Jarek lay back on the pillows. "Laceyjane! What am I going to do with you?"

Lying back, too, she chuckled. "I think you figured that out."

Turning to his side, he crooked his arm and put his cheek on his hand. "That's not what I mean."

"Are we getting serious again?"

"Just a bit. I'm...um," he glanced at the ceiling, "Jeez."

She brushed her hand down his cheek. "What is it?"

He held her gaze. "I know it's early in our relationship, but I don't think—after all this—I don't think I can stomach you seeing somebody else while we're together. The thought of some other man's hands on you makes me crazy."

"Do you think I'm doing that?"

"Well, no."

"Because I'm not. I haven't had a date—or done anything else with another man—since Pierce."

He let out a deep breath.

She thought of something that tore at her heart. “Oh, Jarek, have you been seeing other women while you’ve been with me?”

“No, no. I wouldn’t. I haven’t.”

Smiling, she leaned over and kissed his forehead.

“So, how do I say this? I’m not telling you to do anything. But I’m stating that I don’t want you to date someone else. And I won’t either.”

“You want to be exclusive?”

“Yeah, that’s the word.”

“I fully agree.” She hesitated. “Yikes, we just made a big decision. I’m glad.”

“Me, too.”

She gave him a mischievous smile. “Why don’t you check your watch again?”

“Hmm, good idea.”

* * *

He fell to his knees. “Oh, no. Oh, God oh no, no, no. Not Bogdi.”

His father knelt, too.

“I’m sorry, Pa.”

Pa dropped down. He was sobbing. He took Jarek in his arms...

“Jarek, Jarek, please, wake up.”

He startled awake.

“You were yelling. You must have had a bad dream. Was it about Afghanistan?”

“I...I don’t know.” More awake now, he sat up.

“You said bog...bog...fog.”

“Um...” He had to control this. “There was a lot of fog in the dream.”

“Anything else?”

Yes, my dying brother.

“No, no, I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I was already up. I’ve got to go to work. You...scared me you were yelling so loudly.”

“Aw, I hate scaring you. I’ll um, shower and leave.”

“You sure you don’t want to talk more?”

“I’m positive.” He smiled. “Otherwise, it was a good morning.”

“A lovely morning.” She kissed him and he took in the exotic scent of her perfume. “Very lovely.”

Chapter 7

Jarek finished dressing in nice black pants and a yellow dress shirt for Sunday dinner with his family. And Lacey was coming with him. He wanted today to go well. He mumbled a Polish prayer he learned as a kid then strode into his kitchen just when Henryk walked in.

“What are you doing here, buddy?”

Henryk ducked his head. “I came to talk to you about today.”

“Go ahead.”

Henryk jammed his hands in the pockets of his chinos. “Matka said you’re bringing someone.”

“I am.”

“Is it Lacey Roth?”

“Uh-huh.”

His younger brother shook his head. “Bad idea.”

Jarek leaned against the counter and braced his hands on the edge. “Why?”

“She comes from money. A lot of it. She won’t fit in.”

“You said you liked her brother.”

“I did. But I’m not sleeping with him.”

Now, Jarek’s gaze narrowed. “That’s a big assumption.”

“Come on. You wouldn’t be bringing her to meet the family if you weren’t.”

He knew Henryk meant well, had his best interest at heart, but Jarek couldn’t let this go. “Matka and Pa aren’t prejudiced.”

“I don’t mean that. Can you see her sitting there with Sofia and Julia? She’ll stand out like a sore thumb.”

“What are you saying, Henryk? I can’t choose to get involved with a woman who isn’t exactly like your wife and Mike’s?”

He grimaced. “I’m trying to spare you the pain, *brat*.”

“Henryk, it’s too late anyway. Lacey’s in my life. She needs to know the family.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll get hurt if I lose her now. Which I don’t plan to do.”

“All right.” He blew out a heavy breath. “*Kocham cię*.”

“I love you, too.”

After his brother left, Jarek drove to Lacey’s house, upset over Henryk’s visit. He knew her presence at dinner might not go well, but like he told Henryk, she had to meet his family. Briefly, he wondered what he would do if they couldn’t accept her. No, that wouldn’t happen. He trusted Matka and Pa, even Henryk, to be fair now.

When she opened the door, he read the anxiety on her face. “Hi, there.”

“Hi.”

“You’re anxious. For the record, I’ll feel the same when I meet Marion and Marshall.”

She smiled and stepped outside. Kissed him briefly. “Thanks for trying to ease my mind. I feel okay about this.”

“You look like a million bucks.”

Her frown was deep. “Oh, the point was not to do that.”

When he got the joke, he laughed. “I like that peach colored dress on you.” With it she wore neutral sandals and left her hair down. He grasped some of it. “I like this down.”

“I know you do. Me, too, and I’m trying to be myself.”

“That’s all you have to do.” He noticed she carried something. “You brought a gift?”

“Something small.”

Hand in hand, they headed out.

As soon as they walked into the Zenko house, Jarek saw something was different. The place was spotless, with absolutely no clutter in the living room, where they entered. Pa, dressed in khaki shorts and blue polo shirt, stood. “*Cześć*.”

“Hello, Mr. Zenko. I’m Lacey Roth.” She held out her hand.

He clasped it. Put his other hand over their two. “I’m Alek. Jarek finally spilled the beans about you. Welcome to our home.”

Matka came out to the living room. She wore white shorts and a multi-colored top. She gave them a reassuring smile. “Hello, Lacey. I’m Ada.”

“Hello, Ada. Thank you for having me for dinner.” She handed her the candy. “I brought chocolates.”

“Thank you. We’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” After setting down the gift, she gazed over at Jarek with affection in her eyes, then to the living room. Though it was old, their furniture was well kept, if a bit worn. He pictured Lacey’s fabric couch, perfectly made, and new. Same for the other furnishings. Well, this was him. They took seats.

“The boys aren’t here yet?” he asked.

“No. We thought we’d have some time alone with you two before they descend.” His dad rolled his eyes, but he knew the man loved having a houseful.

Lacey cocked her head.

“They are boisterous when they get together. And with the grandchildren! *Przez niebiosą*. Sometimes, I can’t think straight.”

“I think all that sounds wonderful.”

“You have no brothers or sisters?” Alek asked.

“My brother died four years ago. Now it’s just me.”

Jarek had had an early conversation with his parents, asking to say the prayer before dinner. He didn’t want them to tell her about Bogdi just yet. They were confused but nonetheless agreed.

“We are so sorry, Lacey.” Both Matka and Pa spoke the same words.

“I appreciate the sentiments.”

“It’s early afternoon,” Matka put in when they were comfortable again. “Would anyone like a drink?” She grinned. “I have one started in the kitchen.”

“Matka likes to sip beer or wine when she cooks.”

“Yes, wine would be nice.”

Jarek stood. “I’ll get yours and Lacey’s. Pa?”

“I’ll have a beer.”

In the kitchen, he got the drinks, put them on a tray then brought them and his mother’s back to the living room and sat.

At one point, Matka asked, “Lacey, what do you do for a living?”

“I’m an adolescent psychiatrist.”

”*O jejku!*” his father exclaimed.

His mother was surprised, too. “You have had a lot of schooling for that.”

“I did.” Lacey smiled. “I work at Memorial Hospital and at the Eastside Clinic downtown.”

“I know that place.” This from Pa. “It does good work. The city needs specialists like you helping the unfortunate.”

“What did you do, Alek?” she asked, knowing he was retired.

“I worked at the Crystal City Glass. That’s where I met Ada.”

“I was a secretary.” Ada rolled her eyes. “Now the job would be called an administrative assistant.”

Pa jumped in again. “Tell us how you cure the kids who come to see you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t cure them. I help them manage their lives. I see some very disturbed young people.”

“I’m sure you’re—”

“Hello. Anyone home?” Mikoliaj’s voice came from the kitchen.

Pa called out, “We’re in here.”

Mike’s kids raced into the living room and skidded to a halt when they saw the company.

Matka smiled fondly at them. “This is Krystzof and Magdalena.”

“Maggie.” The beautiful dark-haired, girl with eyes like Jarek’s crossed to Lacey. “Are you Uncle Jarek’s girlfriend?”

She smiled. “We’re dating. Are you his niece?”

Maggie chuckled. “Uh-huh.”

His brother had come into the room just as Maggie approached her. “Kris, say hello.”

“Hello.”

“Would you like something to drink, *dziecinka*?” Alek asked them.

Kris turned to Mike. “Can we have soda, Pa?”

“Go get one each. Make it last. You can play the games you like in the spare room until dinner.”

After the kids took off, Mike sat down next to Jarek on a smaller sofa. They were about the same size, same hair color,

same shoulders.

“Where’s Julia?” Matka asked.

“Right here.” She came into the room. “I had to stop at the bathroom.”

Ada greeted her with a huge grin. “Our Julia is pregnant again. We are so happy.”

“Congratulations. To both of you.” Lacey set her glass down and stood. “I’m Lacey Roth.”

“Hello, Lacey. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you. Do you know if you’re having a boy or girl?”

“Another boy.” Sophia exchanged an intimate, affectionate look with her husband. “We’re happy even if he was a bit of a surprise.”

They were in love, Lacey noted. Wholly in love.

Soon, Henryk arrived. There was a scowl on his face when he saw Lacey had indeed come. “Hello, Lacey.”

“You know each other?” Pa asked.

“I stopped over to see Jarek and Lacey was there.”

“Hello, Henryk.” Lacey transferred her gaze to his wife. “You must be Sophia.”

“Hello.” The one word was curt.

When the adults were seated in the living room, Lacey tried to show interest in the others. “Julia, Sofia, Jarek tells me you’re both professional women.”

“He did?” Sofia questioned. “Why?”

“I can’t remember how it came up.”

“I’m a teacher,” Julia interjected. “High school English.”

“God bless you.” Lacey smiled. “I deal with adolescents too, but one on one.”

“You’re a…” Her brow furrowed. “Psychiatrist, right?”

“Yes.”

“Our school counselors are godsend.”

“I’m so glad to hear that.”

Sofia jumped in. “Did Henryk tell everybody we’re getting a new car?”

“Um, I didn’t, no.”

“What kind?”

“A tesla.”

Jarek whistled. “Wow, how can you afford that, bro?”

“Julia just got a promotion. And it’s one of the cheaper models.”

“What do you drive, Lacey?” Julia asked. Her words sounded like a challenge.

“A BMW.”

Silence.

Well, she had to tell the truth and she was who she was.

“What do you do, Julia?” Lacey asked her.

“I’m in computers. I got promoted to supervisor. Big pay raise.”

“How nice for you.” Lacey gave her a generous smile.

Matka stood and picked up her wine. “I’m going to check dinner. Lacey, come with me.”

Lacey was surprised at the request. But she hopped up and followed Ada. In truth, she was glad to be away from Henryk’s wife.

Lacey sniffed when they reached the stove. “Smells delicious. What is it?”

“Hunter’s stew.” She stirred the pot. “It’s made with sauerkraut, shredded fresh cabbage and a variation of meats.”

“It sounds great.”

“My boys love it. And the potato pancakes and cucumber salad.”

“I’m sure I will, too. I love how you call them *your boys*.” She smiled. “Is there something I can do to help?”

“In a bit.” Turning to Lacey, she picked up her glass. She could see concern in the woman’s gray-blue eyes. “I have some questions for you I didn’t want to ask in front of the others.”

Hoping this wasn’t going to be negative, she nodded.

“First, Jarek is a wonderful man. I do not want to see him hurt.”

“I agree, he’s wonderful. What makes you think I’m going to hurt him?”

“Your...wealth. I’m not judging you or jumping to conclusions. But I have to hear it from you.”

“To be honest, I’m sure we’ll hurt each other as we go along. You must know that about relationships.” And they already had a bout of it. “But I care deeply for your son. He’s very important to me. That’s how far our relationship has gotten, and I hope it gets further.”

“Thank you for telling me all that. Have I offended you?”

“No, of course not. You’re looking out for *your boy*.”

“I am.” She squeezed Lacey’s arm. “Now, would you like to learn how to make cucumber salad from me? Everything’s cut and prepared.”

“I’d love to.” She waited. “Ada, I hope you’ll accept me.”

“I already have, *kochanie*. I already have.”

On the ride home, she put her hand on Jarek’s knee. “That went well, don’t you think?”

He covered her hand with his. “I do. I expected them to be gracious. Except for Julia.”

“They *were* gracious. Julia was just trying to impress me.” She sighed.

“Why the sigh?”

“I’m afraid my parents won’t be as nice to you.”

“I’m bracing myself for that.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” He pulled into her driveway, shut off the engine and turned to her.

“It is what it is, Lace. We can’t change the people we love. We’ll negotiate with them for as long as we have to.” He

frowned. “Unless their disapproval of me will affect us seeing each other.”

“Never. Never, Jarek.”

“Good to hear. Want me to come in? Stay?”

“Of course.”

He kissed her hard. “We’ll be fine.”

God, she hoped so.

* * *

Still on a high from their reunion, Lacey sat in her office, waiting for Holly. She was worried about the girl because of her alter ego, Hannah. Lacey was considering medication that would help her control the disease.

When her phone buzzed that Holly was here, she let the girl in. “Hello, Holly.”

“Dr. Roth.” Instead of taking their usual places, Holly sat on the couch. Lacey took the chair.

“You wanted a different view?” she asked the girl casually.

“A different what?”

“View. Of the office. You usually sit here.”

She looked around. “I forgot.”

“That’s all right. It’s good to change things up.”

She blurted out, “I hate when things *change up* for me.” Her tone was miffed.

“I know that. Did you read any of the material I sent home with you?”

Holly rolled her eyes. “No. I had three photo shoots for commercials this week.”

“That’s a lot.” She examined Holly’s face. “I can see how tired you are.”

“I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Because of Hannah?”

“Who?”

“Hannah. The girl you become sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s why.”

“Let me tell you what’s in the articles.”

She explained what drugs were often used to treat her illness. That new non-medication treatments were being tested. She noticed the girl’s eyes glaze over. “Are you too tired to do this?”

“Maybe. I don’t understand the difference between them.”

“How about if I choose?”

She shifted nervously in her seat. “No, not today. Hannah won’t like that.”

“You’re not Hannah now.”

“I’m not?”

A chill went through Lacey. Something was very wrong. “Holly, I’ve changed my mind. I want to admit you to the hospital.” On a psych hold. “We can monitor a few doses that way.”

“For how long?”

“Seventy-two hours.”

“Too long.” She shrugged a shoulder. “I got commitments. I’m exhausted. I want to go home.”

“You have a half-hour left.”

She stood. “I’m leaving.”

“Hold on Holly.”

“Nope. We already got another session booked. I’ll make sure I’m not so tired for that.”

“If that’s what you want. I’d like to talk to your parents, though.”

“No!” Her face flushed and her eyes widened. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Calm down. We agreed I could call them and keep them updated.”

“You’re not going to complain about me, are you?” Her tone turned whiny.

“Of course not.”

She closed her eyes then opened them again. “I’m sorry, Dr. Roth. I’m not thinking straight. Please let me go.”

“All right. If you want a session before the one on the 22nd, just call. I’ll fit you in.”

Nodding, she stood laboriously. Like she was drained. “Shall I call you an Uber?”

“Yeah, I can call it.” She took out her phone. Got the ride-share.

“I’ll go downstairs and wait.” A glint in her eye chilled Lacey. “See you later, Doc.” She walked out the door.

Lacey knew if a patient was reluctant to talk she couldn’t make her. Nor could she force her to stay. But the nagging worry wouldn’t go away.

Then it crystallized in her mind. She’s just gotten peeks at Hannah.

She picked up her phone to call Holly’s parents. The girl needed help.

* * *

The P.A. crackled. Fire at 67 Lake Boulevard. Engine 4, Truck 3 and Rescue Squad go into service.

The five firefighters had been up all night and were waiting for the next shift to come in. But they stood and hurried to the bay.

“Fuck,” said Big Joe, stuffing his legs into his turnout pants and pulling up the suspenders. “We almost made it.”

“Yeah. I know,” Jarek tried not to sound annoyed, too. “But it’s still our shift until relief comes in. He stuck his feet into his boots. “Let’s go.”

After hopping on the rig, they stuffed their arms in the sleeves of their coats, which were set up in the seats and they sped to the site in silence. The radio broke the quiet. *One-story building, under construction. The first floor in flames. There’s no plans on file because it’s not finished.*

“Hope it’s not too bad,” Suzie finally said. “I’m beat.”

“Adrenaline will perk you up, Suz,” Eric told her.

They arrived at the fire scene and dismounted the rig which idled loudly in the night. Jarek studied the building. “Suzie and Eric, lay a three inch, Harmon and Big Joe will take in a four-inch.”

“Got it cap.” Harmon grabbed for a hose.

Before they entered the building, a siren signaled Truck 3 had arrived. Noah Keaton jumped off and approached him.

“I’ve taken Incident Command.”

Keaton nodded. “Where do you want us?”

“We’ll go in behind the hose.”

Facemasks in place, they rushed to the house and lined up. Jarek went inside without the others. And his jaw dropped at what he saw. Half the roof was unfinished, giving oxygen to the blaze, which was really rolling. There was too much air to feed the beast. Still, they let the hose spray water until the Red Devil was out in the kitchen and living room.

Since the house was filled with smoke, Jarek fished out the thermal camera and just as he peered through it, a loud crack rent the air and Raycroft disappeared. On its heels, more cracking and Woo fell through. Big Joe went next, and Harmon last.

“Hold on,” he said into the radio to Keaton and his men. “The goddamn floor collapsed.” The truck guys waited at the entrance.

Jarek gingerly tried the floor. Off to the side. Again. “It looks like it’s reinforced up to this edge. Keaton, get your rappelling equipment. There’s one on our rig, too.” He ordered the three guys left to walk gingerly to the perimeter of each hole. When Keaton came back, he gave the ropes to his two sets of men.

“That’s all we carry because of cutbacks.”

“*Jezus!*” What to do? “You go with your guys lieutenant and execute the rescue for two of my people.” He radioed, “I need another truck and more rappelling equipment at my scene on Lake Boulevard. And the Med Truck.”

After that, he gingerly made his way to the first cave in, where there was no rappelling gear. Luckily, dawn had arrived and he could see down the hole because of the open roof. Suzie sprawled flat on her back, her helmet and face mask gone. *Shit, I can’t wait.* Setting aside the camera, his halligan and a few other tools, he leapt into the hole.

He landed on his feet, jarring his fucking body big time, but his head cleared and he dropped to his knees. “Suzie!”

No response. He took off his hat, air mask and nomex hood. The acrid scents of wood burning filled his head. Leaning over he listened to her chest. Her heartbeat was thready. But she *was* breathing. He started to cough as he put his air mask over Suzie’s face. Then shined his flashlight around the hole. He couldn’t see her SCBA.

The O2 did the trick. She roused. *Dzięki ci, Boże.* He hoped God was listening.

“What...Jarek, what’s going on?” she said though the mask.

“You fell. We have to wait for reinforcements. We’ll share the air. I can’t see your mask.”

She nodded. This was protocol.

He took a full breath and gave it back to her. Again, the putrid scent assaulted him. “I gotta check for injuries.”

“Just don’t get frisky.”

He laughed as he felt her arms. “Anything hurt?”

“My back.”

He checked her right leg. “A little sore.

He crawled around her. Arm on that side good.

But when he worked his way to her ankle, she cried out in pain. Then spat out, “Fuck.”

Kneeling there, he took more air from the mask.

“It smells like shit in here.” She was more awake now.

He situated the mask on her again. “Don’t talk.”

Soon, he heard from above, “Zenko, Adam Stark here. What you got down there?”

“Raycraft’s hurt. She won’t be able to walk. Send down the harnesses. You’ll have to pull us up together because she can’t come up alone.”

“You got it.”

Harnesses came down. He moved to the top of Suzie’s head, put his arms in her armpits and dragged her over to the

wall. He gently laid her back down and she said, “Take the air while you do all this, Cap.”

He did. She coughed. He stuck his legs through the openings, pulled up the suspenders, then attached a carabiner for her harness. He bent down and slid her legs into the harness and attached it to his rope. Then lifted her. For a minute, she hammer-locked his head. “Easy now. I know you’re scared.”

She said, “Don’t tell the guys.”

He picked her up and felt every tug as they were lifted. He clung to Suzie, who coughed and gagged on the way up. At the top, Stark grabbed for her. He took off her mask and gave her his oxygen.

Jarek climbed out next and saw the floor was still holding. Still, they had to vacate the building. “Mayday, Mayday,” he ordered over the radio.

Hell, what a call!

* * *

Outside, Noah watched as the victims were loaded into the Med Truck and newly arrived Ambulance. “Hell of a thing,” he said to Adam Stark who was standing next to him. “Not enough rappelling equipment.”

“Yeah, those fucking cutbacks. Somebody should do something about that.”

“Like what?”

He stared over at Noah. “I got an idea.” He checked his watch. “Want to meet me at The City Diner for breakfast?”

“Can’t. The big kids are in school, but I got a two-year-old.” He gave Adam a half smile. “You could come to my house.”

“I got no problem with that. I raised girls who were terrors at that age.”

By the time Noah got cleaned up, it was eight a.m.. He’d texted Deana he’d be delayed because they had a fire. Now, he texted Adam that he’d be home in ten minutes and typed in his address. When he reached the house, the three older kids had already gotten on their busses. But he could hear Casey squalling in the kitchen. He hurried there.

“I’m trying to give him a bottle, but he won’t take it.”

When Casey looked up, his face was beet red but he held out chubby arms to Noah.

Noah took his baby to his chest. The familiar weight of him soothed him. The boy continued to cry, deep heart-wrenching sounds. “Go ahead Deana, leave. I got this.”

“You sure? You look exhausted.”

“I’m sure.”

Deana kissed his head and took off. Noah sat in the living room with the cranky baby who was whimpering now. He picked up the bottle from where Deana had left it and teased his son’s lips with the nipple. Casey knocked it to the floor. “Damn it. What’s going on, kiddo?”

The front bell rang and he got up to answer it.

“Ba Ba!” Casey screamed from over Noah’s shoulder.

He set his child in the portacrib, but Casey pulled himself up and grabbed the rim. He rocked it back and forth.

Noah opened the door. “Hey Adam. Sorry but this might not work. My two-year-old is throwing a tantrum. He’s teething.”

“Maybe I can help. I used to...have a touch with babies.”

“Be my guest.”

Adam strode inside and caught sight of the boy when he got to the living room. “Hey, buddy.”

Casey’s eyes narrowed on him.

He picked the bottle off the floor. “Want some.”

Casey screeched, then cried out, “Ba Ba.”

“Let me rinse it off.” Noah took it and walked out the door.

Alone with the boy now, Adam bent down and met him eye level. When the kid opened his mouth, he saw Casey’s gums were swollen on the bottom left side. “Oh, I bet that hurts.”

Noah returned. “It does.”

“Got any whisky?”

“Yeah.”

“Pour some in a glass.”

Noah grabbed a bottle from a cabinet and brought it over. Adam dipped his finger in it. Then when Casey opened his mouth to cry, Adam rubbed his gums with the alcohol.

“Deana said that isn’t a good idea,” Noah told him.

Casey stopped crying. He pointed to the glass and said, “Mo...Mo.”

Noah laughed. “That means more.”

Adam chuckled. “A man who knows his mind.” He rubbed his gums again. Then he set everything on the cabinet and lifted Casey from the crib. He cuddled into Adam. The scent of baby and powder and shampoo brought him back to the younger days with the girls. Since firefighters were used to getting up at night, he’d regularly given them their three a.m. feedings.

After scooping Casey up, he took the bottle from Noah’s hand and sat in a rocker in the corner. Casey latched on and sucked vigorously, but Adam rocked him for good measure. He looked up. “So, what’s for breakfast?”

“Eggs, bacon and toast?”

“Sounds great. Why don’t you start it? I have a feeling this guy is going to go out for the count.”

Sure enough, after ten minutes, Casey fell asleep in Adam’s arms. Adam stood and settled the baby into the porta-crib. The kid put his thumb in his mouth and turned to his side. It was a bit chilly in here, so Adam covered him with a blanket, also inside the crib for just this purpose.

He walked out into the kitchen. Noah looked up. Man, fatigue made his face almost gray. “You okay?”

“No sleep is happening around here. Nothing I can do about that.”

“Maybe we can. Leave the food on warm, I’ll eat, then wait to see if Casey wakes up. You can sleep this morning.”

His eyes closed. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Now scoot, before I change my mind.”

“What about talking about the equipment shortage?”

“That can wait.”

When Noah retreated to the bedroom, Adam served himself breakfast. The eggs were fluffy and flavored with something Adam couldn’t identify. The bacon was crisp.

After he cleaned up, he walked around Noah’s downstairs. He found the place bigger than it looked from the outside. Rooms had been added. A family room with a tv. Toys. Books. A large bathroom that butted up against another room that could be Noah’s bedroom. A laundry room off the back sun porch. The house flowed well and these parts didn’t feel like add-ons. He went back to the family room and sat in a chair in the sun. He took out his phone. And scrolled through pictures until he came to ones of Janelle when she was Casey’s age. His heart clenched in his chest in memory of those days...

The two of them sleeping, him in a rocker, her on his shoulder. He could almost feel the weight of her. The sensation of skin-to-skin contact.

The next pic showed Adam with Janelle in a backpack carrier while Adam ran.

The third was of his child and his wife. She was breast feeding Janelle, staring down with such love and adoration it made his heart clench. The baby stared back with a hand on her breast.

He sat back. Damn it. What was happening to him? He... felt an odd emotion. Yearning. Hell. The Brothers of Fire were affecting him after all.

* * *

Lacey was late getting to the hospital. She didn't have any patients this morning but needed to prepare the agenda for the staff meeting at four. Lord, did she hate meetings. Paperwork. But she was slogging through it when she heard, "Hey, beautiful."

She looked up. "Jarek!" Her eyes widened. "What happened?"

Wearing his firefighter pants, which were soiled, a fire department T-shirt with suspenders, he leaned against the door. His hair was askew, his face blotched with ash. Her pulse sped up; she rose and came around the desk. "Come in. Sit."

"I'll dirty your pretty chairs."

"Don't be silly. Sit."

He dropped down, almost as if he couldn't stand any longer. She sat next to him. The pungent scent of smoke was strong.

Raking a hand through his hair, he said, "We had a fire ten minutes before the end of shift." His voice was hoarse.

"Oh, no. Did you get hurt?"

"Sore, is all." He explained about all the members of his group falling through the floor. "I, um, leapt into the hole

because the truck guys didn't have enough equipment." He shook his head. "The brass cut our budget for that."

She swallowed hard. "H-how deep was it?"

"An eleven-course basement."

"Gosh. I can see why you're sore. Did you get examined?"

"I'm the last one on the list. It'll be a while."

"How are your people?"

"Docs are seeing them now." He gave her a half-smile. The smudges on his face didn't diminish his attractiveness. "I thought I'd come up and see you in case you watched the morning news or went online and saw what happened at the scene."

"No, to either. I woke up late, grabbed coffee and came to work to finish an agenda for a meeting."

A half-smile. "I'm glad I got to you first."

"I would have panicked," she admitted.

"I didn't call because it was hectic in the ambulance until we got in treatment rooms."

She reached for his hand. He flinched. "Oh, sorry."

"This one's the most sore." He sniffed. "I'm filthy and I smell. Firefighting's dirty business and there was a ton of smoke."

"I don't care about that."

He cupped his other hand under her chin. She saw that it was bruised on one side. "I love that about you."

She met her forehead with his. Then drew back and stood.
“You need to get checked out. I’m coming with you.”

“Oh, man, I’ll get razzed.”

“Too bad.” She smiled as much as she could. This was the first time she’d seen him after a fire. And he was hurt. “Let’s go. I want to make sure you’re all right.”

He stood. “Don’t hug me until I’m cleaned up.”

“I think I can resist.”

All the way to the ER, she tried not to let what could have happened to him come to the forefront. The notion would level her.

* * *

Two hours later, Jarek sat in the passenger side of her car, his eyes already closed. “Thanks for taking me home.” Some of his crew had left Suzie in her room and went home to clean up and grab some shuteye. All except Big Joe. He’d settled in the hospital recliner and stayed with her. They were both asleep when Jarek left.

“We’re just stopping at your house. Then going to mine.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a jacuzzi bathtub. It’ll go a long way in soothing those bruises and sore muscles.”

“I never noticed the jets on the tub. Sounds like heaven.”

He leaned on her as they walked up the driveway to the side door. The soreness was seeping in deep as the hours wore on. Once inside his house, she accompanied him to the bedroom and made him sit as she grabbed clothes and toiletries. Soon, they were on the road to hers.

When they got inside they went right to the bedroom and bath. Lacey turned the water on in the tub, while he sat on the chair in the corner. She unbuttoned his captain's shirt and pulled the tee over his head. He groaned when he lifted his arms.

She asked, "How much does Suzie weigh?"

"I'd guess 140 pounds."

"Which you carried all the way up." She shook her head, and he noticed the moisture in her eyes.

"Hey, I'm okay."

Kneeling in front of him, she took off his boots and socks. Then he stood and pushed down his turnout pants. She let him lean on her as he stepped into the tub. After he lowered himself into the water, the heat immediately sunk in. He sighed. "God, this is heaven."

"It'll get even better when it fills, and I turn on the jets."

He laid back and closed his eyes. The water got higher and higher and he sighed again when the jets began to pound into his muscles. His entire body felt weak. After a while, he dozed off and she watched him for a few minutes. The motor hummed, soothing him.

He felt someone shake his shoulder. His eyes flew open. "What?" He saw Lacey and exclaimed, "I slept?"

“Yeah, but you’ve been in the tub for forty-five minutes. You have to get out now.”

He held onto a grab bar and the side of the tub, managed to stand. “Let’s get you in the shower.”

Once he soaped up and shampooed, and the water cleared his head, he stepped out and grabbed a towel. She was sitting on the chair, now. “Have you been in the bathroom all this time?”

“Only an hour.”

He dried his face and torso. She stood then. “Let me do that.” He handed her the towel and she gently dried his back. The terry cloth felt like a back scratch. She stopped the drying periodically and kissed his back. Then he felt her head lean into him. She was upset but that was expected. He turned around. “What did you do?”

“Listened to you talking in your sleep.”

“Hmm.” That was new to him.

“It was about the fog. Or a bog.”

He stilled. “I-I don’t remember. Did you just sit here?”

“I answered emails on my phone. Now that you’re dry, it’s time for sleep.”

He walked into the bedroom after her. “I’m too tired for sex.”

“Of course, you are. Do you have to go to work tonight?”

“We were relieved of our shift because everybody’s pretty banged up. I’ll sleep a few hours now.”

“All right.” She pulled the sheet up and her lips grazed his forehead. He grabbed her hand so she sat on the side of the bed and let him hold it. In about a minute, his grip went slack.

Lacey watched him. His color was high because of the hot water. Dear God, he could have been killed in that fire today. Or gravely hurt. Since they started dating, she’d forced herself not to worry about his work, but wondered now if she’d be able to push the fear out of her mind after this eye-witness to what firefighters went through. And if she couldn’t, did she really want to live like this?

The answer came quickly. *Yes, if that’s what it took to be with him.*

She’d fallen in love with him.

Chapter 8

As he drove to the Upper Eastside of Crystal City with the windows down to let in the spring air, Jarek struggled not to allow his nervousness to show. Lacey was anxious enough for the both of them. He squeezed her hand over the console. “How are you feeling about all this?”

“I’m glad we’re getting it over with. You said you’ve braced yourself for meeting them, but I hope they’re civil.”

He shrugged. “If they aren’t, Lacey, we’ll deal with it.”

“If they aren’t, we’re leaving.”

They went further in silence. Then he asked, “Do they know anything about me?”

“I only said I was bringing a friend.”

They turned into a neighborhood with big houses and long driveways.

“That the mayor’s mansion we passed?” Jarek asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you know my friend Trish Mackenzie saved his sister’s life?”

“I knew a firefighter did. You know the one?”

“Uh-huh. The mayor’s sister in turn helped save Mac’s life. Her boyfriend beat her up and the mayor’s sister went there to keep him away from her.”

“Funny how those details don’t come out.” She sighed then pointed to the next lot. “That’s the one.”

He turned into a driveway lined with trees swaying in the breeze. As it was early evening, he could take all of this in. He pulled up in front of the house that rose high into the sky.

“How many rooms in there?” he asked turning off the engine.

“I never counted. But Linc and I had our hiding places to get away from their harping.”

Linc, her dead brother. Guilt seized him for not telling her about Bogdi. He got out, “I’m sorry you grew up that way.”

She just nodded.

He pointed to the five-car garage. “Do they have five cars?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t get me started on the over consumption of goods.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t have the words to comfort her or himself, so he gave her a genuine smile, got out and opened her door. They took a series of front steps that rose up to double wooden doors with stained glass windows on either side.

She rang the doorbell.

He gave her a questioning look.

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head. “I have to wait for the butler to answer.”

Sure enough, a man in a tux pulled open a door. His sober face brightened. “Laceyjane, hello.”

“Martin.” She surprised Jarek by hugging the older man. “This is my friend Jarek Zenko.”

If he was shocked by Lacey not bringing Pierce, he didn’t show it. But he did revert back to formality. “Hello, Mr. Zenko.”

“Jarek. Hello, Martin.”

Once they got inside, his jaw dropped again. A massive foyer that was bigger than his living room shot up two stories. On either side was a sweeping curved staircase.

They walked down a long corridor to the back of the house to a huge room with four skylights and groupings of furniture. Her parents sat in the middle of a pristine white couch. Her father stood. “Lacey. Hello, dear.”

“Hello, Daddy.” They hugged. She transferred her gaze to Marion, who’d stayed seated. Jarek thought about the kids who ran to him and Matka and Pa and the boys hugging him. “Hello, Mother. Marion and Marshall Roth, this is my friend Jarek Zenko.”

Her mother cleared her throat. At his name? “Mr. Zenko.”

He nodded. “Mrs. Roth.”

Her father held out his hand. “Welcome, Jarek. Call me Marsh.”

Lacey looked to her mother who held her gaze, then stood, too. “I’m Marion.”

They sat across the room on a smaller couch of the same fabric. He thought it might be silk. The furniture was close enough for conversation but to him too far away so as not to be intimate, like Lacey's home. And his.

A woman in an honest-to-God maid's outfit walked in. "May I get you cocktails?" she asked them.

"Harriet, hello. Nice to see you again. I'll have a glass of Chardonnay."

"And you sir?"

"A scotch."

When Harriet left, Lacey stole a glance at Jarek. He was frowning. He probably didn't like the idea of a maid. She looked like the servant she was.

Her dad said, "How is everything going, Lacey? We haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been busy with administrative work at the hospital."

"But you see patients," her mother queried.

"Yes. And at the clinic."

Harriet returned with drinks.

Her mother focused on Jarek. "What do you do, Mr. Zenko?"

"I'm a firefighter."

Marion's martini sloshed over her hand. "Good Lord."

Her father tried to cover for her rudeness. "One of America's Bravest. Thank you for what you do."

Jarek nodded.

“I...can't imagine what you two have in common.”

“Mother!”

“I can't. Certainly not your heritage. Zenko, which is what?”

“I'm Polish, ma'am.”

“I see.” She gave Lacey a wide-eyed glare.

“Are your parents alive, Jarek?” her father asked.

“Yes. Both of them. And I have two brothers.”

“Does your mother make schabowy?” he continued.

Marshall even got the pronunciation right. “She does.”

Lacey put in, “I had dinner at their house last weekend. We had Hunter's Stew. It was delicious.”

“I never had that one.” Her dad spoke again.

“Where did you have Polish food, Marsh?” Jarek asked.

“My college roommate at Yale was Polish.” He glanced at his wife. “He's a state court judge now.”

Her mother's face colored. “You never answered my question, Lacey.”

“What was that?”

“What do you two have in common?”

“Do you even know how rude that question is, Mother?”

“I have your best interest at heart. I'm sorry, but you two can't possibly be suited for each other.”

“Oh, I assure you we are. We have the same values. The same taste in food, the things we like to do.”

“Do you enjoy the ballet?” she asked Jarek.

“I don’t know,” he said unabashedly. “I’ve never been to one. If Lacey wanted to go, sure, I’d try it out.”

“How about church? We’re Episcopalian. Aren’t your people Catholic.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Lacey had enough. “Mother, stop!”

“Why? Someone has to show you how wrong this is.”

“Wrong?” Lacey could feel her face redden. “Who gives you the right to judge us?”

“I’m your mother.”

“Then act like one.”

Marion recoiled.

Jarek put his hand on her arm. “Lacey, don’t.”

“All right.” She stood. “Listen to me on this, Marion. I’m in love with Jarek and I won’t have you insulting him.”

Jarek rose up by her side. “And I’m in love with your daughter. I hope you can someday see that I make her happy.”

She turned her gaze to her father. “I’m sorry, Daddy. We’re leaving.”

He rose too. “Lacey, please.”

“I won’t subject Jarek to this treatment anymore.”

She crossed to the other couch, kissed her father’s cheek, then hand-in-hand, she and Jarek walked out through the foyer and left the house where she grew up.

* * *

Lacey could barely contain her anger. Jarek held her hand; she gripped his. They didn't speak until they got in the car. Once inside, he didn't start the engine. She turned to him. His woodsy scent filled her head when she leaned over. "I'm so sorry, Jarek."

"You don't have to apologize for something you had no part in. I'm just pissed off."

He didn't sound pissed. "I don't blame you."

"It's not what you're thinking."

"No?"

Turning as much as he could in the front seat, he gave her a bright smile. "I'm mad that the very first time we said those words, they were to your parents as a defense. How unromantic."

"D-didn't you mean them?"

"Of course, I did." He cupped her cheek, then ran his knuckles down it. "I love you, Lacey."

She held his wrist. "I love you, too."

He watched her. "She can only ruin this moment if we let her."

"Then we won't let her." She sat back in the seat. "Drive for a while and let me bask in what we just admitted to each other."

He'd started the car but her father appeared in front of the house and hurried to Lacey's side. She buzzed down the window. "Daddy?"

"I'm sorry to stop you from leaving. Lord knows you have the right to." His face was taut. "Louise Patterson just telephoned your mother. Pierce has been in a terrible accident. He's asking for you."

"How terrible?"

"Louise says he'd critical. But she does exaggerate."

"What do you want me to do, Daddy?"

"I suppose—"

Jarek leaned over so her dad could see him. "We'll go to the hospital."

She laid her head back on the seat. "All right."

"I'll see you there, darling."

When her father disappeared into the garage she turned to Jarek. "Do you believe this shit?"

"I knew it would be hard, but this is a lot!"

She just shook her head.

"I can't believe Pierce is asking for me."

"He's in love with you."

"I think self-love is the only kind that man knows." She bit her lip. "I hope this isn't a ploy."

"You can't fake an accident."

"We'll see."

They arrived at Memorial, only this time they went in through the ER. The scents of antiseptic and cleaning fluid were more prominent down here. A nurse she knew staffed the registration desk. “Hi, Lacey. You looking for Pierce?”

She felt Jarek stiffen.

“Yes.”

“Third room down.”

“He’s in a private one?”

“I thought you’d want that.”

“Thanks, but Janice, we’re not seeing each other anymore.”

Jarek stepped forward. “I’m Jarek Zenko. Lacey’s with me now.”

She had to laugh at his forwardness. Before he met her, before the Brothers of Fire, he never would have done that.

They traveled past a ward of curtained spaces, patients inside moaning or the low buzz of conversation, to the end of the treatment area where three private rooms were available. One was occupied. She knocked. Then opened it.

The tableau said it all. Her mother sat by Louise and her dad was talking to Herb. Pierce lay in the bed, head bandaged, leg up in traction. So he *was* hurt. His eyes were closed.

Her mother caught sight of her and Jarek. “Oh, Dear Lord, Lacey have you no sense?”

“Marion, stop.” Her father’s voice was no nonsense. “Louise, this is Jarek, Lacey’s friend.”

Louise's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

Leaving Jarek by the door, she crossed to them and knelt before Piece's mother. Took her hands. "Louise, Pierce and I broke up over two months ago."

The woman clapped her hand over her mouth. Marion patted her back. "There, there, Louise."

Just then an ER doc came inside. Lacey stood; she recognized Philip Jenkins. "Hi, Phil."

"Lacey, hello." He scanned the crowd. "And everyone. Who do I talk to about Mr. Patterson?"

"Us." Herb came forward with Louise. He was shorter than Pierce but stocky. His mother looked a lot like Marion.

"Pierce has a concussion and hematoma on the head. That's a big bruise. And his femur is broken."

"Oh, Dear God."

"So he'll need surgery?" Lacey asked.

"Yes. The orthopedist is on his way in."

"What does that entail?" Herb asked.

Philip described the surgery.

"La...cey..." The whisper came from Pierce who had stirred and his eyes were open.

"I'm here." She crossed to the bed and her father moved to stand behind her. Put his hand on her shoulder.

"I knew you'd come. Every...thing will be all right... now."

“Dr. Jenkins has some information to give you. He’s a good doctor and will take care of you.”

“Not...what...I meant.”

She turned away. And her father took her place. “Don’t try to talk, Pierce. Conserve your strength.”

Philip went up to the bed. “I’ll explain everything to you now.”

Since they blocked his view of her and Jarek, she took his hand and pulled open the door and walked out. They sat down on a bench outside the three rooms.

“What did he mean, everything will be all right now?” Jarek asked.

She blew out a heavy breath. “Between him and me. This is what I meant earlier when I said this might be some kind of ploy. He could have caused an accident as a desperate measure to get back with me.”

Jarek’s blue-gray eyes widened. “Hell of a thing.” He ran his knuckles down her cheek. “But I might do something drastic if I was trying to get you back.”

“I made it clear there was no chance for that.”

“This isn’t your fault, honey.”

“I know. What should we do? I don’t want to go back in there.”

“You don’t have to. Wait till your doctor friend comes out and we’ll get the lay of the land.”

She nodded. “Thanks for being here.”

“You mean thanks for speeding to the hospital to see your former fiancé?”

She laughed.

Soon, her father came out. He looked weary. Sometimes, she didn't know how he lived with her mother. “It was nice of you to come. But it seems Pierce thinks you showing up means you're back together.” He smiled at Jarek. “Which you're not, I know. So why don't you go home. You've had a rough night.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

Jarek held out his hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“Call me Marsh, please. Take care of my daughter.”

He winked at her. “We'll take care of each other.”

* * *

“I've got champagne. I'll go get it.”

“Sounds good.” Jarek dropped down on the couch. *Jezus*. What a night. He'd taken the slings and arrows of her mother, then the presumptions of Patterson with as much grace as he could muster. But hell, these people were something else. Was it just their wealth? Their sense of entitlement? He supposed it didn't matter. Though he didn't want to live in their world, he admitted he loved Lacey. He was in this for good.

Then tell her about Bogdi.

No, not tonight. The two of them needed to celebrate their earlier declaration.

She returned with the bottle—uncorked—and two champagne glasses. They were probably crystal. She handed him one, poured them both bubbly and dropped down beside him while the wine was still fizzing. She said, “To us. To love.” They clinked.

“To love.” He held her gaze and sipped. “We’ve gone to another level, *kochanie*.”

“We have.” Her blue eyes were glowing. “All because you’ve opened up. Doesn’t it feel good?”

“It scares me to death.”

“Well, I for one am glad we don’t have any more secrets.”

He looked away briefly. He would *not* tell her tonight. He took another sip. “So, what do you want to do now?”

“You’ll see.” She set down her glass and stood. Slowly, she unbuttoned the top of the purple knit suit she wore. She eased it off her shoulders, tossed it to the floor. Beneath was a matching bra. Skimpy. “*Boze*.”

The pants went next revealing, of course, matching panties. He closed his eyes.

She waited till he opened them and released the front closure of her bra; she spilled out of it. And slowly pushed down the panties. She was naked now. Beautifully naked.

He’d gone granite hard. He was so aroused, he didn’t think he could move.

Apparently, he didn't have to. She knelt before him, undid the belt he wore, opened his trousers' button and reached inside, freeing him.

Then she knelt up, undid his dress shirt and eased it off him. After that, she straddled him. She leaned in so they were skin-to-skin. "There, that's better."

He took in a breath and let it out slowly. "Take me inside you, love."

She rose up and impaled herself on him. He tipped her chin. "I love you, Laceyjane Roth." His words were a harsh whisper.

"I love you too, Jarek Zenko."

"Now that's how it was supposed to—" She rose up and came down hard. He felt the tautness in her body, the swirls of desire building in her. She went up again then erupted. Moaned. He came too. After, he was semi-hard so he kept moving. Pushing. Plunging. She spiraled again, then collapsed on him.

He clung to her. "As I was saying, that's how it's supposed to be."

* * *

The shopping in Crystal Corners consisted of a few chic shops and two department stores, but Ruthie insisted they go to the Elmwood Mall, between the two towns.

“You’re glowing,” she said, glancing over at Lacey as they headed down the tree-lined route, the bubbly river on either side of them.

“I’m happy, and I guess it shows. That’s why I asked you to drive. I couldn’t concentrate.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I have a lot to tell you.”

“Start now. It takes fifteen minutes to get there.”

She gave Ruthie the rundown on Marion. Since her own mother was Marion’s sister, Ruthie shook her head. “If it’s any consolation, she used to be mean to my mother, too.”

“Sweet Lois.” Ruthie’s mother had died five years ago.

“She was *too* sweet. She never chided Marion.”

“She never chided anyone.” She squeezed her friend’s arm. “That’s why you’re like you are.”

“So, back to last night.”

“I blurted out that I was in love with Jarek to my parents.”

A slow smile crossed Ruthie’s face. “First time, right?”

“Yeah, and he told them the same thing. I was so pissed that those special words were said in that situation.”

“I have a feeling something *juicy* is coming.”

“Oh, God, Ruthie. Sex is different with Jarek. He’s so giving, so solicitous.” She remembered the heavy feel of him inside her, the sounds of his pleasure, how he murmured endearments, some in Polish.

“I told you Pierce wasn’t a good lover.”

“Yeah, you did. I didn’t have much experience other than him. But with Jarek...just wow. We had champagne and made love on the couch.”

“Aw...It’s been ages since Bobby and I did anything like that.”

“It’s pretty hard with kids in the mix.”

“So, you re-said the words then?”

“Yeah. And he told me to let go of what happened with my mother.”

“He sounds like such a great guy. Let’s make plans for dinner with our two men.”

“I’ll ask him tonight then call you with some dates.”

Ruthie turned into the mall and parked the car. “Let’s go spend money.”

“You’re on, sister. I particularly want to go to Valentine’s.”

“The sexy underwear shop? Hmm, maybe I’ll get some, too. Spice things up again with us.” She opened the door and got out. Arm in arm they walked into the mall.

Lacey couldn’t be happier.

Chapter 9

Two days later, Lacey was still on a high when Mila walked into the clinic. The sunlight slanted through the blinds accenting her shiny hair and bright eyes.

She said, "I'm doing a lot better, Dr. Roth."

"I can see from your face you're happier."

"I am. Papa's getting help from social services." The man had kept his word, met Lacey at the building and signed up. "We just got the first check." It had been two weeks since she and Jarek intervened in their lives.

"I assume you'll be able to have a few hours a week to yourself."

"Absolutely. Mama is working two hours less *every* day. I went to an afterschool baseball game, I joined math club and even went for a coke with Elena."

"I'm so glad, Mila."

She came to the edge of her seat. "All because of you."

"I think you were brave through what happened."

"I hope so."

They talked more about her activities and her parents, then Mila left.

Lacey's first thought was to call Jarek with the news. But he was with the Brothers of Fire tonight and she didn't want to

disturb him. Still, all was right with the world.

* * *

“Did we reserve the gym?” Tommy asked as he accompanied Carson and Noah into the fire academy. They each carried a gym bag, though Tommy sported a red backpack.

“Yeah, Tim did.” This from Noah. “He had to wait until it was free.”

“There’s a training class going on, isn’t there?”

“Uh-huh. But they only need one side of the gym.”

They passed that space and could see through the glass ten trainees and Brooke Remington inside. Brooke was demonstrating how to climb a rope. “Boy she’s good. How old is she now?” Tommy again.

Noah said, “An ancient forty-eight.”

“Old enough to be my mother.”

“You’re a baby.” Carson’s voice was teasing.

They walked further to their half of the gym and went inside. A faint scent of sweat filled the air. Tim Daniels was already shooting hoops and Jarek was running the track. They dumped their stuff and changed footwear.

“Adam coming?” Tommy asked sitting on the side bleacher.

Carson frowned. “I don’t know.”

“I hope he doesn’t drop out.” Tommy again.

“I don’t think he will,” Noah told them. “We spent some time together. He likes the group.”

“Who does?” a voice came from off to the side.

“Speak of the devil.”

“You talkin’ about me?” Adam gave them a sham frown as he made the comment.

“Yeah. Nothing bad,” Noah added.

From the court, Tim yelled, “Come on you guys, get it in gear.”

They met in the middle of the large wooden floor and Jarek joined them. “Everybody good tonight?” Tim asked.

Nods.

“Un-huh.”

“Sure.”

Jarek didn’t answer, just bounced the ball which echoed in the open space. He was trying to drum up the interest in this game. Today was Bogdi’s birthday, and every year, all day, he thought about his little brother—his animated blue eyes, his messy hair, his wiry body. Jarek spent most of the day in mourning.

“Glad to hear it. Carson and I will be captains. Pick a team.”

Jarek went with Tim. Then Noah went with Carson, along with Adam.

“Me by default, Cap,” Tommy said to Tim.

“Hey, kiddo.” He headlocked Tom. “Don’t put yourself down.”

“Trying not to.” He leaned in and whispered, “I’m pretty good at this. I played center forward in high school.”

“That’ll teach us.”

In the middle of the court, Carson and Noah, the two tallest, jumped up for the tip ball and Carson batted it to Jarek. He dribbled fast, took a quick layup, making the first basket.

His team members slapped him on the back. “Great job.”

“Way to go.”

Tim took the ball and shot it to Tommy, who headed for his hoop. Carson tried to tap it away, but Tommy dribbled between his legs and around Carson. He took a leap up outside the key and the ball swished in for three points.

The score went back and forth. Jarek stole the ball from Adam and made another layup. Tommy got off another long shot.

Boos and hisses. Adam shouted, “Tom was sandbaggin’ us,” then knocked the ball away from Tim when he went up for a layup.

They took a break after twenty minutes of play. Drank water. High-fived each other and played another twenty minute segment.

At the end of it, Noah cradled the ball in his arm, leaned over and took in air. “I’m in shape guys, but I’m done here.”

The others readily agreed.

“Where to?” Tim asked after they picked up their gym bags.

Jarek checked his watch.

“How about your house?” Carson asked.

“I um, I was thinking of begging off.”

“Something bothering you today?” Tim asked.

He shrugged. “Nah.” He’d planned to go home and sulk. Physical activity had given him energy but emotionally, he was still in the pits. “But never mind, come to my house and we’ll order pizza and wings.”

After picking up his bag, Adam looked at Noah. “Can you go with us?”

“Sure. Kathy’s there. I should check on her.”

“I will,” Tim said of his daughter. “Let’s head out.”

* * *

By the time Jarek arrived home with Tim and Noah, he was feeling neutral about the guys meeting here. “I’ll see what I have in the fridge.”

Jarek trudged to the kitchen, grabbed some menus and came back out. The door he’d left ajar opened and Carson and Tommy walked inside. “I went through that new drive through for beer. It’s cold, too.” Everybody took one.

Jarek handed out menus. “Take a look,” he said to the others who were milling around the living room. “My treat.”

They decided on a pepperoni pizza and one with almost everything the place had to offer. While Jarek took out his cell, Carson walked around the room, sipping his beer, looking at pictures his friend displayed. One caught his attention. “Hey, Zenko, who’s this with you?”

When Jarek saw what he held, his stomach dropped to his knees. “Um, ah,” he cleared his throat. “Not something I want to talk about.”

“You’ve been quiet all night.” Tim made the observation.

“My head was in the game.”

“Yeah, but something’s going on. Even I can tell.” This from Carson.

“All right it is. I don’t discuss this.”

Tim sighed. “We can wait till you’re ready, of course. Just know it takes a lot of energy to hold that closet full of emotion closed.”

Quiet. They all looked at him.

Jarek felt his eyes moisten. He crossed the room and grabbed the picture. Stared down at those mischievous eyes. Swallowed hard. “This is my brother.”

“I thought you had two,” Tommy picked up another picture. “That’s all that’s in your family photo.”

“I do have two.” He looked up. “Now.”

Stillness. Then Noah asked gently, “He died?”

Jarek nodded. “In Afghanistan.”

“With you?”

“I’m the oldest. So, a few years later.”

Tim moved closer and clutched Jarek’s arm. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me, too, of course,” Noah put in.

“I—” Tommy started to speak but Carson interrupted him.

“Does Lacey know about Bogdi?”

“You’re the only people I’ve told,” Jarek said wearily. “Like I said, I haven’t been able to talk about him.”

Carson slammed the bottle down on a cabinet. “You son of a bitch. Lacey told you all about Linc and you kept this from her?”

“I explained—”

“You’re a coward.”

“Hey,” Noah said. “He fought in Afghanistan.”

“He’s afraid to tell the woman he loves about something they have in common. Something very important. How can you have a relationship without sharing yourself?”

Jarek was getting mad now. “You should talk.”

“I know that’s how I am. That’s why I don’t have any long-term relationships. I don’t want to share my shit.”

Tim got in between the two of them. “Turn down the heat you guys. Let’s sit.”

“I won’t talk about this,” Jarek warned, shaking his head wildly.

Now, Carson’s eyes flamed. “You know, forget it.” He snagged his light jacket from the chair. “The Brothers of Fire

is a farce. It's not doing anything for me. Or Zenko, obviously." He started away and Tommy grabbed his arm.

"Carson, wait."

He shrugged off Tommy's hand. "Nope. You can stick the group up your asses. I don't care anymore." And he stalked out.

The room was perfectly silent.

Finally, Tommy asked, "What's up with him?"

"Something." Jarek swallowed hard. "I recognize the signs. But he's right. I should have told Lacey."

"You think Carson'll go see her?" Tommy asked.

Jarek's eyes widened and he swore vilely.

"He wouldn't do that, would he Tim?"

"I honestly don't know, Tommy. I don't understand his outburst. I know he was tight with Lacey's brother. So yeah, he could go over there." Tim turned to Jarek. "Much as I want to talk about your brother with you tonight, I think you should drive to Lacey's house right away. We'll wait for the pizza, clean up and let ourselves out."

Jarek nodded. Stunned by what just happened, he grabbed his keys off the table in the entryway and left.

* * *

Wearing Jarek's biker shirt with leggings, Lacey sat at her desk working on an article for the Psychiatry Today, when the

doorbell buzzed. He shouldn't be done with his Brothers' night out, she thought, as she approached the foyer. She peeked through the window then drew open the door.

"Carson?" He had his back to her.

He turned around. Lines marred his brow and his expression was bleak. "I need to talk to you."

"Come on inside."

She showed him to the living room. He dropped down on a chair. Now, she could see his eyes were full of anger. "Is something wrong?"

"It's about Jarek."

"Jarek?" She came to the edge her chair. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine physically. I was the one that told him about Linc, but did he talk to you about him?"

"Yes, at length. He was very sympathetic about my loss." And sensitive and wonderful.

Carson shook his head. "Holy hell!"

"What exactly does that mean? Tell me why you're here."

"The fucking Brothers of Fire played basketball tonight. We went over to Jarek's house. I saw a picture of his third brother."

"He has two brothers. I never saw a picture of another one there."

"His youngest sibling went to war, just like he did. He was killed in the line of duty."

"Dear Lord."

“Lacey, he said he didn’t tell you about his own brother’s death when you two talked about Linc.”

And every other time they discussed not keeping secrets from each other. She started to realize the import of what Carson was saying. “This is a big thing, Carson.”

“I know. I came to...try to protect you from him.”

“First off, I don’t need protection. Second, I—” She wrapped her arms around her waist. It was starting to hit her now. Standing, she paced. “I can’t believe he wouldn’t tell me.”

Then she remembered the nightmares, the talking in his sleep, the sadness every once in a while on his face. “What was his brother’s name?”

“I don’t remember.”

Her eyes moistened. “Bog?”

“Yeah, something like that. Maybe Bogdi. Yeah, that’s it.” His gaze narrowed. “How do you know that if he didn’t tell you?”

“He has nightmares. Talks in his sleep.”

“Well...”

The doorbell sounded. Her heart clenched. “It has to be Jarek. He’ll be furious at you, Carson.”

He stood. “I don’t give a shit.”

Now, pounding on the door.

“*You* should be furious at *him*.”

“Lacey!” Jarek called out.

Lacey crossed to the door. Opened it. And forced herself not to react to his ravaged face. “I’m sorry not to call. I have to...” He glanced over her shoulder. “What the fuck?”

“Carson—”

But Jarek had stepped inside and circled around her. “You bastard!” He bent over and went in for the tackle.

Carson hit the floor hard and Jarek jumped on him, raised his arm. Just before he connected with Carson’s face, Lacey leapt on top of Jarek. He tried to buck her off. She yelled, “Jarek. Stop.”

He stopped. She eased off of him. “Now, get up,” she ordered. “Both of you.”

Jarek rolled to his feet, and Carson shakily stood.

“Are you all right, Carson?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You have to go now.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with him.”

Exasperated, she said through gritted teeth, “Carson, this is my decision. Now go.”

Swearing, he crossed to the door and left without saying more.

She turned to Jarek. His hands fisted at his sides. His expression was so bleak it broke her heart.

“I’ve never seen this side of you.”

“I’m sorry I lost my temper.”

“Sit down.”

He dropped onto the couch. She sat next to him. Her hands were shaking when she put one on his knee. “I am so sorry about Bogdi. So sorry you lost your brother.”

He crooked his head to look at her. “I didn’t expect you to be kind.” The words came out hoarse.

“I love you, Jarek. And I hurt for you.”

He just stared at her.

“But I’m also hurt and angry you didn’t tell me.”

“You kept saying things about us being so close and how good it was not to have secrets between us. That you appreciated me opening up.” He looked over at her. “I did, Lace, in a lot of ways.”

“But you couldn’t tell me about your brother?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never talked to anybody about this. I couldn’t get the words out until tonight when Carson pressed.” He ran his hand through his hair. “It still hurts so much.”

“Yes, this is how it goes. Do you know why it still hurts so much?”

“It’s only been a few years since he died.”

“And you’ve kept your grief inside, all this time. You haven’t let your feelings be mitigated by talking about him. Crying about him. Raging against the world.”

He stiffened. “Are you analyzing me?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“You can help me by saying this won’t come between us.”

She watched the face of the man she loved. She was going to hurt him even more now. But she had to be truthful. “It already has, Jarek. I love you, but everything I thought was between us is in question now.”

“No, don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

He waited. “What are you going to do?”

“We can’t be together right now.” With the admission, she started crying and croaked out, “Maybe never.”

Jarek sat back and took her in his arms. She let him. And she sobbed into the chest of the man who’d caused her pain.

* * *

With a heavy heart, Jarek opened the door to his house. His gaze swept the living room, which was meticulously clean. It smelled like pizza. When his gaze landed on the couch, he saw Tim, waiting for him.

“Hey.” Tim stood. Crossed to Jarek. Put his hand on his shoulder.

Jarek jerked back. “Don’t. I’m just holding it together. You should leave.”

“Nope, I’m not gonna do that.” He went back to the couch and sat again. Took a sip of his bottled water on the table next to it.

Jarek was able to offer little resistance. So he moved to one of the chairs across from the couch. Fell down into it. Buried his face in his hands.

“I take it you saw Lacey,” Tim said after a while. “Had Carson gotten to her yet?”

“Uh-huh. What a clusterfuck.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Haltingly, he made quick work of telling Tim about the fiasco with Carson that played out in front of Lacey. “But the biggest thing is she told me she didn’t think she could see me now. Maybe never.”

Tim frowned. “Jarek, you’ve made so much progress. She should count that.”

“I was hoping...” He swallowed hard. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

Tim ignored his comment. “You were hoping she’d forgive you and you could stay together.”

“Yeah. Once again, hope was futile.”

“Once again?”

“When Bogdi joined the army—to follow in my footsteps, I prayed every day he’d be safe.” He shook his head. “I haven’t prayed since then. My family says grace before dinner, but I mouth the words is all.”

“I can understand that.”

“Jesus Christ, Tim.” He pounded his hand on the coffee table. “I fell in love with her.”

“And Lacey?”

“She said she loves me. Not enough, I guess.”

Tim was thoughtful before he answered. “I bet she isn’t sure about anything. I’d give her time to settle down, think this through, then contact her again.”

“No. I can’t keep hurting her.”

“Or you’re scared you’ll have to open up more.”

“Maybe. But I can’t take that risk.”

“You won’t, you mean.”

“All right, I won’t.”

“Self-protectiveness is hard to ignore. Would you talk to a counselor?”

“Oh, God no.”

“I’m thinking of going to see Suzanne Blakely with Ava.”

“The department psychologist?”

He nodded. “Colin O’Shea says she’s pretty good. He and Annie spent some time in counseling.”

“Good for them.”

“She’s there for the members of the department to deal with things like you’re going through.”

“No.” He laid his head back on the chair and closed his eyes. “I just want to forget.”

Tim said, “I should go. Let you sleep.”

Jarek didn’t get up. Just nodded.

Crossing to him, Tim squeezed his shoulder then left him alone.

He'd better get used to that.

Chapter 10

Lacey trudged up to her condo, sweaty and sad. She'd walked a long way at a brisk pace but the exercise didn't help. As the week passed, she kept feeling worse and worse. Jarek's absence caused a hole in her heart and a pit in her stomach that gnawed at her. She missed the deep sound of his voice. The smile that was crooked sometimes. How he touched her, physically and emotionally.

"Hello, dear."

She startled. She'd been looking down and didn't see her father on the porch. When he caught sight of her, his eyes widened. She must look awful. He hugged her. "I hope it's okay that I came."

"It's not such a good time for me, Daddy."

"Please. I haven't seen you since you left the hospital the night Pierce was injured."

"Are you going to chide me for not following up on Pierce?"

"Of course not. He's staying with the Pattersons. It's not your job to take care of him. I just came to see my little girl."

Her eyes teared. A few fell.

"Oh, honey, let's go inside."

Once in her living room, she dropped down on the couch and so did her father. If he noticed her biker shirt, he didn't

mention it. He only said, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’m vulnerable right now. I can’t argue with you.”

“I promise I won’t argue.” His expression was sincere.

“I broke off my relationship with Jarek.”

Marsh’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m shocked. You seemed so happy with him.”

“He...he had a brother who died. A brother who followed his example to go to Afghanistan.”

At the mention of the death of his brother, her father’s eyes closed briefly.

“He’s guilt-ridden.”

“Why did this cause a problem for you?”

Her insides clenched. “When I told him about Linc, he didn’t say a word about his brother. And when we kept getting closer and closer, I thought he was being open with me. Be he was hiding something this huge.”

“Hmm. Do you remember how we couldn’t talk about Linc at first?”

“Yes. I wanted to, but you and Mother were so hesitant.”

“I’m sorry about that. Our grief was too great to open up.”

“That wasn’t meant as a criticism, Daddy.”

“Did he have opportunities to tell you?”

“He had nightmares about Bogdi. And he talked in his sleep about *bog*. He lied and said he was dreaming about fog.” She shook her head firmly. “I can’t risk a relationship with a man who won’t share such important things.”

“Are you sure, Lacey? Real love is hard to find.”

“Why would you say that? You and Mother didn’t like me seeing him.”

“That was your mother, not me. I should have stood up for you right then. *I* could tell how much you cared about Jarek. How happy you were.”

“I was.” She shook her head. “I really thought we had a future.”

“Are you sure you don’t?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” She stood. “I have to get cleaned up.”

“Go ahead.”

Her father waited while she took a shower and when she came out he said, “Want some breakfast?”

“I don’t have the fixings.”

“We could pop down to The City Diner.”

“You and Mother never go there.”

“I do, when I’m not with her.”

“All right. If I’m in public I might not cry.”

* * *

The call came in at five a.m. Car accident, Steuben Street and Market Street. Truck 3 and Engine 4 go into service. Paramedic team 1 to follow.

The House 4 crew, awake at this hour because of another call, jumped up from the table and hustled out to the bay. The air was warm and the sun would shine today. But not on Jarek...

“You’re morose again,” Big Joe had said when they were eating dinner.

“Lots of things going on.” He scanned them all. Glared. “Don’t push me on this.”

“Yes, sir,” Suzie mumbled under her breath, but Jarek heard her...

The atmosphere inside of the rig was strained and the silence was broken only by the honk of the horn and the siren blaring. When they arrived, Jarek moaned when he saw Noah get off his truck. The Brothers of Fire had all checked in with him, but he told them he needed time to himself.

An SUV had t-boned a small Chevy. Jarek and Noah jogged to the cars. The smell of torn metal was caustic. Noah frowned “Looks like they’re both trapped.”

“We’ll need the Jaws of life for the SUV extrication. Rams for the little car. Which do you want?” he asked his friend.

Since they didn’t have the face gear on yet, he saw Noah’s eyebrows raise. A junior officer, he didn’t get to decide procedure very much yet. He jumped at the chance. “The SUV.”

“Go for it.” Jarek motioned his guys over as Noah jogged back to the truck. “We got the Chevy. Raycraft, you open the driver’s door with a ram. Woo, see if both sides need it.”

Soon the sound of metal on metal rent the air.

Suzie, a knowledgeable firefighter, already carried the ram. She put the tool in the crease and popped the driver side.

Woo said, “This one’s open.”

“Big Joe, stand by. We’ll get rid of the airbag, put a collar on her, then you can get her out. Ronny, fetch the collar and a backboard from the rig.”

As his team went into action, Jarek saw the Med Truck pull in.

Trish “Mac” Mackenzie and Jodi Pierson hurried over. Mackenzie approached him.

Jarek stepped back. “You can examine her and decide what to do.”

“Thanks, Cap.” Mac waited for them to deflate the airbag, then Ronnie handed her the collar. She stuck her head inside. “Hey there, what’s your name?”

A weak, “Barbara.”

Jarek saw Mac gently slide the collar around the woman’s neck. “Where do you hurt, Barbara?”

“A-all over.” Her voice was a harsh whisper.

“Any specific place?”

“My leg.”

Mac looked down then moved back. “Jarek, come check.”

“Her leg’s pinned.” He looked over and saw the truck was done with the Jaws. He said into his radio, “I need the spreaders.”

When a truck guy handed Jarek the big scissors, he braced one end on the wheelbase and the other on the floor and pressed the pneumatic lever. Gradually the steering wheel went up. The woman moaned loudly when freed. Again, Jarek stood back.

Mac took over. "We're going to get you out," she told Barbara. "Big Joe, come help us."

Woo cut the seat belt and propped the victim up by the armpits. He slid her forward, then Joe and Mac eased her out from the other side. Ronny raised her legs to get her onto the backboard that Jodi and Suzie held up.

"Ambo's here," Noah called out. "My guy's ready to go with the paramedics."

"Copy that." In a minute, the paramedics arrived with a gurney. Mac and Big Joe settled her on it and wheeled the woman away. Mac stayed at her side.

Jarek let out a big sigh. Now for the cleanup.

When that was finished, Noah approached him. "Our shifts are over. How about I treat you to breakfast?"

"No thanks."

"Not going to cut it, Jarek. We all waited long enough. We aren't letting you go back into your shell."

Surprised at Noah's assertiveness, he nonetheless said, "I want to be in my shell."

Noah stuck his hands in his pocket, leaned back on his heels. "No can do. We care about you, man."

Noah's expression was so sincere—and unusually stubborn—Jarek acquiesced. “All right. I'll meet you there in a half hour. Only if we don't talk about her.”

“Whatever you want.”

Going to breakfast was the *last* thing he wanted. But for some reason, he couldn't say no to this brother.

* * *

Lacey picked at her breakfast and finally threw the napkin over it. Usually, the scents of bacon, eggs, toast triggered her appetite. Not today. Unable to sit still a moment longer, she said, “I can't eat any more food, Dad. As a matter of fact, I have to get going because of work. Do you mind paying so I can leave?” She'd lied. She didn't have to work today.

“Of course. What about a ride?”

“I'll walk home.”

Before he could object to her abrupt departure, she slid out of the booth and threaded her way to the exit through the morning crowd. Pulling open the door, totally distracted, she stepped out of The City Diner and barreled right into another customer. Strong arms came up to grasp her. His woodsy scent told her why. Jarek. She looked up at him, then threw her arms around his neck and held onto him. “Oh, God, I miss you.” She was crying now.

“I miss you, too.” His voice was nearly unrecognizably hoarse.

“Excuse us.” Patrons had come to the doorway.

Jarek pulled her off to the side of the building. Held her again.

After a bit, she drew back. Searched his face. Then said, “I can’t do this.” And she fled down the street. She was a block away when she felt herself pulled back again.

“Hold on a second.”

Her whole body was trembling. But she pivoted.

“You can’t hug me like that, tell me you miss me and take off.”

“I love you, Jarek. But it won’t work. I can’t trust you.”

“Damn it.”

He drew her close again, and right out there on Main Street, he took her mouth in a possessiveness she never felt from a man before. Dear Lord, she let herself be consumed, then did some consuming of her own. His tongue claimed her. Hers claimed him. The familiar contour of his body swamped her with a rush of emotion.

She was the first to pull away and searched his face. “Come to my house. Things haven’t changed but I want you desperately.

“You won’t get any argument from me.”

From there, hand-in-hand, they jogged the short distance to her house.

* * *

Noah went after Jarek until he saw him and Lacey practically running in the direction of the river, where she lived in a condo. Staring after them, he shook his head. It killed him to see them squander their relationship. Didn't they know how rare love was? Silly, silly to waste it. At least he and Sara never separated over anything. And they almost never fought.

Feeling down now, Noah turned away and walked up the street. He'd almost reached his car when he noticed a woman coming toward him hurriedly. She wore a colorful summer skirt and sleeveless blouse.

She stumbled.

Then fell to the ground.

He raced to her. Her dark red hair had tumbled into her face, and she was reaching for her foot. Then he saw the heel of her sandal had broken off.

"You're hurt."

She pushed her hair out of her eyes, managed to sit up and looked at him. Grass green eyes looked back. "My heel broke." Her voice was low. Sexy.

"I see. Why do you wear those crazy things anyway?"

A smile from lush lips. "They make my legs look like a million bucks."

He glanced toward her feet. The skirt had pulled up, revealing a long expanse of skin. "They don't need the heels to do that."

A very feminine smile. "Why, thank you."

“I-I’m a firefighter. And an EMT. Can I see if your foot is sprained or broken?”

“God, yes.”

He palpitated her foot. Her slim ankle. “Hmm, not broken. Sprained.”

“Can I stand?”

“Yeah, lean on me, though.”

He slid his arm around her shoulders and helped her up. A feminine scent of perfume filled his head. She tested her foot, still leaning heavily on him. “Ouch.”

“Pretty bad strain. I can take you to urgent care. I don’t think you need the hospital for this.”

“No, you don’t have to do that.” She slid her phone out of her skirt pocket and punched in a number. “Come get me. I fell.”

In seconds, as if it had been waiting for her, a black town car pulled up. A man, a *chauffeur* got out, circled the trunk and opened the back passenger door. Noah helped her to the vehicle. Before she got in, she looked up at him. “Thanks, Firefighter...?”

“Keaton. Noah Keaton.”

She didn’t offer her name, instead she grasped him by the neck, drew her to him. She kissed him hard on the lips. His entire body reacted. She was more curvy than the outfit revealed. Drawing back, she slid inside, he closed the door, and the chauffer who’d stepped away, got in and they drove off.

What the hell had just happened to him?

* * *

They didn't make it to the bedroom. They tore each other's clothes off in the living room and Jarek dragged her to the couch. Pressed her down. His vision was full of a naked Lacey as he parted her legs. He pushed his hard length into her.

She bucked. He slid back then he thrust and thrust forward. He felt her clench around him and lose it. So did he.

Afterward, he held her close, the familiar scent of lotion filling his head. He just stroked her bare arm. Eventually, he moved off her and she sat up. Cupped his cheek. "This doesn't change anything."

"I don't care. Let's go to the bedroom and do it some more."

She rose to her feet. He rolled up. She took his hand and led him down the corridor to her room.

They fell onto the bed together.

* * *

Lacey unlocked the door to her office and left it open so the nurses would have access to her; then she dropped down to the sofa. She closed her eyes. She could still feel the imprint of Jarek on her body four days ago. She lost count of how many

orgasms she had. At the end, he'd gotten out of bed, found his clothes, then sat down on the edge of the mattress...

"I know you said this didn't change your mind. But we can still do it regularly."

"I can't, Jarek. I've got to move on without you. Today was an aberration."

"It doesn't have to be. I won't pressure you for anything more than this."

She'd studied the face that had become so important to her. Now those gray-blue eyes were sad and his mouth set in a grim line. "No. I won't be able to find anyone else if we're doing this."

"Excuse me? You'll look for another man, have sex with him, while you're still in love with me?"

She bit her lip. "I guess not. All I know is you can't be in my life."

"Ja pierdolę." This was fucking unbelievable...

"Hey, Lace. Why are you lazing on the couch in the middle of the day?"

She looked up at Nick Barrows, dressed in a dark shirt and pants and no lab coat. "I'm a mess."

He sat down next to her. "Jarek, still?"

"Of course, it's still Jarek."

"Lacey, you can't go on this way. It's killing you."

She put her head on his shoulder. "What should I do?"

"Hmm. I play racquetball with Peter Lawson."

“I know. He’s a great guy.”

“Maybe you should have a few sessions with him. See if he can help you.”

“He’s a psychiatrist. He’s in my department. I’m the head of it.”

“Then find somebody else. You must know where to get help.”

Of course she knew good psychiatrists and social workers.

“Maybe.” She eased away and sat up. “I have to meet my family but walk me out.”

They stood and she accompanied him to the nurse’s desk. As soon as they took a few steps down the hall, she heard a screech. From a child. JJ, Nick’s wife, was holding their one-year-old who saw Nick and cried out. “Come on over and meet Rachael.”

They crossed to his family. “Da Da Da.”

“That’s right sweetheart. Daddy’s here.” The sophisticated heart surgeon disappeared, and the father took the child from JJ, kissed his wife’s cheek, then turned to Lacey. “This is Julie Jensen-Barrows.”

“What a nice name. Hi JJ.”

The tough-as-nails fire captain wore a pink peach dress that matched the baby’s outfit. She looked cool and comfortable. And her face lit when she saw Nick. God, Lacey envied that. She wanted children. Jarek’s children.

They said their goodbyes and Lacey trudged her way to her office. Sat down at her desk and buried her face in her

hands. Nick was right. She couldn't go on like this. Reluctantly, she called up the Directory of Psychiatrists on her computer. She had to do something to get her out of her funk.

* * *

Jarek took a night shift to avoid Sunday dinner. So he was shocked when his mother appeared at his office doorway at six p.m.. From the desk, he asked, "Matka, what are you doing here?"

"I brought my son dinner."

Lou, the firefighter who escorted her said, "She showed up at the door with pierogies for all of us." He could smell their doughy scent. His heart warmed. She was trying to take care of him. He thanked Lou, who left.

Without invitation, Matka entered his office and sat. "You gotta come eat."

"I will."

She raised her chin. "This isn't your regular shift."

Swallowing hard, he shook his head.

"You took it to avoid us."

He glanced away then back at her. "Lacey and I broke up. I can't talk about it. I couldn't face everybody."

"Everybody liked her."

"Not Henryk. He'd gloat and his wife would join in."

“Pa and I would not allow that. So, are you never coming to every Sunday?”

“I’ll get over this.”

“How? Not by yourself. You need somebody objective to talk to.”

“Matka, I can’t talk to a counselor. I wouldn’t know how.”

“You’d open your mouth, son.”

The PA came on. *Fire at Woodland Heights. Truck 5 and Engine 4 go into service.*

Jarek bolted up. “I gotta go, Matka.”

“I know.” She stood too. “The pierogi is good heated up.”

“Can you find your way out?”

“Yes, now go. *Kocham Cię.*”

“I love you, too.”

Jarek was relieved to escape any more discussion but he also felt like a shit. He’d hurt his family tonight, trying to protect himself. Man, he was really a mess.

* * *

“Lacey, your six o’clock is here.”

Reluctantly, she stood. “Thanks. I’ll let her in.” Holly worked during the day this week so this appointment was at night.

After securing the hospital door lock, she met the girl at the waiting room entrance. Right away, she could see something was different about her. Her blue dress was tight, her heels high, and she wore bright red lipstick. “Hello, Holly. Come on in.”

The girl sashayed into the room. Lacey got a whiff of unfamiliar perfume. She sat and crossed her legs so more skin showed.

Though she had almost no verve for her job these days, Lacey sat up straight and dove in. Staring into the girl’s eyes, it dawned on Lacey. “You’re Hannah, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m Hannah. Whatcha think of me?”

“Truthfully, I’m surprised you’re here. That means you know what Holly does, but she doesn’t know what you do.”

A sham smile. “Poor little mouse.”

“So why are you here, Hannah?”

Her gaze narrowed. “You talked to Holly’s parents after our last meeting and they’re waffling on inpatient treatment. Don’t do it again.”

She’d placate the girl. “All right. Since you’re here, why don’t you tell me about yourself.”

“Sure. I’m sixteen, I hate my parents, I wanna be free of them. And of Holly. How do I do that?”

If I knew, I’d be a billionaire. So much was not known about schizophrenia than was known.

But she’d meet the girl where she was. “I was talking with you about using some drug therapy to help you.”

“I know. I got a peek at everything last time. She said she didn’t think I’d take the pills. But I will. I’d love the buzz.”

“Hmm.” Lacey took out a pen and scribbled on the prescription pad. Maybe these would help if she wouldn’t go into a hospital.

“Do you want to talk more about what you do when you front? What you feel?”

Hannah stood. “Nah.” She held out her hand.

Lacey gave her the script.

As Hannah walked to the door, Lacey stood and watched her from the desk. Hannah reached into her big purse first then pulled open the door. But she whirled around. “Just one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“This.” She lunged at Lacey.

Lacey felt a sharp pain in her side.

She clutched it.

She saw blood.

Before she fell to the floor, she heard, “Goodbye, Doc.”

Chapter 11

Jarek's phone buzzed. Tim Daniels' name popped up on caller ID. He wanted to ignore the call, but impulsively, he clicked on. "Hey," Tim said. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way home."

"Didn't you get my email?"

His sigh was audible. "I'm not up to a meeting with the Brothers of Fire tonight."

"You sure?"

He was at a loss after he and Lacey made love. He felt adrift. "I...I don't know."

"Come to the Main Street Pub. It's quiet and we're having snacks."

"For a little while, I guess."

When he walked into the Pub, he saw the guys at the end table. Just like the first time at Wink's. Only one man was missing.

"Hey," he said, when he reached them.

"Hey." Adam got up. "What'll you have?"

"Beer. Draft is good."

When Adam returned and put the drink in front of him, Jarek took a sip. It soothed his parched throat. "Thanks, Adam." He waited. "Let's address the elephant in the room."

“Or not in the room,” Tommy joked.

“You know anything, Tom?” Noah asked.

“I went to his firehouse to see him. He told me to fuck off. He said he was done with us again.”

“Shit!” Jarek knew this was his fault.

Tim sat back. “His choice. His loss.”

“Yeah, but I think he’s got secrets inside that are eatin’ at him.” Tommy shook his head. “I feel bad.”

They all agreed they felt bad, too.

Then Noah spoke up. “I, um, had the oddest experience last week after Jarek and I went to breakfast.”

Jarek thought, *I did, too.*

Noah explained about the gorgeous woman he met and helped on the street.

Tommy’s brow furrowed. “I’ll bet she’s here for the filming of that movie up on Harris Hill.” They all knew Tom was up on celebrities.

Adam said, “Yeah, I heard about that, too.”

“She, um, kissed me before she got in the car. For just a few seconds, but it was hot.”

The rest of them laughed. Tim said, “Good for you, Noah.”

“But out of reach. Whoever she is, she wouldn’t fit in my life.”

“Well, you can fantasize about her.” Tom’s suggestion.

“Good enough, I guess. Adam, how you doing?”

“Status quo. I guess Beth and the boyfriend are getting serious.”

“Does it bother you?”

He shrugged. “Some.”

“Didn’t she hint that you two might still have a chance?”

“Yeah.”

“So…”

“I don’t know. The girls already endured a divorce. What if trying again with Beth didn’t work out. They’d be more mixed up.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “I can see how that could be a problem.”

“Fuck, this is hard.”

The guys nodded.

Tim talked about Ava and the progress they’d made. “I admitted that I had to take more responsibility at home. But my hours? My job? Those are non-negotiable.”

“What’d she say?”

“That I’m unreliable. Fifteen fucking years of marriage and I’m *unreliable*?”

Tommy had just started to talk when Jarek’s phone buzzed. He slipped it out of his pocket, looked at the ID and his chest tightened. Lacey. “I gotta take this.” He stood and moved off to the side. “Hello?”

“Jarek. This is Marsh Roth. Lacey’s at the hospital. She’s been stabbed. We don’t know how. A nurse knocked on her door, and when no one answered, she went in from the waiting

room, which has its own entrance. She found Lacey on the floor.” His voice cracked on the last words.

“Oh, my God. How is she?”

He cleared his throat. “She lost a lot of blood. They’re doing repair surgery to close up the wound now. I thought you should know.”

“I’ll be right over.”

He strode back to the table. “Lacey’s been stabbed. She lost a lot of blood and is in surgery.” He raked his hand through his hair. “I have to go.”

“You’re not driving.” Tim stood. “I’m taking you.”

Adam stood. “I’m going, too.”

Tommy got up.

Noah said, “I can drive your car over since Tim picked me up.”

“Looks like we’re all going.”

Jarek went first and when he opened the pub door, he noticed his hands were shaky.

* * *

When they arrived at the hospital, Jarek and Tim were directed to a treatment room down the hall. The other Brothers of Fire would stay in the main hospital waiting room. As they walked down the hallway, Tim said, “God I hate that smell. The cleaner they use. The disinfectant.”

Jarek didn't respond. All he could think about was Lacey lying on the floor bleeding. They reached the private ER room. Huh, the same one Patterson had been in. Marsh and Marion sat outside it on the bench.

Her mother looked up. "What are you doing here?"

Jarek looked to Marsh, who stood.

Marsh lasered his gaze on his wife. "I called him. And don't start anything here, Marion. I mean it. We could lose our daughter and we can't be fighting."

Her mother's moan was soulful.

"Any change in her status?" Jarek asked.

"A nurse came out and said they were taking her up to surgery soon. We were about to go to the surgical waiting area."

"What time did this happen?" Jarek asked, still abhorred at the fact that Lacey was stabbed.

"We don't know exactly. Her schedule said she had a patient at six."

"And she was brought here...when?"

"At eight."

His eyes widened. "So for two hours she lay on the floor bleeding? Dear God."

Marsh put his hand on Jarek's arm. "We don't know if the patient stabbed her or if someone else came after she left."

He focused on Marsh and Marion. "You two must be beside yourselves."

“We are.”

Tim said quietly to him, “I’ll go give the rest of the guys the update and we’ll be out in the main lobby. When you find anything out, text me.”

Jarek nodded. All three of them headed to the surgical waiting area. An hour later, the surgeon came out. Since Jarek was an EMT, he knew the shortness of the surgery was a good sign.

Dressed in green scrubs and a mask hanging from one ear, he approached them; they all stood. “The knife missed all Ms. Roth’s organs and bones. Some tendons were nicked and exposed. We repaired those.”

“H-how is she?” Marion asked.

“She got through the surgery fine. Her anesthesia was light, so she should wake up soon. You can go into recovery then.”

The three of them sat and kept vigil.

* * *

Lacey opened her eyes. She moaned. Then she heard the low buzz of conversation and the beeps of machines. Where was she? What happened? Her mind cleared and she remembered her session with Holly. Hannah had come today. Hannah had stabbed her. A flash of fear, then a dull ached in her side. A rustle off to the right made her turn her head. Jarek sat there,

staring down at his phone. He looked up and saw she was awake. “Hey, Sleeping Beauty.”

“I...” She started to cough. He grabbed the cup and she sipped. It felt good on her dry throat. “I...got stabbed. What else?”

“You had surgery.” He explained what the doctor had done. “You’re all sewn up. We were waiting for you to wake up.”

“We?”

“Your mother and father are outside. They’ve been sitting by your bed, but finally took a break.”

Her eyes roamed his face. “I’m so glad you’re here. Really glad, Jarek.”

“That’s good. Very good.”

She laid her head back. “Did the police come to the hospital?”

“Not yet. You needed surgery, then to wake up. They’ll be called.” He leaned over. “I’d rather stay with you, but your mother and father should know you’re awake and come see for themselves.”

“In a minute.” She lifted her hand. He eased onto the side of the bed and took her hand.

“In that moment, when I was stabbed?”

A half-smile. “You gonna tell me your life flashed in front of your eyes?”

“No. Just you. You flashed in front of my eyes. I was so scared I was going to die and never see you again.”

Feeling her fear, he squeezed her hand. “Neither of those things happened.”

“I wished things were different between us.”

“They can be, love.”

“I know that now. I’m sorry for not seeing it before.”

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the mouth. “I’m sorry, too. I’ll work on myself.”

“We’ll work on us.”

“I’m with you, *kochanie*. And I always will be”

* * *

Instead of moving into her parents’ home on the hill, where they expected her to go, Lacey had come to Jarek’s house to recuperate. Now, as she laid in his bed, pillows propped up, she smiled at him. It made his heart turn over in his chest.

“I was too tired to notice yesterday when we got here, but this room is beautiful.” Oak beams crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling, skylights as well as a bank of windows let in light and a warm June breeze. She laid in a firm and comfortable king size bed.

From the chair to the right, Jarek smiled. “I like it. Hell of a lot of work, though.” He’d thrown himself into finishing this room when Lacey broke their relationship off.

“I bet it did. Thank you for letting me stay here.”

“Are you kidding? I’d slay dragons to have you with me now.”

“Aw.”

He tucked some hair behind her ear. “Are you hurting?”

“Some, but it’s dull. The medicine you gave me before I slept helps.”

He studied her. Her cheeks had pinked up and her eyes were clearer. She wore salmon-colored satiny pajamas. Her friend Ruthie had bought them for her and also brought over other loose clothing from her closet. “You look better today.”

“Thanks. It’s been two days here, five in the hospital, right?”

“Yes.”

“When do you have to go back to work?”

“I took a month’s furlough of accumulated time off and an unpaid week.” He searched her face. “Damn it, Lace, I’m the one who runs into burning buildings and you’re the one who got hurt at work.”

“Irony, I guess.”

His eyes narrowed in thought. “Why do you think the patient hurt you?”

“Just what I told the police in the hospital. Her alternate personality was threatened by how much I was helping Holly.”

“Crazy.”

“It is a disorder.”

He cocked his head. “You’re so smart and skilled. What are you doin’ with a schmuck like me?”

“It was the bike. The t-shirt.” She raised an eyebrow. “The sex.”

“Oh, yeah.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the mouth. Even sick, she tasted sweet. “I like having you in my house.”

“I like being here.”

He couldn’t resist the opening. He stroked her cheek with his knuckles. “Want to try it permanently?”

“You mean move in?”

Another big step for them. “I do.”

She gripped his hand. “There’s nothing I’d like better.”

“Whew! I was hoping you’d say that.”

“When?”

“Just stay. Eventually, we’ll get all your stuff.”

“Fine by me.” The profound expression on her face moved him. “*Kocham cię, Jarek.*”

He swallowed hard. “Do you have any idea how much that means to me?”

“I think I do. And I feel the same way.”

He grasped onto her hand. “I love you, too.”

They heard the front doorbell. “That’s your parents. I told them they could come later in the day.”

“How sweet of you. My mother’s been okay to you, right?”

“She’s seen the proverbial writing on the wall.”

“I hope it lasts.”

He stood when the bell rang again. “It will, just like us, honey. Just like us.”

* * * * *

If you liked this book, you might want to post a review of it at [AMAZON](#).

For notification of Kathryn’s new work and information about her books, be sure to sign up for her newsletter [here](#).

Author's Note

Welcome to the Brothers of Fire Series! Readers like you asked for more firefighter books, and you got them, starting with ALL FIRED UP.

This first novella was very easy to write. Maybe I was just happy to get back to firefighters. Or maybe it was the characters. I really didn't know Jarek and Lacey very well before I started the book. Nearly halfway through everything crystallized. (Yes, I had a lot of revision to do!) Or maybe... it's because they were both good people, likable in most ways, and very happy to have found each other.

Jarek was tougher to write than Lacey. He's got bad baggage, but he's a loving man with his family, a good captain, even in his more stoic days and, it turns out, a very good friend to his brothers. He falls fast and hard for Lacey and despite their splits, for big and small reasons, his heart is always hers.

Lacey simply came to life in the first sexy-and-sweet scene as the biker girl. The same thing happened when we see her in her real life. Working with kids is special in my mind, so when she became an adolescent psychiatrist it was easy rolling for me. Due to my teaching days, I know teenagers. None like Holly/Hannah, though. But many like Mila. I felt sorry for

Lacey, too, when her mother tries to put her into a mold. She wants a relationship with Marion, but I'm not sure that's ever going to happen.

But let me tell you, I was shocked—SHOCKED—when Hannah stabbed Lacey. It came right out of the blue. Then I had to scramble to get the ending right. Often, though, book endings are not the way I planned.

And what did you think about those Brothers of Fire? I love them all, even pig-headed Carson. Their stories are still forming in my mind, but I am set on Noah's. (Isn't he a doll?) I hope you continue to read these novellas.

Kathy Shay

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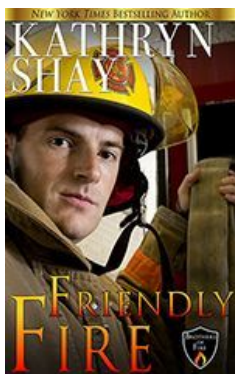
[ALL FIRED UP](#)

Captain Jarek Zenko, a war veteran and firefighter, meets Lacey Roth at a bar one night. They don't share their real identities, even when they retreat to a hotel. When they meet two months later, he discovers she's a renowned psychiatrist and she finds out he's a firefighter. Their relationship can't go anywhere, even if the attraction is still there. But fate has other ideas.



[THE RESCUE](#)

Noah Keaton is a beleaguered single dad to four boys. He's also an outstanding firefighter with an early promotion to lieutenant. Off duty one morning, he helps a woman who stumbles and falls on the street. Attraction sparks between them. But she's the hottest thing in Hollywood and he's an ordinary man, with lots of baggage. No way can they get involved. Or can they?



[FRIENDLY FIRE](#)

Captain Tim Daniels, a highly regarded firefighter, thinks everything's okay at home until his wife Ava announces she's unhappy with their marriage. She tells him he has to change his lifestyle for them to stay together. He's been happy with how they live for fifteen years, so he has no desire to alter his behavior. But will he, for the love of his life?



SCORCHED

Tom Mancini is top notch in all areas of his life except one. He's the only boy in an Italian family, a stellar firefighter and a good friend. But he fails miserably with women. Even when Stephanie Stallone shows an interest in him, he's wary of taking on a feisty, independent and confrontational female firefighter. Nobody tangles with her.



REKINDLED

The last thing by-the-book firefighter Captain Adam Stark wants is for his ex to come back into his life and hint that she wants a reunion. She shook up his confidence when she left him, and she still wants him to change. He's having none of it. Beth Stark never stopped loving Adam. But when his stern, unyielding ways start to affect her daughters, she decides to sacrifice him for her girls' welfare. Unfortunately, she can't forget this very stubborn man.



[COMING IN HOT](#)

Carson Taylor III becomes a firefighter because he and his best buddy planned to save the world until that buddy dies. Carson's independently wealthy, and he attracts women like moths to the proverbial flame. Fearful of another painful loss in his life, he often behaves recklessly, especially with the female sex. Carson's not about to get close to anybody again. Then he meets Grace, a woman who embodies everything her name implies and is the opposite of him. No way will he let her get to him. What's in store for these two shocks them both!

Also, take a look at the SISTERS OF FIRE, Kathryn Shay's six novellas and a predecessor of BROTHERS OF FIRE, on sale now.

[MORE THAN ENOUGH](#)—Hardened firefighter, Trish “Mac” Mackenzie rappels off buildings, saves kids in a car accident and carries victims out of raging fires. But her personal life is a mess. Can Mac fight her way out of abuse and insecurity with the Sisters of Fire, a skilled counselor, and good-guy, kindergarten teacher Nathan Mitchell at her side?

[AT LAST](#)—Fire Investigator Lieutenant Tess Di Marco has struggled through prejudice against women, a messy divorce and years of training to get what she wants out of life. One constant through the years has been her mentor and friend, Captain David Ashford, a now-widowed arson investigator. But what happens when sparks of a different kind erupt between them?

[NO EASY CHOICE](#)—Firefighter Annie Ferris O’Shea has it all: an idyllic marriage to her high school sweetheart, an exciting career and a circle of wonderful friends. But when she gets pregnant, everything changes. Will she and Colin be able to adapt to a new lifestyle or will their lives dissolve into old patterns and expected roles in society?

[EQUAL PARTNERS](#)—At thirty-five, Firefighter Julie “JJ” Jensen runs circles around most firefighters. When her talent leads to a fast-tracked promotion, she loses her boyfriend and gains colleagues who resent her. Enter Dr. Nick Barrows, a surprise suitor who makes her forget her name. Will he support JJ through the complications of her career and merging their very different lives or hold her back from professional success?

[A DIFFERENT WAY](#)—When Battalion Chief Lynn Lucas’ marriage turns cold and she can no longer tolerate the inactivity of a small township firehouse, she decides to change

her life. But when she meets Brady Jamison, a younger man with a secret, will she lose sight of her goals once again?

[TO TRUST AGAIN](#)—Battalion Chief Brooke Cartwright lost her husband Zach and she's not looking to replace him. But then Cord Remington, a man from her past, a man she once loved, comes into her professional life. Can he be enough for her to trust in fate again?

Excerpt

Brothers of Fire, Book 2

THE RESCUE

“Ever been up here before?” Lt. Noah Keaton asked his crew. “Socially, I mean.” The fire call had come for Harris Hill, the local Glider Club and Social Center where planes could be rented to glide around the county. They also offered barbeques, huge picnics and occasionally a full-fledged fair. Noah’s firehouse covered the site.

“Nope.” This from Will Kirkland, the senior member of Truck 3 after Noah.

Lucy Law, a very competent female firefighter responded, “I have. My boyfriend took me here. It was romantic.”

“Aw...”

“How nice...”

Of course, the guys teased. But Noah said, “I do think it’s sweet. Pay them no mind, Luce.”

“I can always count on you, LT.”

They pulled in right behind Engine 4. “Jarek Zenko jumped off and crossed to Noah’s truck. When Noah climbed out, Jarek said, “Seems like a contained blaze. We don’t know the origin.” His team was already getting out two hoses.

A harried looking man crossed to them. “I’m in charge of this project. I don’t know what happened. There’s two people inside. The main actors. The camera people got out because they were closest to the door.”

“Any idea why it started?” Noah asked.

He looked chagrined. Noah said, “We need to know, sir.”

“The fire pit.”

“There’s a fire pit inside the cabin?” Zenko shook his head. “We’ll deal with this later.” He headed toward the building.

Noah’s team carried tools when they came up to him. “How big is it?”

“Fifteen hundred square feet. But the rooms are chopped up. We were filming in the main area.”

“Let’s go,” he said to his group.

They headed inside. The water from two hoses put out the fire in minutes. “You and me will check the downstairs, Law. Kirkland and Davidson, go up to the second floor.”

Jarek said, “We’ll take a hose up there, too. I’ll help with Harmon.”

Smoke filled the air, but it wasn’t too bad. Noah said, “I’ll go to the left.”

Noah walked through a doorway and found restrooms. He opened the first one. Nobody. He tried the second and was met with resistance. He pushed. The door nudged forward. Inside he found a woman, sitting on the john. She wore a bra and

skirt. And by God, he recognized her. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

She coughed. “Just a little smoke in my lungs.”

“Um...”

“I took off my blouse, wet it and put it in front of the door.”

“Smart girl.”

“Yeah. How am I going to get out of here?”

The fire was out. Not too much smoke. Noah whipped off his turnout coat and when she stood, he put it around her. She zipped it up “Let’s go. Fires can reignite before we finish the search.”

He took her hand. She gripped his. He led her to the living room and out the door. She sighed audibly when they reached the fresh air and took in deep breaths. He left her on a bench with the director. “Thanks...”

Noah headed back inside. Soon, the search was finished. This was one of the easy ones. The team started salvage and overhaul, where they took down drywall or wood, in this case, looking for fire that might be hiding. Noah went back outside and whipped off his facemask.

He saw her still wearing his coat, sitting where he left her. Jarek was talking to the director and producer. He crossed to the woman who he’d been trying hard to forget after he met her on the sidewalk one summer morning. Where she kissed him soundly. “Hello again.”

She startled. Then delight in those green eyes. “Hello. I remember you.” Despite her greasy hair from the smoke, and the smudges on her face, she was still a knockout.

He couldn’t help a grin. “I remember you, too.”

“I’m Chloe Logan.”

“As I said before, Noah Keaton.”

“Thank you for finding me.”

“You’re welcome.” He nodded over his shoulder. “Why on earth was there a fire pit—lit—inside the house?”

“Ask the producer. Jackson and I told him that was ridiculous. He said they wouldn’t leave it lit for long.”

“Very, very dangerous.”

“Obviously.”

A man came up to them. He was movie-star handsome. “Chloe, are you all right? We got separated.”

“Yes, Jackson, I’m fine. You?” He nodded. She gestured to Noah. “This is Lt. Noah Keaton.”

“Hey, thanks for all this. We tried to tell Marcus the fire was a stupid move.”

“So I heard.”

He sat beside Chloe and took her hand. She glanced at Noah, seeming uncomfortable.

“Why do you have on his coat?”

“I took off my blouse to block the door gap. There was nothing else to do it with in the bathroom.”

“I’ll walk you back to our trailer.”

Just then, Jarek returned. “We’re set to go.”

“I’ll wait until my guys are out.”

“Sure thing.” He left without acknowledging the couple on the bench.

The costar was holding her hand. Noah wondered if their on- screen romance had gone further than the film.

Jackson stood and pulled her up. “Let’s go, honey.”

“Don’t get carried away, Jackson.” She shrugged off his hand and turned to Noah. “I’ll be right back with your coat.” They headed to the trailers.

She returned when the team had finished. She walked right up to Noah and gave him his coat “Thanks again. Your firehouse covers this area?”

“Yeah, we’re a small one, positioned on the east side of Crystal City.”

“Good to know.”

“Nice to see you again, Ms. Logan.”

She gave him a lush smiled. “I think Chloe is called for in our situation, Noah. I hope to see you soon.” She walked away.

Noah stared after her. Damn, he never planned to see her again. When the dreams about her started right after they met, he forced his conscious mind to...eliminate thoughts of her. But now, the image of her in just a skimpy black bra would make that impossible for a while again.

Hell, he had more important things to think about.

* * *

“Hey, LT. Did you really see the star in her underwear?” This from Dirk Davidson, the jokester of their small group.

“Part of it.” He kept a straight face. “She’s beautiful.”

“That’s all we’re going to get?”

“Yep! Now get ready for some training.” Even though he tried to sound stern, his voice always came out coaxing.

“Sure thing, LT.”

“Come on, Davidson,” Lucy said pulling him out of the kitchen.

Kirkland stayed. “You okay, LT?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“You look a little...lonely.”

He shrugged. “Women are out of the picture for me these days.”

“Are they?”

“Would you want to take on my boys?”

“Your boys are fine. Rambunctious, but that’s normal.”

“I guess.” He angled his chin. “Let’s get out there.”

They headed into the living space. It was like a lot of other firehouses, but smaller since the staff was only four of them on each shift. The furniture, dark wine leather, was in good shape,

and the floor had been replaced with plank wood when the old firehouse had been resurrected.

But the pièce de résistance was opposite the windows. Will Kirkland's father had built an entire wall of cupboards, shelves and drawers in fine oak. In front of it was a handcrafted matching wood table, thanks again to Pa Kirkland, that could hold all of them.

"Before you'll go over there," Noah said, "Put these on." He handed out blindfolds.

"God, I hate blindfold drills."

"I know you do, Lucy. Nobody really likes them. But we're blinded by smoke in most fires." He swept them with his gaze. "Maintaining orientation to the building when conducting a search is critical for [survival](#). It's easy to lose contact with the building and become disoriented. When this occurs, you can get lost. Which has led to dying in the line of duty."

Lucy added, "Yeah, when my dad was a smoke eater, they had deaths from disorientation."

"Your job is to put on the blindfold and go to the floor samples set up on the table and identify where you might be in a house with that flooring. I'll grade you."

"The first guy'll be at a disadvantage," Davidson said.

Kirkland rolled his eyes. "We leave the room, right?"

"Yes you do."

"I'll go first," Davidson said.

"You all can wait in the kitchen."

When the others left, Davidson put on his blindfold, and Noah led him to the table. It was dark as he'd turned off lights and shut the blinds. "Go ahead and identify the surface and where it would be in a normal house. They're all mixed up in order."

He felt the first one. "Ceramic tile. It's either in kitchen, entryway, or bathroom."

"Go on."

He moved to the right. "Hardwood. It could be downstairs in the living room, kitchen or sometimes it covers the whole floor."

"Move on."

He touched the surface. "Um...vinyl?."

It turned out to be laminate wood flooring. Noah was always glad when people missed something, to show them how valuable the drill was."

After everyone finished they gathered in the kitchen to wait for their relief and debrief. "So, was it worthwhile?" he asked.

"Yeah. I knew all of them, but it was good practice." This from Will. "In a real fire, seconds matter so knowing immediately where you are or could be is important."

More of the same was discussed. "Good. I'm glad you learned from it."

He went to the countertop and grabbed two big shopping bags. Put them on the table. "What's that?"

"A treat."

From inside he drew out canisters of pretzels, potato chips and popcorn. “Thanks for not dissing what can be seen as a simple training.”

Noah was glad to have a small group like this to manage on his first officer tour. He knew a lot of firehouses had uncooperative old-timers or newbies who gave the officer in charge a hard time. At least that had tipped in his favor.

As he watched the group dig in, big green eyes and auburn hair came to his mind. Now that would never be on the positive side.

So stop the damned thinking about her.

He was trying to, but fate had played a cruel trick on him, sending him on that call today. There she was, in her bra, for God’s sake.

* * *

Exhausted by the end of the day, Chloe got in the back of the town car and asked Charles to drive her home. The indoor shooting would be delayed, but there were other locations: a lake, downtown Crystal Corners, a house her fictional boyfriend lived in. They’d tried shooting some of those scenes, but no one was ready for that, so at four, he stopped trying.

On the way, she thought of how stupid the producer had been...

She’d stormed over to him in the aftermath. “Christ, Marcus. Jackson and I could have been killed.”

“Well, you weren’t.”

“I hope the fire department doesn’t shut us down.” This from Jackson.

“They can’t do that.”

Jackson had caught her eye. Shook his head. “If they declare us a hazard to the community or the nature surroundings they can.”

Only then had he lost his swagger...

She sighed and looked out the window. June had come in with a bang in this small Southern Tier town. But a cool river running through the city and the nearness of a couple of lakes had made the air bearable. Enjoyable actually.

She lay her head back, thinking about Noah Keaton...

Those navy blue eyes, accented by the T-shirt he wore, had shone with mirth after he took off his helmet and mask. She’d recognized him from the tumble she took on the street that morning.

And in that shirt, she could see his wide shoulders.

He was taller than her, and she was 5’8”.

And she liked the way he carried himself.

“Directly home, Chloe?”

Boy did she want to go to the only firehouse near the shooting site. But she said, “Yes, I’ll order in tonight.”

“You can eat out. I don’t mind waiting.” Their agreement was the local man would be her chauffeur during the day but have nights off. She actually could walk to the downtown area.

“No, not tonight. But thanks.”

He opened the passenger side for her, got back in his car, and headed home only when she got the door unlocked. The rented condo on the river was beautiful, furnished tastefully by a local doctor who moved in with the love of her life. Briefly, Chloe wondered if she'd ever find hers.

About the Author



A NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY bestselling author, Kathryn Shay has been a lifelong writer and teacher. She has written dozens of self-published original romance titles, print books with the Berkley Publishing Group and Harlequin Enterprises and mainstream women's fiction with Bold Strokes Books. She has won many awards for her work: five RT Book Reviews awards, the Bookseller's Best Award, Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year and several "Starred Reviews." One of her firefighter books hit #20 on the NEW YORK TIMES list. Her novels have been serialized in COSMOPOLITAN magazine and featured in USA TODAY, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL and PEOPLE magazine. There are over ten million copies of her books in print and

downloaded online. Reviewers have called her work “emotional and heart-wrenching.”

For notification of Kathryn’s new work and information about her books, be sure to sign up for her newsletter [here](#).