

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATHRYN SHAY



REKINDLED

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Don't Miss All of the Brothers of Fire Stories](#)

[COMING IN HOT Excerpt](#)

[About the Author](#)

REKINDLED
Brothers of Fire
Book 5

Kathryn Shay

Rekindled

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Cast of Characters

Main Characters

Adam Stark—Captain in the Crystal City Fire Department

Beth Stark—Adam's wife; owner of art gallery
Department

The Brothers of Fire

Captain Jarek Zenko (Lacey Roth)

Lieutenant Noah Keaton (Chloe Logan)

Captain Tim Daniels (Ava Daniels)

Lieutenant Tommy Mancini

Captain Adam Stark (Beth Stark)

Captain Carson Taylor III

Adam's Family/Friends

Rose and Gus Mancini—grandparents

Joey Mancini—son

Anna Anderson—next door neighbor

Lila Hart—Joey's mother

Melanie Grant—Tom's lawyer

Beth's Family/Friends

Mary Kay—assistant at the art gallery

Les Hall, a grad student in part time at gallery

Reg Worthington—boyfriend

Ava Daniels—Beth's friend

Various Firefighters

Rescue Squad

Lieutenant Kay Kramer

Firefighter Sean Riley

Firefighter John "Mase" Mason

Firefighter Big Joe Early

Joe Redman—Chief of Fire Department

Various Battalion Chiefs

Locations

Artistic Gems—Beth's Art Gallery

Brothers&Sisters Bar

Wink's Bar

Crystal City Diner

Lakeview Restaurant

The Elmwood Inn (The Grand Hotel)

Magnolia's Restaurant

Memorial Hospital

Branson County Fire Academy

Chapter 1

“Mom, it’s me, Janelle. You gotta come over to Dad’s condo.”

Beth’s heart clutched at the worry in her daughter’s voice.
“Calm down, sweetie. What happened?”

“We just got home from school and found him in bed. He didn’t go to work today.”

Which never happened. Adam was rigid about showing up for work and the kids going to school. It was one of the reasons they divorced.

“He’s burning up with fever and his face is red.”

Janelle could call 911. But Beth would never leave her two kids to deal with a potential emergency alone.

She glanced around her gallery, Artistic Gems. As the manager and owner, she had a lot of leeway with the schedule.
“Work is close to the river condos. I’ll be right over.”

After she disconnected, she walked out to the back office to find the assistant manager talking to Reg, the man she was dating. “I have to leave for an emergency.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mary Kay told her. “Don’t worry about anything. I’m on till closing.”

“Is it the kids?” Reg asked.

Reg Worthington was a world-class artist and she’d met him at an art show. He’d contracted to show three of his

paintings in her gallery. After they sold, he added more works. Eventually, he rented a loft here, where he could paint and see her.

“Not exactly.” She explained what happened.

“Janelle should call 911.” His voice was cold. In most things, Reg was kind and loving. But where Adam was concerned, he...wasn't.

“Damn it, Reg. I can't leave her alone to deal with this.” She crossed to her desk and grabbed her purse. Adam used to tease her that it was more like a suitcase. “Thanks, Mary Kay.”

Reg took a step toward her. “I'll go with you.”

“No. I need to do this alone.” She hurried out the door, leaving Reg agape.

As she drove, she thought about how different the two men were. Adam was blond, blue-eyed and had a runner's body. Reg sported longish dark hair, gray eyes and a body builder's form. Adam dressed in conservative clothes and Reg in what the kids called hippie chic.

She shook off her thoughts when she reached Adam's rented condo and parked. As the river whooshed by, she hurried to number 24. One of Adam's brothers of fire and his wife owned it but were living elsewhere.

Janey was waiting on the porch. Her fourteen-year-old threw herself into Beth's arms. “I'm so scared, Mom. Daddy's really sick.”

“Let's go see.” She barely took in her surroundings as Janey led her through the living room, to the left and down a hall to a bedroom.

From the doorway, she saw Adam laying listlessly in the bed. His face was indeed flushed. Janelle sat by his bedside. She stood and crossed to Beth. They hugged.

Her daughter was pale. “Thanks for coming, Mom.”

“Of course I came. Did you take his temperature?”

“Yeah, we found a brand new thermometer in the vanity.” Her dark blue eyes were wide. “It’s 103.”

“All right. I’m taking over now. Would you go get a washcloth and a bowl of water with ice in it?”

When Janelle left, she crossed to the bed. Up close, she saw Adam’s face was very red. She put her hand to his forehead. It *was* hot.

“Beth...Beth...” he mumbled.

“Adam, I’m here.”

He opened his eyes. They were the exact color of Janelle’s and Janey’s except his were bloodshot now. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said softly.

Janelle returned with the bowl. Sitting down on the straight chair, she dipped the washcloth in the water and rested the cold compress on his forehead.

He shivered first, then sighed. “That feels good.”

“I imagine it does. Did you take ibuprofen?”

“Don’t have any.”

He was a stickler about taking any medication.

“Did you call into work?”

“I managed that when I tried to get up then fell back into bed.”

She brushed her hand down his cheek. “I think we should take you to Urgent Care.”

“No. Not going there.”

Stubborn man. This had happened before. His obstinacy was another reason why they divorced.

“It’s only a bug.”

“Your fever’s high.”

“It’ll break.”

“Please let me take you.”

“No.” He took her hand in a limp grasp. “But stay with me.”

He must be sick to want her here. For a while, she’d thought about getting back together with him. But he rejected the notion. “I’ll stay. Janelle can take my car to get medicine.”

He was still holding her hand and squeezed it. “Thanks.” His eyes closed.

Turning to her kids, who were in the doorway, she said, “Janelle, money and keys are in my purse. Are you calm enough to drive and get your father some ibuprofen at the Main Street Pharmacy?”

“Now that you’re here, I am.” She grabbed what she needed and left.

Beth turned to her other daughter. “Janey, Dad’s going to be fine. If he isn’t better after he takes the ibuprofen, we’ll

take him to Urgent Care. If he won't go, we'll call the EMTs. Would you refresh the ice water, please?"

"Okay, Mom."

She bathed his face until Janelle returned and Beth opened the bottle; she shook out three pills. He gulped them back and reached for the glass but his hand shook so badly, she had to hold the cup for him while he drank. "There, now close your eyes. Sleep."

"Don't leave."

"I won't."

He fell back to sleep fast.

"Girls, why don't you do your homework, or if you can't concentrate, watch some TV. We'll wait until he wakes up and see what to do next."

After they left, she went to the window and opened it. The late-afternoon September breeze swept the room of its stuffy air. Then she stepped from the room and took out her phone. Punched in a number.

"Beth?" Reg's worried voice. "How is everything?"

"Adam's got a high fever. If it's not better in a few hours, I'm taking him to Urgent Care."

Silence. Then, "I don't like this, Beth." He was jealous as hell of Adam and he had good reason. Though she couldn't live with him, Beth had never stopped loving her ex-husband.

* * *

Adam awoke. He was really sick. His head hurt awful and he had the shivers. His mother called from downstairs. "Adam honey, we're having breakfast."

He called out weakly, "I'm sick, Mommy."

She came right up. Knelt by his bed. Felt his head. "Oh, dear. You're hot. I'll get you some children's Tylenol." She loosened the covers around him before she left.

But she didn't come back soon. He could hear the mumble of her and his father talking.

Then, "The kid has to toughen up. You baby him." Suddenly, his father appeared at the door. Big and dangerous. "Get out of bed!"

"I can't Dad. I'm sick."

"You have perfect attendance. You have to go to school no matter how you feel." He stalked inside and pulled the covers off of Adam. He shivered more.

Dad yanked him by the arm, dragged him up. "Get dressed or I'll dress you myself. I'll drop you off on my way to work."

Adam struggled with the pull-on navy shirt and the khaki pants of the school uniform. But he couldn't get his shoes on. His mother came to the door. "What...what are you doing?"

"Dad says I have to go to school."

"Hank, he's sick. I got him some medicine."

"He has to learn to push through pain. And above all not to

show he's suffering. If he even is."

"I-can't get my shoes on."

"Woman, get over there and do it for the sissy." He shook his head in disgust. "Grow up, boy."

His mother got socks and sneakers on him. His father dragged him downstairs, out the door, grabbing his backpack from the hook.

He stuffed Adam in the car and slammed the door.

Seven-year-old Adam was helpless to do anything about this. He hoped he made it through the day...

Adam moved restlessly on the bed. "No, Dad, no...."

"Adam, wake up."

"I'm sick."

"I know you're sick."

The sound of the soft feminine voice brought him out of the dream. He opened his eyes. Instead of the cruel face of his father, he saw Beth, bending over him.

"How do you feel?"

"As weak as a kitten, but less achy."

"Poor baby." She touched his face. Even sick, or maybe because he was, he noticed her lush auburn hair brushing her shoulders, her hazel eyes bright with concern.

"Reaching to the side, she ran the thermometer across his forehead. "Your fever's down to 101."

"Down? What was it?"

“103. We gave you ibuprofen. You slept for two hours.”

“I feel better.” *Except for the dream.*

“You were having a bad dream.”

“Was I? I can’t remember it.” She knew next to nothing about his background, his parents, his childhood. He couldn’t talk about it.

“Have you eaten anything today?” Beth asked.

“No, I couldn’t get out of bed to make anything. I called into work then slept.”

“The girls phoned me when they got home. They were scared.”

His blond brows narrowed. “Where are they?”

“In their rooms.”

He sat up and moaned. “I gotta use the john before I see them.”

Matter-of-factly, she asked, “Can you get up alone?”

He nodded and swung his feet to the floor. He was wearing pajama bottoms, a concession to having the girls overnight at the house. He put weight on his legs and pushed. He rose a few inches but fell right back to the bed. “I can’t do it. Fuck.”

“I’ll help.” She put her hands under his arms and pulled him up. Then slid one around his shoulder, the other around his waist. This was the closest they’d been in a long time. They took baby steps to the bathroom. It felt good leaning on her.

When they reached the bathroom, she couldn't help herself from saying, "Wow, this is beautiful."

An oversized room held a shower, a jacuzzi, two vanities and a toilet. Tucked in an alcove was an upholstered chair and small table. The whole room was done in a variety of shades of blues and whites. "Yeah, Lacey Roth has sophisticated taste."

She led him to the toilet. "Want help?"

"No."

"Then I'll sit over in the chair."

When he finished, he called out, "Done." He washed his hands.

She was by his side. Again, he leaned heavily on her back to the bed. "I want to sit up."

After she propped pillows against the headboard, she helped him lift his legs and slide onto the mattress. "You can call them now."

Both girls came running into the room and over to the bed. "Daddy, are you okay?" Janelle hadn't used that term with him in years.

"Yeah, baby." He'd started using terms of endearment for them once they were staying with him some weekends and school days. Also since the divorce, he'd become more affectionate with them. He didn't know exactly why. He used to do both things before his brother died.

His younger daughter hovered back. "Come over here, Janey. I'm better."

She ran to the bed. Threw herself at him and hugged him.

He forced himself not to groan at the pain her exuberance caused. Janelle hugged him but more gently.

“Why don’t you wait with Dad until I get him some food?”
Beth left.

He saw the worried expressions on their faces. “Come on up here.” They climbed onto the bed. “I’m fine, girls. And if I’m not better soon, I’ll go to Urgent Care.”

They held his hands until Beth came back, then they slid off the bed. “Can you feed yourself?”

“Yes.” He looked down at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich with apple slices on the side. He raised his gaze. “You remembered.” He always wanted the bland food when he was sick.

She put the tray on his lap and whispered in his ear, “I remember, too. I remember everything, Adam.”

So did he. Their divorce almost destroyed them both. Best to keep that at the forefront.

* * *

Beth awoke. And frowned at her surroundings. She took in the white walls, slate blue chairs, couch and a gray rug. Nice, but not hers.

She blew out a heavy breath. She’d fallen asleep at Adam’s condo. For a minute, she let her head rest back into the throw pillow. Stared at the whirring fan above.

Please don't go, Mom. We're afraid to be alone with Dad. Janelle had pleaded the case so well Beth agreed to stay. She couldn't very well abandon her daughters when their father was sick.

On the other hand, Reg had not been happy.

Let me get this straight. You're staying overnight with your ex because he's sick. Let him call 911.

She'd chided him for being so heartless about her kids. He'd said goodbye quickly and disconnected.

Rising, disgusted at her wrinkled skirt and blouse, she dragged herself to the kitchen, made a pot of coffee, poured herself a cup and headed for the master bedroom, admiring the slate floor in the hallway and kitchen.

Adam lay sprawled out in bed, his legs splayed, his arms over his head. She remembered when she'd first seen him like this. After they'd made love for first time...

They entered his apartment in an old house on First Street. He held her hand as they walked to the bedroom and once there, turned to her. "You sure you want to do this, Bethy?"

She was sure. She was 18 and a virgin. It was time. And she loved him. So she smiled up at him. "We said we love each other. That's enough for me."

"You have a class." She attended Elmwood College. "You hate to miss a class."

Pretending to know what she was doing, she went up on tiptoes and lightly kissed him. "Then you better make this worth my sacrifice."

She shivered when he undressed her and kissed the skin he bared. She fumbled at his clothes. They dove into bed, and headlong into a relationship that led to marriage...

Her heart hurt so much she could hardly tolerate the loss. God, he still had power over her.

“Beth.” His blue eyes opened. They were sleepy. And sexy.

She crossed to the bed. Sat on the mattress, not considering the wisdom of that intimacy until she’d already done it. Placing the cup on the table, she said, “Good morning.” She felt his forehead. “You’re cooler. Did you wake during the night?”

“Off and on. But I didn’t take ibuprofen. Must be I’m better.” He sat up. “I missed work again. I didn’t call.”

“I did. I told the BC you were still sick.” Beth knew all the firefighter lingo, even now, after a year of separation from the firefighter family. She wondered briefly what BC Lewis thought of his ex-wife calling him in sick.

Watching her, he grabbed her hand. “You stayed for me.”

She bit her lip. “I did.”

“Thank you. I’m sure the girls had a lot to do with that. Where are they?”

“Still sleeping. It’s early.”

Weakened by his touch and the depth of his blue eyes, she whispered, “I was worried about you.”

“As I said, I’m better. But weak.”

“Let me get you breakfast.”

“I’m desperate for a shower. I’m sweaty and I smell.”

“I’ll help you after you eat.”

She fixed his favorite omelet and rye toast. She brought his meal and a plate for herself to him. He was drinking her coffee. Something about the intimacy of that unnerved her. She managed to set the tray on his lap and took her own plate. He sighed. “I love this breakfast.”

“I know.”

“Beth, I—”

“No need to go into how we split and aren’t getting back together. I’m embarrassed by my lapses about us getting back together.”

“Let’s forget about that.”

“Agreed.”

“What did the hippie say about all this?” Though he swore he didn’t want to get back together, he needled her about Reg.

“Adam! He’s a renowned painter.”

“Sorry. What did Reginald say?”

“He wasn’t happy. I reminded him that I was here for the girls.”

“Hmm. Not sure that’s true.”

“Eat!”

The omelets were cheesy, the toast lightly browned and the juice ice cold. When she finished, she took the tray and set it on the night table. “Can you get up by yourself?”

“I think so.”

He did. But he leaned heavily on her all the way to the bathroom. He stripped in front of her and got in the huge glassed-in shower. She looked out the window, wondering why the hell she was here, doing wifely things, when she knew in her heart this was a mistake for her well-being.

The water went off. She got up and turned. He stepped out of the stall and she handed him a towel. While he dried himself, she got clean pajama bottoms and a T-shirt from the bureau in the bedroom.

Once he was dressed, she helped him back to the bed. He sat down and swung his feet in. "Take more ibuprofen."

He opened the bottle and downed the pills with the juice he hadn't finished and gave her a weak smile. "I'm tired again."

"Go to sleep. I heard the girls stirring down the hall."

He slid down taking the pillow with him and closed his eyes.

Frustrated and somewhat alarmed by this whole situation, she left the room with the dirty dishes. When the girls got up and came out to the kitchen, they asked about their dad. Because he was asleep again, they ate cereal and juice. Their father hadn't roused so they dressed and left for school. Beth lay on the couch and dozed again.

She awakened to a sound. Listened. The doorbell. Even more ruffled and now irritable, she got up and hurried to the foyer.

She found Reg on the porch.

* * *

“I came over to reclaim you.”

Yuck. “Reclaim? What kind of statement is that?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “No way in hell am I letting him take you away from me.”

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. Then, “Come on in.”

He entered the condo and whistled. “Pretty chic. And expensive, for a firefighter.”

Ignoring his comment, Beth said, “Let’s sit.”

He dropped down next to her on the couch and rubbed his hand across the arm of it. “High end.”

“Adam makes an excellent salary. Besides, he’s renting this from a friend.”

“That explains it.”

“You’re being a snob, you know.”

He shook his head. “I don’t mean to.” He ran a hand through his trademark long hair. Mink colored, it brushed his collar. “This guy sets me off.”

That was true. Reg was a decent man who gave to charities, was kind to *his* ex, and took care of his elderly grandpa.

“I’m jealous.” Grasping her hand, he said, “How can you be surprised?”

“I’m not. You’ve never liked my relationship with Adam.”

“Now that’s interesting.” They both glanced over to see Adam had come into the room. He seemed remarkably better. But he walked stiffly to the couch. Held out his hand. “I’m Adam Stark. You must be Reggie.”

Reg stood. “Reg or Reginald, please. Yes, I’m Beth’s boyfriend.” It sounded odd at their age to be using that term.

“That’s all good with me. We’re divorced. But we share a family and the girls were staying with me. They got scared and asked her over here.”

“And she stayed the night.”

Beth answered, “He was pretty sick, Reg.”

The damn doorbell rang again. Beth immediately got up. “I’ll answer it. Sit, Adam. You’re still weak.”

He dropped down into a chair.

Beth went to the foyer again. Opened the door. Oh, great, just what they needed. But she said calmly, “Hello, Olivia.”

* * *

Olivia Brandise looked like a million bucks today. But the expression on her face was dark. “Hello, everyone.” She crossed directly to Adam. “Darling, what’s wrong? You’re so pale.”

“He’s been sick.” Reg stood. “I’m Reg Worthington.”

Her eyes widened. “Hello. I love your work.” Her gaze landed on Beth. “Hi, Beth. What are you two doing here?”

Reg volunteered, “Adam called Beth when he got sick last night.”

“I did not.” Adam’s voice was weak. “The girls were here and got worried. They called their mother.”

“I see.” Olivia cocked her head. “Why didn’t you call me, Beth?”

“Because my daughters asked me for help. Truthfully, it never occurred to me to call you.” Now that was catty.

Olivia transferred her gaze to Adam. “Why didn’t *you*?”

“Are you kidding? My temperature was 103. I was barely able to call in sick for my job.”

“You seem better now.”

“I am.”

She gave him a once-over. “Good enough to take a shower and dress.”

He and Beth shared a guilty look.

“Oh, I get it.”

Reg said, “I don’t.”

“She helped him shower and dress.”

Adam hoped he didn’t blush. “Yesterday, when I was so sick.”

“I’ve had enough.” Reg bolted up and extended his hand. “Beth, come with me.”

“I have my car.”

“Then follow me home.”

“Home?” Adam almost barked the word. “Hell! Are you living together? You didn’t tell me Beth.”

“And why should she?”

“Because I have a right to know about anybody who’s living in the same house as my girls.”

“It’s a moot point,” Beth told him. “We aren’t living together. I would have told you.” She glanced at Olivia. “Like you’d tell me, right?”

“Right.”

“Grab your purse, honey.”

“Please don’t order me around, Reg. I won’t tolerate it. But I will leave now in my own car and go to my own house. I don’t feel much like seeing you today.”

Reg left in a huff. Beth went into the bedroom. Came back out with her purse.

“Thanks so much for all you did, Beth. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Goodbye. To both of you.”

When they were alone, Olivia dropped down into a chair next to him. In a soft and loving voice, she asked, “How are you today?”

“Weak, but my fever broke, thankfully. Look, I’m sorry if you’re put out by Beth being here. But she was telling the truth. And the shower thing—well, it isn’t as if she saw anything she hadn’t seen before.”

“Hell, Adam.”

“What’d I say?”

“I don’t appreciate having my concerns brushed off like that. And what you said is an image I could live without.” She stood. “I think I should leave.”

“No, please stay. I’ll try to be more sensitive about things.” Not his forté.

She dropped back down. “All right, Adam. I’ll stay.”

Whew! He dodged that bullet. Because he could understand exactly why Olivia was upset about the shower. Had their roles been reversed, he would have been furious.

* * *

Her cell phone rang at six that night while Beth was running a bath. She’d checked the ID. If it was Reg, she wouldn’t answer. But it wasn’t Reg.

Beth clicked on immediately. “Hey, sis, how you doing?”

Her older sister Bianca said, “I’m well. I called to hear about you.”

“Hmm.” Bianca knew everything about her and Adam, even her residual feelings for him. “Something’s happened with Adam.”

“Yeah?” Bianca didn’t judge. She loved that about her. “And did you help him?”

“I didn’t have much choice.” Even to her own ears, the defense sounded weak. “The girls were staying with him. They called me in a panic that he was burning up with fever.”

“Understandable that you went over.”

“Not to the people each of us is dating. Reg, in particular was furious.”

A pause. “He’s a macho guy. I’m not surprised.”

“You don’t like him very much, do you?”

“He’s okay. Sometimes, though, when I’ve seen you together, he’s possessive about you. Pushy in it.”

“Yeah, he did that today.” She told him about the *reclaim* comment.

“Oh, my God. How Neanderthal.” Bianca was a feminist through and through. Even now, when she stayed home with her three kids, she was active in keeping rights for women.

“It upset me. A lot.”

“It should. Was Adam glad you came?”

“Yes, surprisingly.”

“Doesn’t surprise me, little sister.”

“You like him.”

“I never liked how unyielding he got. How stern and strict. I never thought that was right for the girls.”

“Which was why I ultimately couldn’t live with him anymore.”

“So be careful, sweetie.”

“I will. Now, tell me about the twins and my beautiful niece.”

“She’s a doll. The twins are terrors.”

Beth laughed. "I want to hear all about it."

Chapter 2

“Man trapped on roof. Rescue Squad, Trucks 2 and 5 go into service.”

Three days after Adam got sick, in the middle of the morning, Adam’s squad hurried to the bay, donned their gear and sped to the scene, sirens screeching. They arrived at a downtown office building four stories high. Battalion Chief Lewis stood at Incident Command. Adam hurried to him. “Hey, Chief, what’s going on?”

“A worker was hanging a banner on the roof and fell off the ladder. He’s hurt. Get your rappelling gear and lay a ladder up to the roof. Take the basket that way too. It won’t fit in the elevator.”

Adam hurried to the rig and explained the situation to his squad. Riley and Kramer slid the ladder off the truck and the others removed the rappelling equipment including the basket. They hurried to the front of the building and propped the ladder up against it. Adam climbed up first, then Early and Mason eased up the rectangular basket. Kramer and Riley carried the gear.

Once at the roof, Adam stepped off and was hit by a blast of wind in his face. Not ideal conditions for rappelling. Lt. Kramer came next and guided the basket onto the roof; then Riley, who’d braced the thing underneath, got off. The rest of

his crew climbed over. Adam knelt down near the injured man lying on the flat floor. “Hey, buddy, how you doing?”

“My leg hurts like hell.” It was at an odd angle.

“What’s your name?” Making a connection with the victim was crucial so they could keep him calm.

“Luke.”

“We’ll get you down safely, Luke.”

Adam stood and faced the group. “Anyone done this before?”

Big Joe Early, a recent transfer to the rescue squad and a hulk of a guy as strong as hell waved a hand. “I’ve held the rappelling ropes in a lot incidents but I’m too big to go down the ladder with the basket.”

“I’ve done some rappelling drills,” John Mason said. “Nothing like this.”

“Me, neither.”

Kramer, a mother of three, had rappelling experience but told Adam she’d rather not go down today. Adam said, “That’s cool, Kay. This is an unusual situation and only happened once in my twenty-year career.”

“Then I guess it’s you.” This from his lieutenant.

“Kramer, get out a collar from the bag Riley brought up. You and Riley, get Luke in the basket and secure him while I gear up.” He’d go first to guide the basket down.

Adam took off his air pack and his turnout coat, leaving on his helmet and gloves and turnout pants. Riley opened up the harness. He stepped into one side then the other and pulled it

up. Riley secured the rappelling rope on Adam, then Early and Mase tied it on a heavy air conditioning unit. Adam fastened the harness, then Riley rechecked it, a practice of the department. No one took chances when rappelling.

When the victim was secured, Adam went to the edge of the roof and turning inward, stepped onto the ladder and descended a few rungs. The wind picked up, blowing him sideways. Calmly, Adam anchored his feet on the building and stepped right to get back to the ladder. Then, with everybody on top ready, the basket came over the roof onto the ladder.

Dangling beneath, Adam grabbed the end of the bulky wired bed from below, holding on to take some weight. With nerve-wracking slowness, Big Joe Early and Mase let go of the ropes.

One step down, two.

Two more.

Something flew by. A fucking bird traveled right in front of his face. “Come on, God.”

A few more rungs down.

Luke said, “Man, what a rescue. I’ll buy you a beer, Captain when this is done.”

Adam laughed. “You’re on, Luke.”

His heart pounding, Adam’s toe finally touched the ground. Firefighters from Truck 2 rushed to them. Two medics put the basket on a yellow gurney and wheeled it over and into the waiting ambulance.

Adam took in a couple of breaths. He didn't realize his hands were shaking. After a few seconds, he disentangled himself from the harness.

Early, Kay and Mason gathered the ropes and Adam's gear on top, then came down with them. Adam took back his turnout coat and dangled it over his shoulder.

Riley had his tank. "I'll carry this over, Cap."

When they started toward the truck, a reporter rushed to them. "Captain Stark, how did you feel dangling on the rope when the wind blew you off the ladder?"

"I was concerned but got back in place. The whole rescue was a success."

"Were you nervous?"

"Not nervous. Hyped up, I guess. This is a one of kind rescue."

"You're a hero," she said.

"My team are heroes. But thanks."

He checked in with Incident Command, then met everybody at the rig. "You did a great job, all of you. Thank you for your calmness and expertise. And your honesty. I assure you, your reluctance to be the point man won't go against you."

"What did the guy say on the way down?" Kramer asked.

"He said he'd buy me a beer."

"Then you owe us one, Captain." This from Riley.

"Be glad to. After shift?"

Big Joe Early smiled. “You’re on.”

They were all happy. It was good to see.

* * *

Beth wasn’t due at the gallery for another few hours, so she switched on the TV while she cleaned up the kitchen.

“Breaking news here at WCCR.”

She glanced up. A headline came on: *Firefighters perform daring save.*

A video of the incident played with a voice over. As a former firefighter’s wife, her mind went on high alert. “Only hours ago, a daring rescue by America’s Bravest at the site of a call. A team of firefighters saved a stranded man who’d gotten hurt when he fell off an A-frame ladder on a roof. Here are the highlights.”

A team of firefighters climbed to the top of a four-story building with equipment and a basket...

They lowered a firefighter down. He didn’t wear his coat with his name on it. He rappelled down a ladder propped up against a brick building and the wind blew him off it. Her heart hammered in her chest. He toed his way back to the ladder and took the weight of a rectangular basket from the bottom. The camera panned in.

It was Adam.

Beth dropped the pan she held and it clattered and splashed in the sink.

They continued to lower the basket as both rescuer and victim descended with excruciating slowness. She could see a huge man at the top of the building letting out more and more of the rope.

Beth literally held her breath watching Adam descend. It took forever getting down to the ground. Finally, they reached the bottom and other firefighters took over.

The camera panned to Adam and a reporter after the incident. He answered questions about the rescue with aplomb. He didn't even look anxious.

“Goddamned son of a bitch.”

He'd been sick only three days ago, so sick he couldn't get out of bed. Then three days later the idiot executes a daring rescue? She took her phone out of her pocket and was about to punch in his number when the girls came rushing into the kitchen. They seemed...excited. “Mom, we saw Dad on the news.”

“Yeah, I saw it too.”

Janelle added, “He was so cool and brave.”

“He was.” She bit her tongue to conceal what she really thought.

“Seems like he's all better,” Janey put in.

“Seems like.”

“I—” the phone rang cutting off Janelle's next comment. “Answer it Mom. It might be him.”

It was. “Hello.”

“Beth, hi. I wanted to warn you and the girls about what happened early this morning.”

“We all saw it on the news.”

A hesitation. “You sound pissed.”

“Um, do you want to talk to the girls?”

“Well, yeah.”

She put the cell on speaker and walked out of the kitchen. She didn't want to hear them twitter about his heroism. In the bathroom, she studied herself in the mirror and said aloud for emphasis, “You gotta pull away from him now, Beth. You can't worry about this man. You have to curb all your feelings about him. Or it'll destroy you—again.”

* * *

“Here's to Adam.” Tim Daniels raised a glass of beer to his friend as a low murmur of voices backdropped them at Wink's Bar, where they'd met the night of the rescue.

“Here, here.” Tommy clinked Tim's glass.

“Good going, buddy.” From Jarek.

Noah grinned. “Proud of you, bro.”

“Thanks guys.”

The beer was crisp and cold as Adam sipped. It was great being with the guys again. Though he never shared his background with anyone, he liked discussing things with them.

“You must have gotten your strength back pretty quick,” Jarek stated. “You were sick a few days ago.”

“Yeah, I recuperate fast.”

“So why aren’t you smiling?”

He rolled his eyes. “Beth gave me shit about the call so soon after I was ill.”

“Beth?” Tim frowned. “What’s she got to do with this?”

“When I was sick, the girls were staying with me. They got home from school and called her because they got scared I had such a high fever. They asked her to come over. She spent more than twenty-four hours with us. After the rescue, I called them and she told me she didn’t nurse me through a fever just so I can take this kind of risk when I probably wasn’t strong enough.”

“You know what you were sick with?” Tim asked.

“A 24-hour bug. But I feel fine now.”

“You must,” Jarek said. “to have pulled off rappelling.”

“Not according to her.”

Tommy asked, “Beth didn’t used to be this way when you were married.”

“I know. She understood the risks firefighters take. She supported my career. Not anymore, I guess.”

“Doesn’t she have a boyfriend?” Jarek asked.

“She does. Get this, the hippie painter came over the next morning to *reclaim* her, he said.”

Tommy whistled. “Sexist language. I can’t imagine Stef taking that well.”

“Beth didn’t either. But there’s more. When he was there, Olivia showed up. It was a goddamned circus.” He shook his head. “Enough of me. Tell us how Stef and you are doing Tommy.”

“You sure? This is a pretty big deal.”

“I’m sure.”

Tommy’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Stef moved in with us after we bought an engagement ring.”

“Rose and Gus good with that?” Adam asked.

“Yeah, they love her. Not to mention having another pair of hands to take care of Joey is welcome.”

“How *is* the boy?” Noah would ask about the baby.

“Super. He’s sleeping at least four hours a night before he has to eat again.”

“Wow.” Noah sighed. “That’s more than I got with any of my babies when they were 3 weeks old.”

“We’re lucky.” His eyes moistened. “Boy, am I happy.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Not for a bit. We have to get our bearings with Joey first. I went back on the line this week, though.”

“Congratulations.” This from Tim.

A waitress brought over a couple of bowls of popcorn, which smelled heavenly. They took handfuls.

“How are *you*, buddy?” Adam asked Noah. He and Chloe had been married nearly a week.

“Ecstatic. Deana took the boys for a few days so Chloe and I could have time to ourselves.”

“How was it?” Adam wiggled his brows.

“Surprisingly hot.”

“Pregnancy hormones,” Tim, Jarek and Adam said together.

They all laughed.

Tim turned to Jarek. “Lacey feeling well?”

“Uh-huh. She’s got a ton of energy. And she’s glowing.”

“Sweet.” Tommy smiled. “How’s work for Ava? She adjusting?”

“Yeah, all the shit about Preston died down. She’s happy to be back. We’re still finding balance in our lives. My girls have stepped up, though.”

“Your girls are darling,” Noah put in. “My boys love them.”

Adam said, “My girls do, too.”

It warmed everyone that their children were close.

Someone approached the table. “Hey, guys,” Carson said as if they weren’t estranged.

“Hey, Carson.” Of course, Tommy stood and hugged him. Carson tolerated it. When Tom stepped back, he said, “Join us.”

“No thanks. I’m with some guys from the department. They wanted to come here.”

“Glad they did,” Tim added. “We miss you.”

He literally stepped back. “I gotta go. I came over to congratulate Adam on his save yesterday.”

Adam took a deep breath and blew it out. “Thanks.” But his tone was cold. Carson shrugged and left.

Tim frowned. “Adam, you gotta get over Carson leaving us.”

“Why?”

“It’s mean,” Noah put in. “And you can be nice when you want to be.” He gestured to the others. “We all wish you’d stop badmouthing him.”

“I’ll keep it to myself. I’m going to the end of the bar to catch the playoff games. Come over when you’re done.”

The Brothers of Fire watched him leave. One thing they all agreed on. They didn’t want another guy to leave the group.

* * *

Lakeview Restaurant was upscale and expensive. They walked into the hushed atmosphere, Reg’s hand at Beth’s back. Beth noted the colors and shapes first. Oval tables, stark white cloths with black and white napkins. Starbursts chandeliers. The art on the walls fit right in. They were seated off to the right of the main room; a demure round globe set in wood was between them.

“I like this décor,” Reg said.

“It reminds me of your work. The paintings on the wall are all modern, like you, Picasso and Braque.”

“Why thank you for putting me in their league, darling.” He gave her a sexy once-over. “And you look lovely.”

She’d bought a new peach linen dress today that swirled at her calves; it was sleeveless with a demure dip in the bodice. She felt good in it. She needed to feel good tonight with Reg after all the shit with her ex-husband lately. He had her on edge long enough.

“So,” he said, taking her hand over the table. “Am I forgiven for my Neanderthal moment?”

“Yes. I don’t want to talk about it or think about that whole mess.”

He nodded. The preordered champagne arrived. Beth chose good brands for the shop’s exhibits but when she saw the Dom Perignon, she was surprised. “So extravagant. Why?”

“I want to spoil you.”

“I like the sound that.” In their early days, Adam had spoiled her too even when they had little money.

The bubbly was dry and tart. They sipped and made small talk. She laughed when he told funny stories about his aging grandfather. Reg supported him and visited him in the nursing home often. He seemed interested in Janey’s art club and Janelle’s drama endeavors. When the waiter set down a plate of shrimp cocktail, she asked, “Did you order for me?”

“For us, darling.”

That didn't sit well. Not that she didn't like shrimp and the Beef Wellington that came later. But she squelched the irritation at his presumptuousness.

Served on a wooden board, the beef was rare and juicy, the crust crisp, the asparagus al dente and the mashed potatoes cheesy.

They sipped the Dom Perignon again after dinner. "I hope you didn't order dessert because I'm stuffed."

"I couldn't resist the chocolate lava cake. We'll have it boxed up. But I want to do something before that."

"What?"

He stood, pulled her up and took her hand. Oh, no, he got down on one knee. Drew a box out of his pocket, took out...a ring. A huge diamond ring.

Murmurs filled the restaurant. "Beth Stark, will you marry me?"

Her mouth dropped open.

* * *

A host led Adam and Olivia into the restaurant. Before they sat, he stopped short at the sight off to the right. "What the fuck?"

Olivia's eyes widened. "Adam, shush. Everyone's staring at us."

He didn't give a flip about that. All he could do was stare at the proposal happening in front of them. Which, he now noted, stopped all conversation, too.

Beth was staring at him like he was the devil incarnate. Reggie threw a venomous look at him, but finally stood.

Olivia gripped Adam's hand. "You need to apologize to them."

"Like hell." He walked to the table with Olivia following.

"Adam. What do you think you're doing?"

Finally, his heart slowed down and he realized what he'd done. "I...I...I don't know what to say."

Beth's said tightly, "How about I'm sorry?"

He glanced at Reg and lifted his chin. "I...I can't say anything I don't mean."

"What the hell, Adam?" She kept her voice low but now she was mad.

Olivia stepped forward. "We're sorry we interrupted. I hope we didn't ruin your night."

Reg stood, creating a rumble through the other diners. "Well, you did."

Beth asked, "Olivia, do you mind if I borrow Adam?" She didn't wait for an answer. She was at his side, his elbow in her hand and she pushed him to walk with her. She wore some new, exotic perfume and it filled his head.

When they got outside, twilight had fallen but he could see her clearly in the outdoor lighting. "Bethy, listen."

She arched a brow. “Go ahead.”

“I’m...not sure why I reacted that way. Maybe because I don’t like him.”

“Well, I do. And you ruined a perfectly nice gesture.” Though she was glad she didn’t have time to react. Reg had shocked her with a proposal. And she hated surprises.

“I am sorry I made a scene.”

She watched the man she’d loved since she was eighteen and softened inside. “Why on earth did you do it?”

He ran a hand through his hair. He wore it longer now. She liked it that way. “I honestly don’t know. That was so unlike me.”

“It was.” She could feel her throat clog. “Before Reg and I got serious, you rebuffed me every time I implied I wanted a second chance with you. And now this?”

“Maybe it was dog in the manger stuff.”

She gaped in horror. “The Aesop’s fable?”

“Yeah. The dog who prevented all other animals from eating the hay when he himself was a carnivore.”

“That’s great. The story’s an allegory for a person who prevents others from enjoying something *despite having no use for it.*” She shook her head. “So you have no use for me? I’m the mother of your children.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. Goddamn it, I’m...confused.”

She blurted out, “So am I!”

From the corner of her eye, Beth saw Olivia and Reg come into view. Beth turned away from him abruptly and walked up to the porch. Reg said, “Beth, we’ve been waiting at reception. People are gawking at us.”

“I know you hate that.”

Reaching out, he took her hand. “Can we please leave now?”

“Yes, of course.”

Olivia put her shawl around her shoulders. “Let’s head out now, too, Adam. I’ve lost my appetite.”

Beth gave Adam a look that could melt ice and walked away.

Chapter 3

Beth didn't sleep much last night after the scene with Adam. She couldn't keep from replaying Reg's proposal and Adam's absurd comments. Now, her shoulders sagged and her stomach felt queasy, a reaction she suffered when she had insomnia. She was on her third cup of coffee when Janelle rushed in. "Mom, you and Daddy and Reg are on the news!"

She hadn't thought this could get any worse. "F-for what?"

Janelle sat down with her phone. "I'm almost an adult, Mom. You don't have to sugarcoat anything anymore. For Janey maybe, not me."

"All right. I know what you're going to say. But where did you see it?"

"On Reg's Facebook page." Her girls were on his Facebook page? "A lady having dinner at the restaurant said she saw Reg proposing and filmed it. But she never expected what happened. Should I play it for you?"

"I guess." Her voice was shaky.

Janelle put her hand on her arm. "Mom, this isn't the end of the world. It could be something positive."

Beth was surprised. The girls were polite but never warmed up to Reg. "You want me to marry Reg?"

"No, I mean with Dad."

“Oh, honey, no matter what that video shows, Dad and I aren’t getting back together.” Even though she still didn’t know why the hell he acted like that last night.

Her eyes narrowed. “Whatever you say.” Which always meant she didn’t agree.

Janelle pressed play.

And there they were, at the Lakeview Restaurant, Reg down on one knee. She hadn’t noticed how silent the diners had gotten, how Reg gazed up at her with adoration—and the frown on her face. She moaned now.

Enter Adam. He stalked over to them. Spat out the obscenity. What she also hadn’t internalized was the sadness on *his* face. Holy Mother of Christ!

“I’m sorry you had to see this,” Beth somehow got out. “Maybe none of your school friends will know it’s on his site.”

“I don’t care about that. Mom, Dad looked so hurt.”

“I didn’t realize that. I thought he was mad.” A dog-in-the-manger reaction, he’d called it. That had infuriated her.

“He has to go to work today. You know how those guys are. They razz each other about everything. I feel sorry for him.”

“Maybe that’ll stop his knee-jerk reactions in the future.”

“He used to be different, Mom. I remember. And you told me how he was when he got you to the hospital when you had me. You said you never loved him more.”

All that was true. He’d drastically changed when his brother died. Best get off this topic. “Enough of this. Go wake

Janey for school.”

“I will.” She stood. “Why don’t you call Aunt Bianca and talk to her. It can be your weekly phone call.”

“That’s a good idea.”

But when she sat back down, her mind drifted back to what Janelle had mentioned, when she’d been born...

“It’s okay, love, I got you.” Adam slowly lowered her to the back seat.

She was in so much pain she could barely get out, “We’re not going to make it.”

“Remember that I’m an EMT with advanced training and I’ve helped birth babies. If necessary, I can deliver this little one. Now keep breathing. I’ll hold your hand when I start to drive.”

She gripped his hand when another contraction hit. “God.....” She’d never felt this kind of pain.

From the front seat, he said, “Breathe, baby, breathe.”

She breathed through this one.

“Time them.” His voice was calm. Soothing.

“I will.”

Three more terrible contractions before the car finally halted. He got out of the front seat, opened the back door and leaned in. “Now sit up and I’ll carry you inside.”

“What if....”

“Shh. I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

He helped her sit up, eased her out and picked her up. He held her to his chest as he walked hurriedly inside. He felt so warm, so secure, she nestled into him. “We gotta have a room,” he said to the nurse at reception in the ER.

“All the rooms are taken. Sit over—”

Another contraction. Beth cried out and gripped his shirt. “No, ma’am. No time to sit.”

He strode to the treatment room. Another patient was at the door when an aide came out. The woman stopped. “Take her first. She needs it more than me.”

Inside, he walked down the hall. Laid her on a cot. “Now then, you can have our kid anytime...”

Beth hadn't realized she was crying until she felt the moisture on her cheeks. Janelle was right, he used to be a different man.

She picked up the phone to call Bianca. With the proposal, the tape, the memories she needed her sister.

* * *

Unsurprisingly, Olivia wouldn't stay over last night. Adam didn't blame her. He'd been a jerk in the restaurant and was metaphorically kicking his butt since he got up. Then, Tim Daniels had called him and told him there was a video online. He knew he shouldn't watch it, but he couldn't resist. His behavior was worse than he remembered.

Now, as he pulled into the lot of the Rescue Squad on the side of the fire academy, he tried to blank his mind. But instead he thought about how the guys would tease him mercilessly. They were probably playing the old song, *This Diamond Ring* by Gary Lewis and the Playboys.

Parking in his spot at the house, he noticed the truck was out with the night shift. Reluctantly, he exited and trudged inside. Huh. No music. No talking. But he found his crew in the kitchen, seated around the table. He halted in the doorway.

Big Joe Early got up and crossed to him. Joe usually kept to himself. But today, he slid his arm around Adam. “We’re all sorry about last night. About your embarrassment in front of the whole world.”

Adam swallowed hard. Then, “Why aren’t you razzing me, or is that coming?”

“It’s not coming.” Mase, the bachelor of the group, got up, poured him coffee and plunked it on the table. “Sit, Cap.”

Kay tugged out his chair. When he dropped down, she squeezed his shoulders. A mom with two kids, she was usually no nonsense at the firehouse.

“H-how’d you find out?” he asked, not knowing what else to say.

Sean Riley waved. “From me. My wife follows Worthington’s Facebook page.” Sean was happily married with three kids, all resembling him with black hair and searing blue eyes.

“Oh boy. So you all saw me make the biggest ass of myself ever.”

“No,” Kay said softly, “We saw a man in love’s reaction.”

“I’m not in love with her.” He couldn’t be. Still...

“That doesn’t matter now.” This from Early. “We want you to know we’re here to support you.”

“Thanks.”

“Now,” Mase put in, “I’m gonna cook breakfast. I stopped and got the fixings and some tasty pastries for after we train.”

Adam stood and picked up his coffee. “I need a minute, so I’m going to my office. Call me when the food is ready.” He got to the doorway then turned, “Really, thanks guys.”

“No problem.” This from Sean. “We got your back in everything.”

* * *

Emotion swamped him, so he took the time to settle himself, then his cell rang. The ID said Janelle was calling. She should be in school now. “Hello, honey. What’s wrong?”

“Hi, Dad. Nothing’s wrong. It’s a free block for me so I called you. How are you?”

She knew. “You mean after last night?”

“Yeah, Mom’s pretty bummed.”

“So am I. I apologize for my behavior. I acted badly.”

“No you didn’t, Dad. You acted like a man in love.”

He kept hearing that. “Aw, baby, we aren’t going down that road again. Didn’t your mother tell you that?”

“She did. But are you saying I shouldn’t believe what I can see with my own eyes?”

His girl was getting smarter by the day. “Of course not. You misinterpreted it, is all. I was selfish and stupid and I’m mortified by the whole thing.”

“I’m sorry you are. Really. But I saw what I saw.”

When she disconnected he put his head in his hands. He’d screwed up big time.

You should find out why.

The notion came out of nowhere. He squashed it, like his father had taught him. Man, he wished he could forget the lessons he learned from the strong unyielding man...

“Ten huh!” The Colonel barked out the order to his two sons.

Adam and Aaron raced to the wall and stood with back straight, eyes ahead, hands at their sides.

“Your shirt is untucked, Aaron.” He picked up a pad. “Another demerit.” A demerit meant punishment. “No dessert tonight.”

He moved on to Adam. “Ah, my boy, you look perfect. As always.” Adam struggled daily to please his dad, whereas his older brother taunted him. He had to know his shirt was untucked.

“Now sit. Martha, bring the food.”

His mother scurried in with a platter of beef and set it in front of his father. A bowl of potatoes accompanied the meat. The Colonel picked up a big knife and began cutting.

He stopped after one piece. "It's not done enough. You have one task at dinner time. Get a meal together."

His mother cowered. "I'm sorry, Colonel."

"You will be if you do something like this again. Now pick up the plate and fix this."

With shaky hands, his mother got the beef and absconded. Adam trembled. He loved his mother but didn't dare criticize his father.

Unfortunately, Aaron dared. "Hell, Dad, she's your wife. You're supposed to treat her better." Of all the things his boys hated about their father, the way he treated his wife was the worst.

"You're so fucking soft, boy. Now get. You won't have any dinner."

Aaron got up with a furious expression on his face. "I don't care. Stop treatin' Mama like shit."

His father's chair scraped back. His face a flaming red, the Colonel marched over to Aaron, who stood his ground. The man who'd raised them lifted his hand and hit his brother hard. Aaron stumbled backward, banged his head on the wall and went down. He lay still and silent on the floor. Adam wanted to help him, but he was afraid to....

Now, Adam straightened. For a long time, he vowed never to be like his dad. But when Aaron died Adam regressed. He couldn't stand the pain.

* * *

Beth walked into Artistic Gems already tired from the morning. Her gallery hours were from noon to nine. Beth worked till closing once a week and then Mary Kay and Les, a grad student from Elmwood who worked part time, shared the other nights. And a day a week Mary Kay spent the whole time they were open.

Beth wasn't scheduled to work but had come in anyway. Reg had gone on a professional tour of four galleries. He'd been furious about Adam's behavior last night and livid that she wouldn't answer his proposal after the debacle at the restaurant. Thankfully, she wouldn't have to deal with him for a while.

She put her things in the drawer in the office and set up a pot of coffee. Turning on her computer to check later for online sales—she grabbed her tablet and walked out into the main showroom. And sniffed. She'd put potpourri in a small bowl and its subtle scent filled the space. Taupe walls, expert lighting and hardwood floors, the main room was large. She started to work at this shop when Janey went to kindergarten and Beth had stayed on, graduating to full time and eventually becoming manager. Adam agreed she'd save all the money, and when the original owner decided to sell the building and the business, she had enough for a downpayment on the place. An angel investor—her brother in law had put her in contact with him— helped her buy the business too. She was paying him back with proceeds from sales.

Beth scanned her paintings. She had a unique collection of contemporary art, which she switched up frequently for viewers and buyers. Walking around, she made notes on her tablet. Three artists' contracts were up in two weeks. She didn't renew them because she hadn't sold enough of their work. She called up which artists had requested her services and pictured them in the empty spots. Then she went back to the office and sat at her desk. Because it was so quiet today, she clicked into the online news.

It was an ordinary call, the chief said, and two rigs showed up. The Rescue Squad and Engine 6. No one knew it would end in the death of a firefighter. No firefighter had been killed in Crystal City in a decade. Names are not being released until the family is notified.

Beth's heartbeat hammered in her chest. She tried to reason with herself. Adam had kept her as next to kin because of the girls and someone would have come to her sooner to tell her if the victim was Adam.

She stood, moved around but it didn't help. Though she rarely called him at the station house, today she needed to. She punched in his cell. It rang several times before she heard, "Stark here."

Her knees buckled and she had to sit back down.

"Hello?"

"Adam it's Beth. I saw the news but no names were given."

"Hell. I didn't know that. I would have called you to tell the girls I'm safe."

“They know I would have gotten in touch by now if you were...” She couldn’t say the words.

Silence.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“It was a routine fire, Bethy. My crew went inside for search and rescue and I was talking to the lieutenant on the other rig when someone screamed, then guys shouted. We turned to see a rookie fall off the roof. We rushed over. Since I was the senior member on site, I dropped to my knees. Felt his pulse. There was none. I started CPR and by the time we got the mobile defibrillator, we couldn’t revive him.”

“I’m so sorry. That must have been awful for you.”

“I-it was, Bethy. Horrific.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“You’d want to after what happened at the restaurant?”

“That’s not important right now.”

“Just a sec.” He spoke to someone else. Then came back. “I gotta go, love. Would you text the kids and tell them I’m all right?”

“Sure. Anything you need.” As soon as she said the words, she remembered when they were married how she used to comfort him after a bad call.

They made love.

“I’ll remember that.” For just a few seconds, there was warmth and amusement in his voice.

* * *

From the assembled stands, Beth heard the sorrowful wail of bagpipes even before the procession appeared. The weepy sound crept its way into her heart. Finally, the solemn parade started moving. The bagpipers came first, each man wearing a kilt and plaids, walking in lock step.

Next, Engine 6, Jamie Travis' station house truck, rolled slowly by. When she saw the casket on its flatbed, draped with black bunting, flowers sprawled across it, her eyes misted.

The rig crept down the street. Other firefighters marched behind it, outfitted in full dress uniform of navy blue. The young man's crew, she guessed. When the morbid parade moved totally past her, she noted a turnout coat, boots and helmet fastened to the back of the engine. That was it. Tears leaked out.

Family walked next, a father, a mother, three women held up by their men, and finally one little boy who was carried by an older man.

When she caught sight of the number of Crystal City Firefighters also in dress blues, she sighed. Every member of the department who wasn't on shift joined in double file down Main Street, holding themselves rigid, eyes straight ahead. The chief's face solemn.

As one of pallbearers, Adam marched with Jamie's group. He'd told Beth the chief suggested him because he'd tried to revive the boy.

The procession came to a halt in front of the church. Her throat clogged as they eased the casket off the truck and onto a platform. All six of them wheeled it inside. Jamie's group was openly crying but Adam was stone-faced.

* * *

After the service, they walked a short distance to the cemetery. When they arrived, colleagues, family and friends were positioned around the grave. The pall bearers stood in behind them. From there, Adam could see the crossed aerial ladders at the entrance, forming an arch under which the truck had ridden. A solemn sight. He could hear women crying, men too.

Off to the left, the mahogany casket bore Jamie's helmet on top. The sight of the helmet gutted Adam but he kept the feelings inside.

Even when Chief Redman stepped up to the microphone. "The alarm code 716 signals the return of a truck to the firehouse. We will ring out the code now, to welcome home firefighter Jamie Lincoln Travis one last time."

A fire department bell clanged.

Wrenching sobs from many at the gathering accompanied the chimes. Jamie's lieutenant broke away from the officers and pulled the flag off the casket and then Adam took one end and a guy from his house the other. They folded it. The crew member handed it to Lt. Jones. Then the officer crossed to the family and held out the flag. "On behalf of the Crystal City

Fire Department, I am honored to present you with this flag, a symbol of the country and the people your son served.”

Another crew member gave five-year-old Jimmy the helmet.

Finally, *Taps* rang out over the sprawling cemetery, and then the funeral was over. But Adam knew its ramifications were just beginning.

Chapter 4

Beth found Adam's car in the parking lot and waited for him there. She didn't go to the cemetery because she didn't want to be a gawker, but she had to see him after what she'd witnessed, both for his sake and for hers. She knew that after something like this, there was a get together, possibly at a restaurant. She'd never crash that either, but he'd have to drive there, so she sat on the grassy hill behind the parking lot and waited.

After an interminable hour, she saw him trudging toward her, his head down, shoulder stooped. He wore his hat so she couldn't see his face. She stood when he reached the car and crossed to him.

He froze when he saw her. Then he fell into her arms and sobbed. "I failed. I couldn't save him."

"I'm sure you feel that way now. But later on you'll see it in a different light."

Beth hated when people said things like *Nobody could have helped*. Instead, she'd lived with him for a long time and knew to validate his feelings in the dark times.

When he drew back, his light complexion was red and his eyes bloodshot. "Fuck. I hate this."

She was embarrassed but she said anyway, "I know you have to get to the gathering so I won't delay you. I, um, had to see you."

His eyes narrowed on her. “Why, Bethy? Why did you show up at the funeral?”

Her heart twisted in her chest. “You didn’t want me there? I thought...” She raked a hand through her hair. “I thought I might be able to help you.”

His face softened. She’d loved that look that she hadn’t seen in a while. “Like you did when we were married?”

Without questioning her motives, she raised her chin. “Yes. If that’s what you want.”

“Is it what *you* want?”

Again, she locked gazes with him and took the plunge. “Yes, I do.”

* * *

She drove to his rented condo. There’d be no interruptions here. He fisted his hands on his knees all the way there. He blanked his mind. He wouldn’t cry again. But he needed an outlet. He glanced over at Beth. Her auburn hair was mussed from the wind. She was biting her lip, which meant she was nervous. Or excited.

They turned onto River Road and reached his parking space, exited the car and he took her hand in his. She linked their fingers. He fumbled with the keys to his door until she finally grabbed them and opened the lock.

He led her directly to the bedroom.

Once there, he gave her one last chance. “I have to ask again, is this what you want, Beth?”

“It is.” She removed her light blazer and went for the buttons on her dress.

He stayed her hands and undid them himself; it fell to the floor. She wore that damned sexy underwear that plumped her breasts and encircled her hips. She unsnapped the bra, slid off the panties.

He discarded his coat, threw it and his hat on the chair. She yanked at his tie and tossed it aside. He was out of his shirt when her hands went to his waist. The jingle of the belt, the rasp of his zipper inflamed him. He kicked off his shoes and stripped the rest of the way.

And then he kissed her. Naked chests together, hips pressed against the other’s, legs entangled. Her mouth was soft...at first. His wasn’t, so she met his greedy lips in kind. His head spiraled with memories...kissing her like this a million times, melding himself to her.

Once she gave into the feelings, Beth was out of her mind with desire. It had always been like this with Adam. Never with anyone else. They kissed long and hard. Then she slid onto the mattress. He grabbed some condoms from his drawer and climbed on and moved to the headboard. “Like we used to?” he asked of the position.

Beth couldn’t speak so she nodded and straddled him; he raised his knees and she lay back. They had access to each other’s genitals. He rolled on a condom.

She was wet and ready. “Now,” she said.

“Yes, now. I need to be inside you, love.”

Raising up on her knees, she came down hard. She went up again. He thrust. It only took two more until they lost their minds together.

Afterward, he stretched out his legs and she laid against his chest. He smelled like he used to when they were together. His chest was tickly with a sprinkling of light blond hair.

He ran a hand down her back. Said nothing. She was afraid to talk. They reveled in the moment.

Finally she sat up. Ran her hands down his arms, scratching him a little. “I don’t regret this.”

“Neither do I.”

Her fingers flirted with his groin. He felt himself grow hard. “It’s going to cause personal problems for us both.”

“Well, as long as that’s true....”

She kissed her way down his body so she could make him come this way. He tasted salty. Again, it was what they’d done when one of them wanted more.

This time, both of them wanted it.

* * *

After Beth dropped off Adam at the gathering, she drove to a secluded part of Denison Park and shut off the engine. She was starting to get shaky. So she punched in her sister’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Bianca.”

“Hi, honey. So glad you called. I have a free hour and I’d love to chat.”

“Good. But this...” Her voice got hoarse now and tears clouded her eyes. “I need to talk.”

“Go ahead. I’m sitting outside with coffee.”

“I’m at Denison Park.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I just dropped Adam off at a firefighter gathering. B, a young firefighter died.”

A gasp. “I’m so sorry.”

“Adam was devastated. He was at the call and tried to save the guy after he fell off a roof. But CPR and the electrodes couldn’t revive him.”

“Then I’m sorry for Adam.”

Nothing.

“Come on, sis. Why were you with him?”

“I went to the funeral. Waited for him at his car. Long story short, we made love afterward.”

“Wow! I shouldn’t be surprised, though. That’s how you comforted him after a bad call.” There was humor in her voice.

“I wanted it, too.”

“Okay.”

Nothing.

Then Bianca asked, “Where do you see this going?”

“I have no idea. Maybe we can forget about it.”

“That’s one path. Or you could try to make your relationship work again.”

“You weren’t on his side, Bianca, those last few years we were together.”

“Neither were you. After his brother Aaron died, Adam became a different man.”

“He’s been acting strange with me. I told you about how he got sick and how he acted at the proposal.” She sighed. “And he’s been softer with the girls. Using endearments with them.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Do you want another chance with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ah... Why don’t we list the pros and cons.”

“My sister, always the logical one.”

“The logical one who loves you.”

* * *

Adam was late to the party at Denison Park, which was big enough to accommodate all the firefighters who’d been at the funeral. Beth had put the car in park and turned to him. Neither said anything more, but he kissed her hard before he got out. She drove away.

Now, he jammed his hands in his pockets. The fire department had paid for the use of the park and pavilion as well as the catered food. The mayor also gave them a dispensation so they could have beer today. He needed a drink.

God, what had he and Beth done? Oh, he needed her then, though he could have gone to Olivia. But he hadn't wanted another woman.

The crowd milled around in groups with their best buds. As he threaded his way through the crowd, he passed laughter and sobbing. The Brothers of Fire were seated at a long picnic table. He got a beer from the keg and joined them.

They looked over when he climbed onto the bench next to Noah, whose face was ravaged. The poor guy was the most sensitive of all of them.

Adam said, "Hi, guys."

Noah knocked shoulders with him. "Hi."

"You're late, buddy." Tim commented. "We thought you might not come. This has been harder on you than the rest of us."

"Because I didn't save him."

"No," Tommy put in. "Because he couldn't be saved."

"You're right. I'm having a hard time internalizing that."

"Where'd you go?" Jarek asked.

"Um, back to my apartment."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

Luckily the chief walked over. His face was drawn and his eyes lined with grief. “How are my Brothers of Fire doing today?”

“As well as can be expected.” Tim scooched over. “Sit down for a bit.”

Redman joined him. “I cried like a baby today.”

“Join the club.” This from Noah.

“How you doing, Adam?” his boss asked.

“Better now.”

He saw Jarek and Tim exchange looks. Fuck, he didn’t care. He’d tell them some other time anyway.

“Suzanne Delaney is available for anybody who wants to talk. Actually, she’s here today.”

“I saw her at the funeral.” Noah shook his head. “This is awful.”

The chief shot the shit for a while then left. All eyes focused on Adam. “How come you feel better?” Jared pushed.

He said, “I was with Beth.” He sighed. “I’ll tell about it the next time we get together.”

“How about Saturday?” Tim suggested. They were still on the same shifts at work. “My wife and daughters are going to see a play at the community center.” Tim was still acting like the father of the group.

“I can do it.” Jarek. “Lacey’s going with Ava and the girls.”

Noah had to check with Chloe.

Tommy would have to run it by Stef and his grandparents.

Adam agreed.

Just then, Carson came up to them, as he had at Wink's. He stood tall and imposing in his white shirt and white hat brimming his face. His face was taut and his eyes blank.

"I wanted to touch base with all of you. Are you handling this?"

"Yes, all around."

But Adam got up and circled the table. Carson stepped back like he thought Adam might deck him. "I'm doing as well as could be expected." He held out his hand. "How are you?"

They shook. "Taking it hard like the rest of us."

"Wanna sit?" Adam asked.

"No thanks. See you around."

"That was odd," Tommy said.

Noah frowned. "No it wasn't. He's hurting and was drawn to us."

"Yeah. It's a good thing." This from Tim.

"Think he'll come back to the group?" Adam asked him.

"You want him to?" Jarek asked.

"It'd be fine with me."

"Seriously? Why?" Tommy posed the question.

"After today, I'm tired of being mad at him. Don't make too much out of it," he said with fake scorn.

The rest chimed in. “Gotcha buddy.” Noah again.

“Sure.” Tim was smiling.

Jarek and Tommy only laughed.

Adam felt a little better as he sat with his friends. He glanced to where Carson had stood. He guessed grudges weighed you down.

* * *

Beth was nervous as hell when she walked into Magnolia’s. Reg had returned late last night and texted her. She didn’t answer until morning. She smoothed down her calf-length skirt and pulled at the hem of her top.

The crowd here was hushed, as usual. She saw Reg sitting in a corner wearing taupe gauzy pants and a light brown shirt. She’d always thought he was sexy in his dress-down clothes.

When she crossed to him, he stood, kissed her on the lips—lips Adam had made swollen with his attention only two days ago. He said, “Hello, darling,” in a low sexy voice.

“Hi.” She smiled as best she could. At least her heart stopped pounding.

They took seats and he poured her coffee from the pot on the table then put in sugar and cream. That irritated her.

“How was your trip?” she asked, struggling for neutral territory.

Reaching over the table, he said, “First off. I missed you.” When she didn’t respond quickly, he asked, “Did you miss me?”

“Of course I did. Now tell me about your exhibits.”

His face brightened. “They were fantastic. One place asked me to give a talk on my process. The audience was fascinated. I sold six paintings there.”

“Wow.”

“And people ordered more.”

“You’d better get busy.”

“I have inventory. The other cities were lucrative, too.”

“I’m happy for you.” Her joy was real.

“Now, what about you?”

“I ordered the paintings that I want to replace those three artists I told you about.”

“Not renewing a contract happened to me. I was devastated.”

“And look at you now. You’re famous.”

“I am. Anyone interested in the four in your gallery while I was gone?”

Her pulse sped up. “I’m afraid people in town aren’t buying paintings now.”

“Come to think of it, the waitress seemed sad and the cab driver last night was grumpy. Why is that?”

“A firefighter died, Reg. People are in mourning. He was only 24 and had a son.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I didn’t realize a whole town would be so affected.”

“You should have seen the attendance at the funeral.”

His brow furrowed. “You went to the funeral?”

“Of courses I went.” She bit her lip. “I still have friends in the department.”

“I’ll bet Adam was stoic. Sometimes I think that guy has ice water in his veins.”

“No, he wasn’t stoic. My girls are upset for him.”

“They love their father deeply. I hope someday they’ll love me like that.”

A half smile. “Girls and their daddies.”

He picked up a menu. “Let’s order.”

When the waiter came and left, Reg grasped her hands again. “I can’t wait for tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“I assumed you’d come over.”

“Um...I—”

“I missed making love, darling. I want you right now.”

“No, not tonight. Things are still raw.” *Boy, were they.* “I need to be with the girls.”

“Maybe they can stay at Adam’s.”

“I can ask. But truthfully, I’m sad too, so I don’t I think I could enjoy it.”

He startled back. “Are you serious?”

“Somebody died, Reg.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did you see Adam during all this?”

“After the funeral for a bit.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Beth?”

“Please, Reg. Understand.”

“I’m afraid I understand too well.” He rose and threw some money on the table, shook his head, then walked out.

Beth stared at him as he left. Why had she done that? She should’ve agreed to go over to his house tonight or told him outright what happened with Adam.

The waiter came back to their table carrying meals.

“I’m sorry. My companion had to leave and I’m going too. The money’s there for the meal and tip.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

* * *

Adam said, “Hold on, Olivia.”

She was currently naked and touching him all over.

“You don’t like this? I could...”

“No, it’s not working.” He gestured at his flaccid penis.

Her pretty brows furrowed. “That’s never happened before.”

“It has to me, once or twice. But I know the cause.” *Beth*.
“I couldn’t save the man who died. I’m pretty much destroyed.”

She eased back, her gorgeous blonde hair a mess from his hands. “I guess I should have known when I suggested this.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Thanks, though.”

Laying her head on his pillow, she said, “Let’s cuddle.”

Images of being in bed with Beth battered his brain. It had taken him forever to forget them when they divorced. Damn it.

He couldn’t lay here or he’d lose his mind. “I can’t stay still right now.” He flung off the covers. “I think I’ll go back to my apartment.”

“No, don’t do that.”

“I have to move. I’m sorry.” He kissed her nose then climbed out of bed.

She pulled up the sheet. “All right. Do what you need to do. Tomorrow night?”

“I’m not sure if I can do this...” he motioned to the bed
“...then either. I think we have to wait a while.”

“Let’s go out to dinner.”

“I have plans already.”

“Well, Adam, why don’t you call me when you’re... ready.” She was miffed, now.

She had a right to be. Without saying more, he left.

Once in the car, he pounded the steering wheel. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” The clock said it was only nine. He blanked his mind and started to drive. He tried hard to keep his emotions at bay but he ended up in front of Beth’s house. His house. He stared at the three-story structure...

“Oh, Adam, can we afford this?”

“We can if we’re careful with money. And use some of our savings for the down payment. When I make captain, we’ll be sitting pretty.”

She swirled around in the U-shaped kitchen. Granite. Stainless steel appliances, two ovens, plank floor throughout. Big windows everywhere. “Four bedrooms, you said?”

“Yep. The girls will love having their own rooms.”

She threw herself at him. “I love you, Adam...”

They’d been happy in that home until Aaron died...

“What?” Adam had gotten the call when he was leaving work.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said. “Your brother is deceased. We tried to revive him, but we couldn’t.”

“What from? How did Aaron die?”

“Did your brother suffer a hematoma when he was young?”

Adam froze. “Yes, my father hit him once and he banged his head on the floor. My mother wanted him to go to the hospital but my father wouldn’t hear of it.” Even Adam had begged his father to get help.

“We think the cause of death was a blood clot thrown from an earlier injury.”

“After all these years?”

“It happens....”

Adam turned into himself after that. He'd been slapped in the face by the awful memories of his father. Haunted by them. So he cut himself from as much emotion as he could, trying to avoid any more pain.

Bolting out of the car to escape those memories, he crossed the walkway and went to the front door. He still had a key but he rang the bell anyway. Beth opened it wearing pink pajamas bottoms and a white T-shirt. Her eyebrows skyrocketed.

“Hi. Did I catch you at a bad time?” Holy hell, Reg could be here.

“No, I was having a glass of wine by myself and relaxing.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“The girls?”

“They have an overnight with the Daniels kids.” She cocked her head. “I thought they told you that.”

He blew out a heavy breath. “They could have. My mind's a sieve lately.”

“Come in. We'll have a drink together.”

Smiling, he walked into the house. He'd loved how she redecorated, with warm colors and varied textures. The

furniture was creatively set up and artwork was chic.

“Sit on the couch. What would you like?”

“I’ll have wine, too.”

Soon they sat across from each other. “How are you feeling?” she asked. She didn’t have to clarify her question.

“I’m still shitty. It takes a long time to get over something like this. I’m not stuffing it, either.”

“Like you do most things.”

“I guess. But everybody in the department is struggling.”

“As they should be.”

He sipped the cabernet. His favorite. “How are *you*?”

She watched him. “Still shaky from the other night.”

“Me, too.”

“Reg came back from his trip.”

“Hmm.” The notion sparked jealousy inside him. “Why aren’t you with him tonight?”

“I couldn’t be. I couldn’t...do it. After...us.”

“God, honey, me either. Olivia wanted to. We tried. I couldn’t...”

“You couldn’t get it up?” She giggled. “I can remember one time when that happened with us.”

“Yeah, when my brother died.”

“But not your mom or dad?”

“No.”

“You won’t talk about them. You never did, even when we were happy together.”

“It’s too hard.”

“Sometimes I think I should’ve made you open up. Or get help.”

“It was one of the things I loved most about you that you didn’t push on that.”

She drew in a heavy breath and let it out. “What have we done, Adam? What does all this mean?”

“I don’t know.” He took a gulp of wine. “And I don’t care tonight.” He set down his glass and stood. Stood and held out his hand.

“Adam?”

“Hey, babe, in for a penny, in for pound.”

She rolled her eyes. “How romantic.”

“Come on. What do we have to lose?”

“Just our hearts.”

Chapter 5

On the weekend, Beth opened the side door to Adam. He'd come a bit early to pick up the girls for a picnic with his group. The kids weren't ready yet so Adam sat at the table with her.

"Smells great in here." The house was filled with the scent of baking cookies.

"I'm making Majic Cookie Bars."

Adam cocked his head. His eyes simmered with... something. "Come with us?"

That couldn't happen. "No, it wouldn't be healthy for any of us." She'd included herself in the caveat because she wanted to go with them.

Reaching over, he squeezed her hand. "We've done things together with the girls since the divorce."

"Yes, but that was before..."

An arched brow. A smug one. "Before?"

"You know damn well what the answer to that question is so don't tease me."

"I'm sorry."

"Adam, Reg would have a fit if I went to a picnic with you and so would Olivia."

"We were together again last night, Bethy. They'd have a fit about that, more so."

“We can’t keep doing—”

“We’re ready, Dad.” Janey came in wearing jeans and a T-shirt, with a sweatshirt over her shoulders.

Behind her, Janelle wore jeans, too, with a blouse and tennis shoes. She carried a sweater. Her gaze narrowed on them. “What’s wrong, Mom? You look so sad.”

“No, I’m not. I’ve got stuff to catch up with at our house and I’m making a huge batch of those cookies you like.” She’d taken today off from the gallery though they got good traffic on Sundays. Mary Kay and Les were working.

“So you’re free today. Dad, can Mom come?” Hell. Now the kids were pursuing this.

Adam lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. “Funny thing, I asked if she wanted to come with us.”

“Are you?” Janelle was pushing.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“We like his squad, Mom. You love Kay.”

“It’s at Big Joe Early’s farmhouse. He has *horses*.” Janey said the words with awe.

“I can’t. I have cookies in the oven.” But she was weakening, she could feel it.

“Sometimes we still do stuff with you and Dad.” Janelle wouldn’t give up.

“I know. But—”

“Daddy,” Janey said using the babyish term. “Convince her.”

“We don’t want to pressure Mom, ladies. You know how she hates that.”

He remembered that detail. She didn’t want him to be sensitive to her needs right now.

The timer went off.

“Cookies are ready.” This from Janelle. “We can bring them to the picnic.”

Beth was losing all her willpower so she got up and took out the cookies. She’d made two rectangular pans of them. Enough for the crew. Taking in a deep breath, she turned around. “All right, I’ll come with you. Let the bars cool and we’ll take them in the pans to cut there. I have to change.”

“Fine. The girls and I can take care of the cookies.”

Beth was back in ten minutes. Each pan was covered with a plastic top that fit them.

“Mom, I love those palazzo pants,” Janelle told her. “And your new blouse.”

Beth liked how she looked in the sweet pink top and the multi-colored silky pants. When she moved, the material caressed her legs. She too brought along a sweater.

After gathering their things, they left the house.

Adam hadn’t gotten a new car since the divorce. So she sat in the front seat of the familiar dark grey Sonata and the kids took their usual places in the back. The leather was still soft and the scent of Adam filled the air.

“Buckle up, ladies.”

All three said together, “Yes, Dad!”

The girls bubbled about the horses and who would be there on the twenty-minute drive out of the town proper, first through downtown Crystal City then through hay fields.

The ranch spread across a couple of acres. Joe's second job was raising horses and training them, a business he shared with his wife. The house lay ahead of them.

"Have you been here before, Dad?" Janelle asked.

"No. Joe's only been on the Rescue Squad for a few months."

"It's beautiful." Beth smiled. "Still green."

They got out of the car when they reached the house. An Indian Summer warm breeze ruffled their hair. Sounds of kids squealing and adults laughing came from the backyard so they followed the path around the house. Beth and Adam each carried a pan of cookies.

A big deck held all the adults. The teens sat at a picnic table on the sprawling lawn and the younger ones played in the yard.

"Hey," Big Joe said, getting up from one of the shaded tables. He held out his hand. "Cap, it's good to see you."

"I didn't think you were coming." Sean Riley was feeding his two-year-old in one of the chairs, his wife Alice next to him.

"Of course we came. For those of you who don't know, this is Beth, the girls' mother, and my daughters, Janelle and Janey."

“Nice to meet you...Hey, Beth, kids...Welcome,” followed.

Beth gestured out to the ranch. “Your place is beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

She and Adam held out the cookies.

“Hold on. I’ll see where Noreen wants the desserts.”

Before he could go inside, a woman came out of the house. She was tall, with red hair several shades lighter than Beth’s. Freckles dotted her fair skin. She wore a red-checked blouse under denim overhauls that fit her sturdy frame well. “Hi, I’m Noreen.”

More introductions.

Noreen and Joe took the dessert into the house.

Kay came up the deck steps. “The kids are fine at the stables.” She’d gone to check on her two teenagers, who were with Joe’s two. She approached the newcomers. “Hi all.” Kay hugged Beth. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Kay.”

Janey tugged on Adam’s shirt. “Can we go to the stables too?”

Adam said, “If it’s all right with Joe.”

He’d come back out. “Yeah, sure. I’ll introduce you to our kids.” They knew Kay’s, of course.

A few minutes after they left, Mase came around the house with a gorgeous Haitian woman. She was dressed in a sporty

red and blue, long dress and a red turban over her hair. “Hey, Beth,” Mase said, kissing her cheek. “Nice to see you.”

“You, too.”

“Everyone, this is Phara.”

The squad greeted his date and they went through the last of the introductions.

“Gin and tonic?” Adam asked Beth.

“I haven’t had one of those in ages.”

“Mase, Phara, what would you like?”

After he got drink orders, Adam said, “Come help me carry them, Beth.” They walked close, shoulders touching. Her presence made him feel...content. He fixed drinks for Phara and Beth and she grabbed two beers for the men.

They all sat down with Sean’s family and Kay. Adam asked, “Where’s Larry?”

Kay scowled. “He’s out on a call. A plumber doesn’t take vacation. I hope he makes it for dinner.”

Adam said, “Well, firefighters understand that issue.”

He shot a glance at Beth, who’s always supported his schedule. Until the end. God, she looked gorgeous in that outfit, her hair fluffy and her eyes sparkling. She was having fun.

Joe returned with the kids as Noreen brought the appetizers out. “Here’s your pigs in the blanket and some chips and salsa,” Noreen said to her son and daughter. “Get some soda from the cooler and you all go sit out there.” She pointed to the picnic table.

Joe disappeared inside and brought out a huge tray of adult appetizers and set it on the main table. “Eat up,” he said. “We won’t have the barbeque for a few hours.”

Adam helped himself to cooked sausages, cut up and skewered with toothpicks, grilled artichoke hearts and pieces of bruschetta for the two of them. They sat with drinks and food and made chitchat. Adam realized he hadn’t felt this normal in a long time. After the snacks, the kids approached the adults. Janey asked, “Mom, can we ride the horses?”

“If Joe and Noreen say it’s all right.”

“We expected this. We got out three saddles for the horses we aren’t boarding. Noreen and I go with them.”

All the kids cheered.

Adam said, “I’d like to see them ride.”

“Me, too.” This from Beth.

They accompanied the Early couple to the stable. It was a big building with eight stalls. It smelled of horse and hay and a whiff of poop. Noreen and Joe saddled three horses and led them outside. “Who wants to go first?”

Janey said, “Me.”

Kay’s fourteen-year-old also volunteered. And Sean’s ten-year-old. The rest of the teens would go second.

Since they’d never ridden, Joe and Noreen accompanied the girls to the corral. They helped up each one onto a saddle and led the horses around the paddock at a slow trot.

Adam and Beth stood behind the rails and watched with the three kids.

“This is so much fun,” Beth said, leaning into Adam. “Janey’s beaming.”

“I was thinking this is all so normal.” He took in a deep breath and let it out. “We lost a lot, Bethy.”

“I guess we did.” She took his hand. Held it between hers. “Let’s enjoy today and not worry about tomorrow.”

“Fine by me.”

They both smiled the whole time the kids rode.

* * *

Adam sensed Olivia was upset when he walked into her restaurant, Olivia’s kitchen. After the last two days with Beth, he’d either have to break up with her or cut Beth out of his life. The latter was still an option. It had to be.

He found Olivia in her office, head down, reading glasses on, staring at a ledger.

From the doorway, he said, “Hey.”

When she spotted him, her face filled with joy. For a few seconds. Then her whole visage turned wary. “Hello, Adam.”

Dropping down in a chair in front of the desk, he asked, “How are you doing?”

She rapped her knuckles on the open book. “Business is terrific. We had tons of business yesterday.”

“I didn’t mean about the restaurant. I meant with us.”

“I’m still disappointed about the night I saw you after that firefighter died.”

“Olivia, I’ll bet that happened to a lot of the guys the last few nights.” Though what he said was true, he felt like the biggest hypocrite alive. He hadn’t had any problems with Beth.

A small smile. She was so pretty. And kind. And sweet. “That makes me feel better.” A pause. “Will I see you tonight?”

“I’m on nights starting today.”

“No, I forgot, I guess. When are you off?”

“In four days.” If he still felt this way, he’d break it off somewhere private.

“That would be nice. Text me where and when.”

A waiter came to the door. “Sorry to bother you, Olivia, but we have a problem out here with a customer.”

Olivia stood. “I have to deal with this.”

“All right.” He rose too.

She came around the desk and kissed him. “Goodbye, handsome.”

His whole body deflated. What a creep he was.

He did some errands, then stopped at a sub place to pick up lunch. Beth loved the meatballs from Petro’s. Inside, the scents of sauce and dough mellowed him. Maybe he’d bring lunch over to the gallery, where Beth was working. He didn’t suppress the guilt and went with the urge. Which was so unlike him.

The gallery was at the end of Main Street, a desirable location. Its original owner had established the business before the town was built up and it became a city. He could see through the sheer drapes that there were customers in the place.

He walked inside. The gallery was Beth-chic. She had a real eye for color and texture. She was with a customer so he browsed. And came upon the hippie's paintings.

He frowned at them.

"You don't like modern art?" she said when she joined him.

"Why doesn't he just throw paint on the walls and let it drip down?"

She bit her lip. "Shh. Don't say that in front of customers." She took a bead on him. "What are you doing here?"

He held up the bag. She inhaled. "Petro's?"

"Yep."

"Remember eating them on our bed?"

"Totally naked."

"Hush again." She led him back to the office. "Mary Kay, you remember Adam?"

The assistant's eyes cooled. "Of course."

"Could you go out to the floor for a while? I have to talk to him and we're going to have some lunch."

"Sure." She squeezed Beth's arm on the way out.

They sat at the small table off to the side. She retrieved water from a little fridge in the corner. They were halfway through their subs, enjoying the spicy taste of the sauce, the crispness of the dough. He laughed at something she said.

The door opened.

Of course, Reg stood in the archway.

* * *

What the fuck was wrong with him? Adam knew he shouldn't have come. He felt even guiltier now. So he stood. "Hi, Reg."

"Stark." His cold gaze went to her. "Beth. What's he doing here?"

"We needed to talk about the girls." He answered before Beth could. "I was hungry so I brought lunch."

Reg jammed his hands in his pockets. "I'm not going to let you take her back, Stark. You can't have her."

Adam tried to reign in his reaction; it felt suspiciously like jealousy. "If I wanted to get back together with Beth, and I'm not saying I do, she'd have something to say about it."

Coming around the desk, Beth raised her chin. Uh-oh. "I won't sit by for a pissing contest. Adam, you need to leave. You stay, Reg."

"Whatever you say." Adam didn't sound mad, at least, though irrationally, he was. "I'll talk to you later." He walked out of her office, out of the gallery.

He was in his car when the phone rang. Tim. “Hello, Daniels.”

“Stark.” There was amusement in his tone.

“We’re getting together today a couple of hours before our shift begins. The Roadhouse at the edge of town. Can you be there?”

“Sure. Who else is coming?”

“All of us. I tried to reach you earlier but you didn’t pick up. And obviously didn’t check your voicemail. See you then.”

“I’ll be there.”

Adam disconnected. He wondered if the meeting was kismet or bad luck. He’d have to come clean with the guys.

* * *

Beth stood before Reg, her chin raised. “As I told you before, I’m not yours to give back to Adam, even if *I* wanted that. You keep forgetting, I make my own choices.”

His face softened. “Beth, I love you.”

“That doesn’t give you rights over me.” She shook her head. “In any case, it’s not the kind of love I want.”

“Damn, everything I do these days is wrong. What the hell, Beth?”

She sighed. The decision came in a flash. She wrapped her arms across to her waist. “I’m sorry, Reg. Our relationship

isn't working.”

“I know. Let's fix it.”

“I...I don't want to.”

The macho guy in him surfaced. “Do I even want to know why?”

“No, you don't.”

He crossed the office and grasped her by the arms. If he'd been rough, she would have leveled him with the news of what happened between her and Adam. “Tell me anyway.”

“I'm sorry, Reg. I slept with Adam after the CCFD firefighter died.”

His face filled with hurt. She hadn't meant to do this to him. “I suspected as much. Was that the only time?”

“No, the next night, too.”

“Fuck it, Beth. How could you do that to me?”

“I know it was unconscionable. I'm sorry.”

“I might be able to get past that if you say you'll marry me.”

“I can't.”

“Are you in love with him?”

She took in a deep breath, then let it out. “I'm afraid I never stopped loving him.”

“Then why didn't you admit it when I asked you?”

“I don't think I admitted it to myself till now.”

She recognized the determination on his face. “Is there anything more I can say to change your mind?”

“No, Reg. Again, I’m sorry.”

“That doesn’t help, Beth. Not at all.” With that, *he* turned and walked out of the office.

Beth burst into tears. But she didn’t know what she was so upset over. Hurting a good man as she had. Or because she’d been drawn back into a man’s life who could destroy her again.

Chapter 6

The Roadhouse was a cowboy joint. Its dark interior sported a long bar, tables and a big dance floor with an old-time jukebox next to it. He and Beth used to come here to dance. He was momentarily taken back to one of those times.

The babies were two and four and he and Beth had been going at warp speed raising them, him working full time, her parttime and trying to keep their heads above water. A couple of the firefighters' wives came to babysit that night. The bar was busy...

"Wow," Beth said at the crowd. "It's packed."

"I see some tables in the back." Adam took her hand. They threaded their way through the masses to an empty table that was just being cleared. As they waited, he gave her a sexy once-over. "You look mighty fine, Bethy."

"Mighty fine? You sound like a cowboy."

"When in Rome."

She smoothed down the pretty pink sundress she'd worn with the cowboy boots that were back in the closet. They'd danced here in college. "But thank you."

"Dance first or get a drink?"

"The bar's crowded. Dance first."

A country song came on, of course. They went out to the floor and did a two-step, then he twirled her around. He loved

how she was smiling. Next was a line dance. They'd learned this particular routine. They stood with their legs together arms at their sides. Stepped out with their right foot...left foot behind their right...legs crossing...repeating the steps with the opposite foot...

When the song ended, they were both laughing, red-faced and out of breath. She threw her arms around him. "Thank you so much for taking me out."

He buried his face in her neck right there on the floor. "We need to do this more. I love you so much..."

When he came out of the memory, he was breathing hard in real time. He scanned the room and spotted the guys at a table in the back. They were all wearing their uniforms. Adam didn't. He'd had a busy day and would change when he got to the firehouse. Tim waved him over and he crossed to them.

"Hey, Adam." Tom got up and gave him a hug, surprising Adam. They didn't force affection on him. He hadn't realized what he was missing.

"Hey, Tom." He patted the kid's back, then drew away. "Tim, Jarek."

"Noah's going to be late." Tim said. "Something came up with the kids."

Jarek held up the pitcher of coke on the table. They had to work in a few hours. "Want some?"

"Sure." He sat.

They all stared at him.

“I know why we’re here. But shouldn’t we wait for Noah?”

“He’s here.” Jarek looked over Adam’s shoulder.

Noah approached and squeezed Adam’s arm after he sat.
“What’d I miss?”

Tim grinned. “Adam was about to tell us about Beth.”

“Great. What’s goin’ on, buddy?”

“Pretty much what you know. She came to Jamie’s funeral.”

“Why?” Tim again.

“She said she was worried about me.”

“Wow.” This from Tommy.

“She waited for me afterward, as you know, and we went to my condo.”

“You were late getting to the Denison Park thing. You talked all that time?” Noah, the innocent, asked.

“I doubt it,” this from Jarek.

“We had sex.” He shrugged. “Maybe it was a mercy fuck.”

Tim’s gaze narrowed on him. “So that’s the only time it happened?”

“Um...” He glanced away. This would be a big deal to confess. But he might as well get it all out. “No, it happened again. Then she came along yesterday to a picnic at Big Joe’s.”

“As your *date*?” Tom asked.

“No, as the girls’ mother. They begged her to come.”

“So you didn’t want her to go along?”

“Right now, guys, I don’t know what the hell I want.”

Jarek asked, “Where are Olivia and Reg in this?”

“Reg is pissed. I brought lunch over to the gallery today and he showed up. I have no idea what happened after I left.”

“And Olivia?”

“Um, I couldn’t, you know, get it up with her right after Beth. I went over to make amends today.”

“Holy shit, Adam. You’re involved with Beth again!” Tim sounded disapproving.

“I am. I admit it. She’s involved, too. I think we’re both mixed up. What the hell have we done, guys?”

Tim leaned over. “This is too big to hash out with us. We might give bad advice. Right, guys?”

Yeses all around.

“So, I recommend you go see Suzanne Delaney.”

Adam nodded. Though he’d hate baring his soul, he had to get his head on straight. For himself. For Beth and most of all for the girls.

* * *

“You did what?” Bianca asked. She sat in Beth’s kitchen a glass of Chardonnay in front of each of them. She’d surprised Beth and came to town unannounced. She planned to stay overnight.

“I broke up with Reg.”

“Because he was so controlling?”

“I’d like to say that was the reason. But deep down...” She trailed off. This was hard to admit even to her sister.

“You’re still in love with Adam.”

She was grim-faced.

“Bethy, that’s not the end of the world. But are you sure you want to do that? It leveled you when you two divorced. Him too.”

Beth’s expression was quizzical. “How do you know it leveled him?”

“He came to see me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He said he didn’t know where else to go.”

“Well, he didn’t have the Brothers of Fire then.”

“The who?”

“I’ll explain that later.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. “Honestly, I think I might be making the biggest mistake of my life. And I’m scared to death.”

“Geez, sweetie, I’m sorry.”

“What should I do, B?”

“Why don’t you make an appointment with that counselor you saw when you two broke up?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

The door opened and the girls came inside. When they caught sight of her sister, they said in unison, “Aunt Bianca!”

Bianca stood and caught Janey when she leapt forward. She kissed the top of her niece’s head. “It’s so good to see you, munchkin.”

“Did you bring the kids?” Janey asked. She adored her cousins.

“Nope. I came up to spend some time with you all for a night.” She smiled over Janey’s head. “Hi, Janelle.”

“Hi. I love that you’re here.” They hugged when Janey stepped back. Janelle said, “I think we should go upstairs and do our homework. Mom and Bianca were talking. Let’s give them some space.”

“Why?” Janey asked.

“Just come.” Janelle dragged her sister out.

Bianca dropped back down. “Boy has Janelle grown up.”

“She has. I think she suspects more is going on with Adam than I let on.”

“Smart girl.”

“They were inconsolable when we divorced. We can’t do that to them again.”

“You do have to be careful. That’s why you need help.”

“You’re right, as usual. I’m a mess.”

* * *

At 4 a.m. the PA came on. “Fire at Fairway Lane. One house burning; black smoke observed. Neighboring houses in danger. Rescue Squad, Truck 2, Truck 3 and Engine 5 go into service.”

Adam bounded out of bed, as did his group. Kay grumbled, “I was having a good dream.”

“A sex dream?” Sean asked as they rushed out to the bay.

“Be respectful,” Adam said with fake firmness. “People are in trouble.”

Snorts.

They reached the bay, Adam punched in the door opener, then joined the others as they stuffed feet into turnout pants, then boots and pulled up suspenders. Helmets on, Kramer went around the side and unhooked the rig, then the two of them climbed the front. Their turnout coats and air packs were already in the truck.

Adam noted three other Brothers of Fire and Carson were called to the scene. The Rescue Squad arrived simultaneously with Tim Daniels’ crew and Carson’s guys. Noah’s truck pulled in last.

Black smoke did indeed billow out of the first house. A large, sprawling ranch, it was close to Crystal City Country Club and only ten feet from another dwelling.

Tim and Noah met Carson at the jeep. “You wanna go in or take command?”

“Take command.” Carson was firm on that.

“Go ahead.”

Adam and Noah waited for instructions.

Carson studied the fire scene. “Tim, gear up the aerial and aim the gun at the second floor. Have your guys lay lines into the front of the first floor.”

“Copy that.”

“Engine 5, lay lines to the first floor in the rear.” He turned to Noah. “Keaton, you drench the house next door. The fire could jump at any minute.”

“Copy that,” Noah also said.

He turned to Adam. “The Rescue Squad can go in the front door when they’re done.”

The acrid scent of smoke and its density made Adam’s eyes water. “Put on face masks now,” he told his group. “We’ll wait out front.”

The aerial was activated. Its creaky sound got louder as it went up. The gun poured water on the top floor.

In place and waiting, Adam studied the scene. Black smoke indicated the cause was electrical or burning toxic material. Since the house was a single residence, he’d assume electrical. He told his guys.

“Also, assume it’s inhabited since it’s early morning.”

Carson called over the radio, “I got house plans from headquarters. I sent them to all officers. When you can go in Keaton, Daniels, Stark, use your thermal to check for inhabitants.”

From his place at the front, Adam held up the thermal camera. Then he said into his radio, “No movement. Two heat sigs in the master bedroom, four in the next two rooms over.”

To his crew, “I’ll take Kramer down the left corridor. Early, Mase and Riley go to the right down to the other rooms.”

They hurried in when the fire was out. Adam and Kramer went left. It was pitch black except for the lights on their helmets. And hotter than hell; he began to sweat. He dropped to the ground, heard Kay do the same. They crawled feeling their way against the wall. On the way to the master bedroom, Adam felt the tile beginning to heat, Kay bumped into a table. Remembering the floor plan, he supposed they were in the kitchen.

More thick, black smoke greeted them. “Hell,” Adam commented at the doorway “whatever triggered the fire was below here.”

They made their way to the beds. The mattress bounced when Adam tested it. Not necessary but protocol was important. Kay lifted up the body on the right side and staggered back some. “It’s the guy. I got him.”

Adam slid his arms under the woman. He hefted her over his shoulder and walked to the door. As they reached it, an explosion rent the air...

Adam came awake. He was lying on concrete. The floor must have opened up and he must have fallen into the cellar. He groaned as he sat up and took inventory. Aches and pains but no injuries, miraculously. His helmet was off but he still had on his SCBA.

He took his flashlight from his coat pocket and switched it on. The female victim lay unconscious about four feet away. He crawled over and did the ABC’s taught to all firefighters. He tilted her head and lifted her chin. No obstruction of the

airway. Next he put his ear to her mouth. He could feel her breath. Then he put his ear to her chest and found her heart pumping, so the blood was circulating. No need for CPR. Her face was sooty but it didn't look burned.

Yanking off his mask, he placed it on the woman's mouth. She took in some air, then coughed, then came awake. "It's okay, ma'am. There was an explosion. I'm a firefighter and we ended up down here."

She breathed into the mask.

Adam coughed. And asked, "Where's the staircase down here?"

She pointed to the right wall.

He shined the flashlight on it. The staircase had collapsed too. Debris blocked the top. Calmly, he said into his radio, "Cap, we're in the basement under the master bedroom. The stairs are gone. That was the main egress but there's a doorway to the left."

"Let me check the plans." In seconds he said, "There's big windows in the next room over. Get there and my guys will be waiting."

"How's my crew?"

"They rescued all the kids."

"My kids are fine?" the woman asked him.

"Yep, safe and sound. Can you stand, ma'am?"

"Emma." She came up on her arms then sat. He helped her stand.

“Let’s go Emma.” He used the flashlight to guide their way. They went down a long hallway. She said, “The big windows are in the room to the right.”

They entered the room and heard glass break. Two men poked their heads through the open space. Carson’s guys. “Come on, Cap,” one of them said, “Let’s get you outside.”

He heard over the radio, “Damn it. The fire spread to the house next door. All firefighters head there when able.”

Adrenaline raced through his veins as he assisted Emma out of the window, then he climbed through. Two paramedics waited there behind them. “You two get checked out by the med truck. We’re going over.”

He hesitated.

“Carson’s orders.”

Adam would follow instructions. But he knew their night and his were far from over.

* * *

Carson got home four hours later. He poured some scotch into a tumbler and sat outside on his huge, winding deck. Eight a.m. drinking wasn’t cool, but he’d had a hard night. Mostly because he worked with the Brothers of Fire.

Fuck it. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get those guys out of his head.

So he turned his mind to his house. Set into the side of a hill, it was built in Frank Lloyd Wright’s style. Its angles and

openness inside were hallmarks of the architect's work. Windows had been strategically placed so it brought the outdoors inside. He'd chosen all natural wood. Four rooms down here. One in the basement. Five in the upper floors. He knew the place was too much for a single man, and from the get-go, he hadn't planned to marry and have kids. Something could happen to them.

Something could happen to the Brothers of Fire, too. When they were inside the house and the place exploded, he had to struggle not to panic. It was his firefighter training that got him through the event. For long minutes, they didn't know if Adam survived. His stomach roiled until his friend's voice came over the radio. Carson's relief was too great. He couldn't live like this.

But he was.

He remembered telling David Ashford and Suzanne Delaney that he'd seek his own psychologist. He never did it. He never planned to. But *this* situation, having them in his head, was untenable.

He finished his scotch and trudged back into the house. Went up the winding staircase that led to a bedroom overlooking the city through walls of large windows. He stripped in the second floor laundry room, leaving his smelly clothes there, then went into the bedroom.

He collapsed onto the mattress. Oblivion came fast.

* * *

Beth slid out of bed at 7 a.m. Bianca wanted to sleep in so she tiptoed out of the room. It had been fun sleeping with her again. She missed company in bed. She missed Adam. Might as well admit that.

In the kitchen, she made a pot of coffee instead of using the Keurig and sat in the breakfast nook with a cup. An hour later, she wasn't surprised when she heard a soft knock on the door and Adam walked inside. "Hey, there."

"Good morning." She stood and crossed to him. The whiff of smoke told her he'd been in a fire. Even after showering, the slight scent seemed to stay with firefighters.

He slid his arms around her waist and kissed her soundly. "Hi."

Dear Lord, did that feel wonderful. "Want some coffee or are you going to sleep?"

"I was up since four in a fire. A bad one that lasted into the second shift. But I'll have a cup."

"You probably need rest." She crossed to the pot and poured him coffee. "Want to tell me about it?" He used to do that all the time.

He leaned against the counter. "I planned to. There was an explosion. I woke up in the basement with a victim I was trying to get out. We had to be rescued."

"A-Are you all right?"

"I am. You might hear it on the news. We'll have to tell the girls."

"At least you're safe now."

“Can we talk about something else?” He sipped his coffee as he leaned against the counter, his navy blue polo shirt accenting the width of his shoulders. “Did you make a pot for me?”

“Yes and for Bianca.”

His light brows rose. She noticed the tired lines around his eyes. “B’s here?”

“She came for an overnight.”

“Can I stay to say hi to her and the girls?” It was Saturday so they’d sleep in.

“Uh huh. Let’s sit.”

They faced each other on either side of the nook. They’d solved a lot of problems at this table: money issues, worry over the kids and sometimes, his safety.

“We made a lot of decisions here,” he said as the sun peeked through the sky.

“We did. I have some things to tell you.”

“I have things to share, too. You first.”

“I ended it with Reg.”

“Huh.” He seemed surprised. “Now that makes my day. How’d he take it?”

“Not well. He couldn’t understand why I’d pick you over him.”

“He always was a snob.”

“I guess.”

He took her hand across the table. “I called Olivia on the way over here. I’m going to see her today. I plan to end things between us.”

They both smiled.

“I’m going to make an appointment with Mary Fox, my former psychologist. I want to be sure that we’re doing the right thing.”

“When did you go to a psychiatrist?”

“When we officially split, then divorced.”

“Well, the Brothers of Fire convinced me to go see Suzanne Delaney.”

Now, they laughed. He said, “Kismet, I guess.”

“Well, if this isn’t a familiar sight.” Bianca had come downstairs and over to the nook.

Adam stood. “Hello, B.”

She initiated a hug. “Good to see you, Adam.”

She’d gotten coffee so she sat next to Beth.

He faced her sister, whom he liked. “I assume you know what’s happening.”

“Yes, of course. Beth told me last night.”

“What do you think?”

“Honestly, I’m worried about you both. And the girls. You can’t afford to make a mistake in this.”

“I know.”

“Adam’s going to see the department psychologist,” Beth put in. “He knows I’m going to make an appointment with Mary.”

“Hmm.” Her chin raised. “What about your girlfriend, Adam?”

“I’m seeing her for lunch. I’ll tell her then.”

“Good luck.”

By tacit agreement, they changed the subject. Adam asked, “How’s Brad and the kids?”

“Brad and Lilianna are great. The twins are terrors.”

He chuckled. “They’re two. Of course, they’re terrors.”

“Your girls never were.”

As if summoned, her daughters came into the kitchen. Janey crossed to Adam. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hey, baby.”

“Hi, Dad.” Janelle studied him. “What are you doing here?”

“I had something to talk to Mom about.”

Her eyes narrowed. Beth got the feeling again that Janelle knew something was going on. “And to tell you, too.”

He explained about the fire. Janelle bit her lip. Beth could tell she was digesting this.

Janey hugged him again. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

He let them ask questions and he answered them honestly.

“Now, no more of this. I’ll make you all some breakfast.”

Bianca stood. “You will not. I’ll rustle up my famous French toast.”

“Yay,” Janey said. “I’ll help.”

When they left, Janelle sat down next to Beth in the seat Bianca had vacated.

He shot a glance at Beth. She nodded. He’d done a good job with this.

* * *

Adam was conflicted. He’d enjoyed the morning with his family. Man, he missed having breakfast with them and doing other normal things. He allowed the feelings to come. He was changing, and it scared him, but the situation was what it was.

Now, though, he had bad news to deliver and it wasn’t going to be pretty. He’d pulled into a parking space in front of Magnolia’s when his phone buzzed. He didn’t recognize the number. “Adam Stark.”

“Mr. Stark, this is Laura Lewis at Memorial Hospital. I’m calling about Olivia Brandise. You and her sister Sara are listed as emergency contacts for her.”

His pulse sped up. “I am? I didn’t know.”

“That’s not supposed to happen. Do you decline the responsibility?”

“No. Did something happen to her?”

“I’m afraid she was in a car accident. She needs surgery. Are you able to come to the hospital now to sign some papers?”

“Um...Did you call her sister?”

“She’s flying up. But not in time.”

“How serious is this?”

“I’m afraid she’s unconscious. She hasn’t awakened since she arrived.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Stupidly, selfishly, he was angered at the delay, which would be prolonged now, but he squelched it, drove directly to Memorial and hurried into the ER. He stopped at the desk. “Laura Lewis called me earlier as the next of kin of a patient.”

“I’ll buzz her.”

He sat, watching the misery that spread out before him. A woman with a bandaged arm hung her head. A kid whined. He had on yellow pajamas that were bloody. A man coughed mercilessly.

“Mr. Stark?”

He stood. “Ms. Lewis.” They shook hands.

“Let’s go sit over there.” She pointed to a small alcove with a table and chairs. When they sat she asked, “As I said on the phone, Ms. Brandise listed you and her sister as next of kin. Are you two related?”

“No, we’ve been dating. As you know, I was surprised she put me down.”

“Probably because she doesn’t have family in the area.”

“I suppose.”

“As I said, we can’t wait for Sara Brandise to arrive. You’ll have to sign these consent forms.”

“I don’t even know what happened to warrant the surgery.”

“She has a ruptured spleen and some internal bleeding. The spleen needs to be removed and the surgeon will have to find the source of the bleeding so we can’t do it laparoscopically. That means—”

“I know what it means. I’m a fire captain and EMT.”

Nodding, she handed him the paper. He signed.

“She’s being prepped for surgery now. Will you stay until it’s over?”

“I’m scheduled to work at six. Will it be finished by then?”

“Probably. But someone should be here when she’s in recovery. And that will be a while.”

He took out his phone when she left. First he called the firehouse battalion chief and told him there was an emergency and he couldn’t work tonight. Then he dialed Beth’s number. No answer. Maybe she and Bianca went for a walk. He’d try later.

After three hours, he finally got ahold of Beth. “Hey, sweetheart.” Now that he’d given in to his feelings, the endearment rolled off his lips.

“Hi. We went to lunch on the lake before Bianca left. Did you see Olivia before work?”

“I’m not going to work.” He took a deep breath. “Olivia was in a car accident. She’s having her spleen removed and some repair of bleeders.”

“How did you find out?”

“She had me down as her next of kin.”

“Wow.”

“I was surprised, too. She didn’t tell me about it. Her sister is on the list, too, but she lives on Long Island so they called me next because this is emergent.”

“I—I don’t know what to say. I hope she’s okay.”

“It’s a fairly common surgery but yes but it is serious. I’m going to stay until she wakes up. Can I come over afterward?”

“Of course. We’re eating about six.”

“I’ll try to make it for that. I’m sorry all this, us, got delayed, Beth.”

“It’s okay. I trust it’ll happen.”

“It will.”

An hour later, a nurse came out and led him to recovery. The scent of disinfectant was strong in here. Olivia was awake, but very pale. When he approached the bed, he saw bruises on her face. “H—” She cleared her throat. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

He grasped her hand because it was the kind thing to do. “Do you know what happened?”

“The doctor said I had a splenectomy. What causes that?”

“Usually an abdominal injury. We see it all the time. Most likely the steering wheel jammed you when you crashed.”

“No wonder I feel so awful.” She swallowed hard. “Did they call Sara?”

“Uh-huh. She’s on her way.”

“Good.” She yawned. “I’m sleepy.”

“Rest now. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

She was already in snooze land before he got out of the room.

This would work out. Olivia’s sister was coming to take care of her. And she had a close friend in town. So Adam wouldn’t be responsible for her. The only thing was he couldn’t end their relationship while Olivia was down and out.

* * *

Beth felt bad for Olivia and simultaneously irked by the fact that Adam hadn’t been able to tell her they were over. Which was inexcusably selfish. The poor woman. But maybe it wasn’t even a bad thing. Maybe Beth and Adam should slow down some. Take their time with what was happening between them.

She was stirring the spaghetti sauce when the girls came downstairs. “Finish your homework?”

“Yes, Mom. What time are we eating?”

“Around six. Your father’s coming over to eat with us.”

“Wow! Two meals in one day. I like eating with Dad.”

“I know you do, Janey.”

They were at the table looking at their phones when the side door opened and there he was. Dressed the same as this morning but his shoulders slumped; the lines around his eyes had deepened. “Dad!” Janey said. “We get to eat with you again.”

Janelle put in, “Like old times.”

“I know, ladies.” He kissed the top of both their heads. “What a treat.”

“Want some wine?” Beth asked.

“Sure.”

“Open the bottle on the bar.”

He sniffed. “That sauce smells wonderful. I forgot how wonderful.”

“Hmm.”

As he uncorked the wine, he asked, “Do you girls want anything?”

“Thanks for checking,” Janelle answered, “But we have water.”

He poured two glasses of wine and brought them to the stove. He leaned against the counter and sipped his Chianti. It was full-bodied and dry. Beth took a sip of hers. “Janelle’s right,” she whispered. “This is nice.”

“It feels normal.”

The sauce was spicy, the pasta al dente. The chatter among them was light and upbeat. When they finished eating, he told the girls, "I'll clean up and Mom can keep me company. Why don't you all go upstairs for a while. Then maybe we can play cards, the four of us."

"We haven't done that in forever." Janelle grinned. "Let's go Janey, before they change their minds." The girls were in charge of cleanup so this was a boon for them.

Adam stood and brought the dishes to the sink. Beth got out some containers to save the sauce. When she turned around, he was behind her. "Hold on a sec."

She put the plastic ware down. He circled her with his arms. Nuzzled her neck. She turned. The kiss was hot, sexy and she participated in kind.

"I thought so!"

They broke apart to see Janelle had come back to the kitchen.

Beth asked shakily, "Why did you come down again?"

"I left my phone on the counter. Tell me about you two."

Adam took over. He was good in a crisis. "Sit, honey."

She sat. Beth joined them. "Your mother and I are...close again."

"Close?"

"We've been..."

"Having sex? Is that what close means?"

"Our feelings for each other have been rekindled."

“I don’t understand.”

“We realized we’re still in love. We recently gave in to it.”

Her face lightened some. “Is that why Reg hasn’t been around?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “I thought you had a girlfriend, Dad. Olivia.”

“I won’t be seeing her in the future. It’s complicated right now.”

She sighed. “You don’t yell at each other anymore. This must be why.”

“We’re trying to be kinder to each other.” Adam smiled at Beth.

“Does it mean you’re getting back together?”

Beth said, “We both want that to happen.”

She grinned. “We do, too.”

“I know. But we have some things to work out.”

“Why? If you love each other.”

Adam said, “It’s personal, honey.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Could you get on with it though? So we can be a family again.”

Adam laughed.

“I don’t think we should tell Janey yet,” Beth suggested. “You know how overboard she gets about things.”

“Yeah, I do. I won’t say anything.” Janelle stood. “I’m going back upstairs. So you can kiss or *whatever* again.”

When she left, Beth sighed heavily. “I thought she knew.”

“Maybe it’s not bad that she knows.”

Beth faced Adam squarely. “Then, as she said, you better do something about Olivia.”

“I will. I promise. As soon as I can.” He hit his head. “I told the girls we could play cards and completely forgot I have to go back to the hospital tonight. I don’t know when Sara’s getting in.”

“I understand. I’ll explain things to them.”

“Come on. Let’s clean up. Then I’ll head out.”

* * *

Adam headed into the hospital wishing he could have stayed with Beth and the girls. He wanted his family back! There. He admitted it. But he wasn’t a cruel man, so he walked in ER and asked about Olivia.

“Ms. Brandise is still in recovery. But they’re getting a room ready for her.”

“That should be more comfortable for her.”

“You can probably go up now.” She gave him directions.

He strode quickly to the recovery area, bigger and roomier than the ER, and had cubicles instead of curtained-off space. When he got inside the one she was in, she was more awake

than before. She lay on her back, her temple and wrist bandaged. “Hey, there.”

“I thought you’d be back sooner.”

“I’m sorry. I...had to check in at work. How are you feeling?”

“My middle hurts like hell.”

“Surgery does that. But you’ll heal soon. A splenectomy recovery time is two to six days.”

“I hope it’s two.” She patted the side of the mattress. “Come sit.”

Reluctantly, he sat.

“Sara’s coming.”

“They told me that.” Her eyes filled with fear. People got anxious after surgery. “Please don’t leave me until she gets here.”

“I won’t.”

A doctor entered the room a few minutes later. “Are you Ms. Brandise’s husband?”

“Not yet,” Olivia said.

Adam rushed to clarify. “I’m her contact for emergencies.”

“I’m Doctor Basil.” Then he addressed Olivia. “You’re recovering well. Someone’s coming down to get you in a hospital room.”

“Will she be in ICU?”

“She’ll be on the critical care floor, but not in ICU specifically. These surgeries are common. They know how to

care for her.”

The orderlies arrived while the doctor was still there. “Can Adam come with us?” Olivia’s voice bordered on panic.

“Of course. Good luck, Ms. Brandise.”

The trek to the room was uneventful. Adam waited until she was settled, then sat in the chair next to the bed. “What’s wrong?” she asked. He could tell she was sleepy again.

“I’m worried about you.” He took her hand. “It’s okay to be tired again. The best thing for you is rest.”

“You’re the best thing for me.” Her eyes began to close. “Don’t go.”

“I said I wouldn’t. I’ll wait for Sara.”

After a few minutes, he took out his phone and texted Beth while he waited for Sara.

Olivia is scared and clingy. She asked me to stay. I said I would until Sara got here.

I understand.

I love you, he typed in.

I love you, too. I have to work tomorrow so that’s where I’ll be.

All right. I’ll come by.

See you then. Try to get some sleep.

Chapter 7

“Hey, there you are.” Beth was sitting on the front patio as mid-October warmed up again and the sun shone down on her. She was sipping a glass of Chardonnay when Adam arrived.

He crossed to her, bent over and kissed her soundly. “Hello, love. Mind if I get some of that?”

“Of course not. You don’t have to ask for things like that. Oh, and I got you some beer if you’d rather have that.”

He held her gaze. The gesture meant a lot, and they both knew it.

After retrieving a Molson’s, he dropped down next to her. He appeared tired but happy. “How are you?”

“Better, now that you’re here.”

“Yeah, it was a long three days. I got tied up in all the stuff with Olivia. At least I’m off for four days now.”

“Did Olivia get home?”

“Yeah. I helped Sara with that. Then I stayed for an hour or so.” He reached over and touched her hand. “Honey, I didn’t tell her we’re over. She was extremely tired. And grumpy.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow.” He shook his head. “I hate this limbo.”

“Me, too.”

“Where are the girls?”

“In the den watching TV.”

He sniffed. “What are you making?”

“Fried chicken. We’ll have a summer picnic out on the patio.”

“My favorite. That should be fun.”

The girls greeted him warmly when they came out to help get the food outdoors. They passed around corn on the cob, next the chicken, finally the potato salad.

“Don’t hog the legs,” Janelle told her sister. “Dad likes them, too.”

“I’d eat any parts of the chicken cooked this way.” He took a bite. “Crunchy. And a little spicy. Just as I like it.”

Beth bit into the corn. It was sweet and juicy.

They discussed Janey’s intramural basketball game next week and Janelle told everybody she was going out for the fall drama. When they finished eating, their older daughter offered, “Janey and I will clean up.”

Janey went inside with some dishes. Janelle whispered, “You guys can stay out here and hold hands or do other stuff.”

“Don’t be smirky, young lady.” He teased her because he was happy.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Ten minutes later, Janelle called out, “Mom, the doorbell rang. I’ll get it.”

They could hear mumbling from the deck. Soon Janelle returned. Her expression was puzzled.

“Who’s at the door?” Adam asked.

“A lady. She burst into tears when she saw me. She’s still there.”

“That’s odd.” Beth stood. “Did she say anything?”

“Just *Dear God in heaven.*”

Frowning, Adam rose. “I’ll go.”

Beth followed him out to the foyer.

Adam pulled open the front door. He hesitated. “May I help you?”

Again the woman cried. “A-Adam.”

His hands got clammy. His heart started to beat fast. He just stared at her. So Beth stepped in front of him. “I’m Beth Stark. Who *are* you?” she asked politely.

“I’m Elle Gardner. I, um,…” She hadn’t taken her eyes off Adam but now she transferred her gaze to Beth. “I used to be Ellie Stark.”

“Stark? That’s our name.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Beth. This is my long lost mother.”

Beth looked up at him. “You told me your mother was dead.”

“She was. To me and Aaron.”

Elle straightened. “I-I’m so sorry for what I did to you boys. I’d like to explain.”

Adam's face reddened. He spat out, "How can you explain leaving your children with that monster?"

"I was afraid he was going to kill me."

"Yeah, we were afraid he was going to kill *us*, too."

"What happened to you two?" Elle asked.

"We ran away when we were thirteen and fifteen. We never saw him again."

"He died soon after that."

"I don't care. About him or you. Get the hell off my porch and never come back again."

He was shaking when he slammed the door and turned around. Leaned against the wood. Both kids stood in front of him, agape. And a little bit horrified. Beth hugged them both, then took Adam by the arm and led him to the living room. The girls followed. "Let's sit in here. We'll calm down."

The doorbell rang again. Beth turned. "I'll answer it." She noticed that his hands trembled. "You stay in here with the girls."

He nodded.

"I'm going with you."

Janey sat. "I'll stay with, Dad."

Beth walked into the foyer again and opened the door. A man stood beside Elle Gardner. "Hello. I'm Nicholas Gardner, Elle's husband."

"I'm Adam's wife."

"May we come in and talk to you?"

“Adam doesn’t want to see to you, Elle.” She addressed his mother.

“I’m sure he doesn’t.” She said to Nicholas, “I told you this was a bad idea.”

Janelle moved out from behind Beth. “Mom?”

“My grandchild,” Elle said with awe in her voice.

“What does she mean, Mom?” Janelle frowned deeply “We don’t have any grandmas.”

Elle threw back her shoulders and focused on Janelle. “Yes, darling, you do. I’m your daddy’s mother.”

“We thought you were dead.”

Nicholas scowled. “Apparently everybody did.”

* * *

She cleaned up good, he thought bitterly when Beth led her into the house and she sat on the couch across from him. Her clothes were sophisticated and chic, her hair expertly colored a steel blond. She must have had some work done on her face.

She did all right for herself.

The kids were still gawking. They sat down next to Adam and each held one of his hands. “Dad, why did you tell us she was dead?”

Elle spoke up before he could. “Because I did something unconscionable. I left your father and his brother in the hands of a monster.”

“A monster?” Janey was owl-eyed.

“Your grandfather,” Adam spat out. “Who *is* dead, I assure you.”

“Why did you do that?” Janelle asked. Her voice was shaky, sensing that something was very wrong here.

“Because I was afraid Hank—that was his name—would kill me.”

“Were you afraid of him too, Dad?”

“Uh-huh, both my brother and I were. We got away from him, but not before some brutal beatings after *Elle* left. He got worse, *Mother*.”

Elle bent her head and started to cry again.

Beth came to the edge of her seat. “Why would you come to us after all these years?”

More crying.

“Because I forced this issue,” Nicholas put in. He’d been silent up until now. “Elle suffers from debilitating migraines. Her psychologist diagnosed them as stemming from past trauma.”

“Cry me a river.” Even to his own ears, the comment sounded immature and surly.

“What do you want from Adam?” Beth asked Elle. “And please, Nicholas, let her answer.”

She looked up with watery eyes. “Forgiveness.”

Adam wanted to be a good man, really. Beth and the girls deserved one. So he reached down into himself for forgiveness

—but it wasn't there. "You won't get it from me." He said the words in a deadly voice.

Janelle and Janey gasped.

"Dad!"

"Daddy?"

He couldn't do this. He couldn't. The memories clawed to the surface, jumbling in his mind. His body was about to combust. "I'd like you to leave," he said to them.

"Adam..." From Beth.

They didn't budge.

"Then I will."

"Please don't go, Adam." This from Beth.

Why was she taking his mother's side? Before he lashed out at her, at the world, he had to get out of here. He bolted up, hurried to the foyer and walked out the door.

At least he could breathe a little easier in the air.

Until he got in his car.

He only reached the park by their house before he couldn't drive any longer. He parked under a tree and laid his head back on the seat. The memories had to be let out...

Aaron lay on his stomach, his bare back a patchwork of wounds from his father's belt. Adam struggled to stay calm. He'd only gotten a fist. Since his mother left, his father was like a bear with a thorn in his paw.

Finally, Aaron was able to raise up on his elbows. "We gotta get out of here, Adam. He's worse every day."

“Where will we go? We’re little kids.”

“I’m a man now.” Aaron was fifteen and Adam twelve. “And it doesn’t matter where we go. We have to get away from him.” He winced in pain when he sat up. “Pa’s got money stashed in a sack in his closet.”

“How do you know that?”

“I saw him put more in yesterday morning before he went to work.”

Since his jaw hurt so much, Adam asked, “When would we go?”

“I gotta get my strength. Tomorrow or the next day if we can survive until then.”

Pa stayed out all that night and wasn’t there when they got up the next day.

So Aaron decided to leave then. “Pack as much as you can in a duffle. We’ll take the money, head to the bus station and take the next one out.”

“To where?”

“I told you it doesn’t matter.”

Adam was shocked when he saw how much money his father had saved in a box. They split it between the two backpacks, fit in a change of clothing and a few necessities and headed out...

The first bus to leave was headed to Crystal City, about two hours away. They’d gone there once on a rare family trip to see how glass was blown.

Aaron planned to regroup once they were out of town and maybe travel further that day. But they saw a poster on the wall of the bus station. *Room to rent*. The address was a nice yellow house down from the road. The owner, a kind woman, took them under her wing. They stayed. She got them enrolled in school, claiming they were her nephews, gave Aaron a job at a laundromat she and her late husband owned and bestowed on them the only motherly love they'd ever known. But it was never enough for Aaron. After they saw the obituary of his father online, he ran away again. Adam did not. Eventually, he joined the Crystal City Fire Department.

He shook his head. Nope, no way was he ever forgiving her.

* * *

Beth had no idea what to do. Adam had put her and the girls in an impossible situation. She could see why. He'd suffered terribly over the horrible things this woman had done and obviously couldn't handle this visit.

"I don't know what to say, Elle."

"None of this is on you." Her voice was raspy with tears. "Should I leave?"

"Well, he won't be back. I know that."

"Where will he go?"

"I have no idea."

“Mom?” Janelle was near tears too. “Can we visit with our grandmother?”

At the word, Elle put her face in her hands.

Nicolas intervened. “Would we be able to do that? It’s your call, Beth.”

“Mommy!” Janey said. “We want to talk to her.”

“All right. Go sit on the side patio. I think it would be better if I didn’t stay with you. But I’ll be right in the kitchen.” Where she could hear what was happening. She had to protect her girls but it would be awkward if she was there with them.

They went out through the sliding doors and took seats on the rattan sofa. Beth took bottles of water out of the fridge and brought out four.

“Thanks, Beth,” Nicolas said.

“You’re welcome.”

She scooped up the remnants of what was left from dinner on the picnic table, threw the detritus in the trash then started to clean the counters. But she listened to the conversation.

“Did you understand all of what happened?” Elle asked.

“I did.” Janelle’s voice was stronger. “You left Dad alone with a man that beat him and his brother up.”

“I did. And I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I can never make up for what I did.”

Janelle put in, “You said you thought he would kill you.”

“I did.”

“Did you ever think about Daddy and Uncle Aaron?”
Janey again.

“Every day.”

“Where’d you go?” Janelle asked.

“I had a sister in Florida. She and her new husband came to get me. I...I wanted to take the boys, but she lived in a condo in a gated community and children weren’t allowed.”

Nicholas put in, “She told the boys she’d come back for them. But she was bleeding from her head and her arm was broken, so she left with her sister.”

“Did you ever go back?” Janelle was doing the questioning.

“Once I found a place we could live. My sister gave me the money.”

“So you went to get them?”

“I tried. A month later when my arm was healed enough. But by then they were gone. Hank was drunk and told me what happened. When I found out the boys ran away, I went back to Florida.”

“Did you try to find them from there?”

“At first, I had no money to do that. Once I got two jobs and saved enough, I hired a private investigator but their trail had gone cold.”

“So you stopped?” Janey sounded horrified.

“I-I didn’t know what else to do.”

Nicholas spoke again. “She met me a year later. She was visiting her sister and I was a friend of her brother-in-law. We fell in love.”

“I’d cleaned myself up by then. Laura bought me new clothes and got me a decent haircut.”

“You’re pretty now.” This from Janey. “How old are you?”

“I’m sixty this year.”

Janelle frowned. “That would make you sixteen when you had Aaron and eighteen when Dad was born.”

“I got pregnant before Hank and I married. But I loved both of them so much. And Hank didn’t abuse us for eight years. Then, he started slow and he told me it was my fault.”

“You stayed for four more years with him?” Janelle again.

“I did. My biggest regret in life was leaving my boys.”

The girls had to be saturated by now so Beth started to go out. Then she heard Nicholas say, “I think that’s enough of the past for now. Why don’t you tell us what you like to do.”

“I’m in high school this year. I’m in drama club and chorus.”

“I’m in junior high,” Janey told her. “I’m on the basketball intramural team and in junior chorus.”

So she let the visit go on.

By now, she was standing by the door openly eavesdropping.

“Are we gonna see you again?” Janey asked.

“I want to.” This from Janelle.

“That depends on your mother. And father.”

Time for this to be over. Beth went out to the patio. “I think that’s enough for now.”

Nicholas said, “I agree.”

Beth asked, “Are you going back to...do you still live in Florida?”

“No, we moved to Bingham. Nicolas grew up there and loves the Southern Tier.”

“But if we can see the girls again, we’ll get a motel room in Crystal City for a while.” Nicolas held her gaze. “Please, Beth.”

“Please, Mom.”

“Please, Mommy.”

“I’m not sure this is my decision to make. Adam will be back for his shift in four days. I need to talk to him first.”

“One more time,” Elle begged. “Please.”

“All right. Do you two have after school commitments tomorrow?”

It turned out Janey had basketball practice. And Janelle had tryouts for the winter play. They’d take the late busses home.

“You can see them for dinner. Here, so I can supervise.”

“Thank you, Beth.”

“I’m doing this for the girls, Elle. What you did was awful. What Adam went through...” She bit her lip. “It’ll take me a while to forgive you, but I’ll get there.”

“Do you think Adam ever will?”

“I truly don’t know.”

* * *

Adam didn’t go to his condo on the river where he could be found. Instead, he checked into the Red Creek Motel, halfway between Crystal City and Elmwood. He walked into a room with only a brown paper bag. He got a glass from the bedroom then sat on the bed, his back against the headboard. He turned the TV on and opened the bag. Took out a bottle of Jack Daniels. He filled the glass. Drank slowly as the newscaster talked about politics. It barely registered.

He dug deep into himself to find the man he used to be right before he and Beth divorced. He’d been able to block the images of his past then. Block out all the emotion that swamped him now. Before this month with Beth, Adam had been good at blocking. At not showing emotion. At being stern and strict as hell with himself and his family. That’s why Beth divorced him.

He drank all night. When he started to feel sick, he laid down on the bed and oblivion came. When he awoke it was dark. He bolted to the bathroom and vomited. Afterward, he felt like shit. He went back to sleep and when he awoke again it was morning. Feeling moderately better, he found the liquor bottle with a third left and poured it into the sink. Then he took a shower. Then he walked to the diner next door.

“Hello, my name is Cindy and I’ll be your server.”

“Hi. I want a pot of coffee, three scrambled eggs and a waffle.”

“Gotcha.”

He wouldn't drink again. But he was staying here for a while. After breakfast he'd feel well enough to go buy some things at a local discount store, then run. He'd run and run until he was exhausted.

* * *

The next morning Beth put a roast in the crock pot for dinner, then went for a brisk walk, which energized her. She got to Artistic Gems around eleven. She'd work and take her mind off Adam and Elle and the girls. She'd called him twice last night and again this morning. Both times she was sent directly to voicemail. She'd left the same message. *“Please call me.”*

He didn't. Damn him.

Mary Kay came in at eleven too. “You okay?” her assistant asked.

“Yeah,” she said sipping the coffee, praying it enervated her. “I didn't sleep well.”

“I'm sorry. Want to talk?”

“About the gallery. I picked up the mail on my way in.”

She leafed through the envelopes. There was a letter addressed to the gallery.

“Hmm.” She sat down at her desk while Mary Kay poured herself a coffee. Beth sliced the seal on the envelope with a desk knife. Drew out papers.

The letterhead read *Jenkins, Jansen and Cook*. Reg’s attorneys. “It’s from Reg’s lawyers.” She read the missive. “No surprise here. He won’t be renewing his contract. We’re to ship his paintings to his townhouse in New York.”

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

“I don’t mind. Reg and I broke up...” She checked her written calendar. “About a week ago.” It felt like months, given all that happened. “I’ve been meaning to tell you but some things are going on in my life right now and I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“I realized he hadn’t been around but thought he went out of town like he often does. Beth, he proposed. It was very public.”

“I said no marriage the next day. He had a fit and stormed out.”

“I’m sorry. Is that why you didn’t sleep well.”

“No, I made the right decision for me. And I’m truly sorry if I hurt him.”

“What about Adam? He’s been around a lot. Is that what’s going on in your life?”

“Now that’s a story for another day. Let’s go online and see what paintings we might bring in. We both love doing that. Maybe we can get more local artists to exhibit.”

“That’d be fun.”

She called up her computer. Work was what she needed.

Later in the day, Beth was walking around the gallery planning for the next local artists exhibit—they'd emailed four—when her phone buzzed. Foolishly, she kept it in her pocket in case Adam called. She didn't recognize the number. "Beth Stark."

"Hi, Beth. This is Olivia Brandise. I'm sorry to bother you but do you know where Adam is? I've called several times but his phone goes to voicemail."

"I don't know. I'd tell you if I did. How are you feeling?"

"I'm recovering well. My sister is still with me."

"Glad to hear."

"Adam was supposed to come back to my house last night and he didn't."

She'd lie. She'd be damned if she'd do Adam's dirty work and facilitate their breakup. The thought made her realize that deep down she was mad at him, too. "I don't know anything about that, Olivia. We're divorced, you know."

"I know. I've been dating him for a while. If you hear from him, would you let me know?"

"I'll tell him you want him to call you."

"All right. Thanks."

She disconnected. Damn it! What next?

The afternoon was busy. All the local artists called back and wanted to show their work at Artistic Gems. It took up the rest of the day to make appointments and make plans in the

gallery. She left at four-thirty to get home to finish dinner. Elle and Nicholas were arriving at six.

The nagging feeling that she shouldn't be letting the girls see Adam's mother wouldn't go away, but she pushed it to the back of her mind. If he didn't like the decision she made, too bad. He'd left her to deal with all the fallout.

* * *

Adam tried to blank his mind as he went for his second run of the day at a local park. When he got back to the motel, he felt physically better but emotions battered at him to get out. Squelching them took energy so he laid down and slept.

But now, rested, he began to feel bad that he'd left Beth to deal with the shitty situation his mother had caused. How could he dump that on her? Boy that was probably a mistake, maybe one he couldn't correct.

His phone rang as he was running. He checked the ID. Tim Daniels. He didn't answer but when Tim left a voice message, he stopped at a bench, sat down and listened to it. "Hey, Adam, where are you? We're all at Jarek's house for a Brothers of Fire night. We're ordering out dinner. I know you were tied up with Olivia but you said you'd make this meeting. Call me back, buddy. I'm worried about you."

He called up his email on his phone and texted a response to Tim.

"Hi, Tim. Adam here. I didn't come to the Brothers of Fire tonight because I'm dropping out of the group. Don't call and

try to get me to stay in. It's not good for me. It took me places I didn't want to go. I know this will hurt you all, and I'm sorry, but it has to be this way. Say goodbye to the rest of the guys for me."

He was shaky when he disconnected. What he did cut him to the quick. He ran faster this time, got in the zone so he could forget Elle, Beth and the Brothers of Fire.

* * *

Beth was as gracious as she could be when she set the roast in the middle of the dining room table. The girls brought in the baked potatoes and the broccoli. The dinner smelled heavenly. The five of them sat down to eat. Adam should be here.

"This is wonderful," Elle said when she took a bite of the beef.

"Thank you."

"The girls said you own an art gallery in town."

"Yes, Artistic Gems."

"I know of that gallery," Nicholas commented. "You have some Reginald Worthington's work."

"Yes. But his paintings are only going to be here until the end of the week."

"Maybe we can stop tonight on our way back to the motel. We'll be leaving early tomorrow."

“Do you like art...?” Janelle hesitated. “I don’t know what to call you.”

“You can call me Elle, dear. And to answer your question, yes, I do. Nicholas introduced me to it.”

“What do you do, Elle?” Beth asked around a bite of the succulent meat.

“Well, I had a lot of odd jobs and finally got my GED at SUNY Bingham.”

“What do you do now?” Janelle again.

“When I married Nicholas, I didn’t need a paying job. I, um volunteer.”

“Five days a week,” Nicolas put in forcefully. “It’s more of a full time job.”

“Where?” Beth asked.

Elle held Beth’s gaze. “At Branson County Battered Women’s Shelter.”

A gasp from the kids.

“Good for you, Elle,” Beth told her. “Do you get a lot of satisfaction doing that work?”

“Yes. Now, enough about me.” She smiled then turned to the girls. “How was school today?”

“I got an A+ on my history test.” This from Janey.

The rest of dinner consisted of more of the same. Still, Beth couldn’t wait for it to be over.

Elle helped her and the girls clean up. “Thank you, Beth, for all this.”

“You’re welcome. But remember this is only one time until I talk to Adam about the girls seeing you.”

“I understand. As Nic said, we’re going back to Bingham tomorrow.”

They had ice cream for dessert, then Nicholas stood. “I think we should go, Elle. We don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

“Of course.”

The girls both hugged her warmly. “I hope we see you soon.”

“I hope so too, Janey.”

Later, after they left, they all went to their rooms, the girls to do their homework, Beth to unwind.

In the bathroom, she looked in the mirror. Damn it, she had deep grooves around her eyes and mouth. She washed and moisturized her face, brushed her hair, then slipped into some blue silk pajamas Bianca had bought her. That Adam had liked on her.

Don’t think about him.

She could call her sister for support, but this would be a lot to lay on her at nine at night.

Instead she climbed on the bed and picked up her book. Maybe she could lose herself in the tense thriller. She needed to escape tonight.

Chapter 8

On the morning of day four, Adam straightened up. He'd gotten old Adam back, the one he became after Aaron died. It was easier not to let himself feel.

Scheduled for work tonight at six, he needed to be in shape for that. First, he went for a walk instead of a run. Then he ate lunch at a diner on the way to Crystal City and was in his condo by two. He showered. Put on a clean uniform and headed to the firehouse at four. It wasn't unusual for a captain to arrive two hours before his shift.

"Hey, Cap." Jimmy Peters greeted him when he walked in through the door. He was a good lieutenant, Adam's age, and a seasoned firefighter. "How you doin'?"

"Hey, Jim. I'm fine. Any action today?"

"Three fires. We got called to all of them, though I'm not exactly sure why."

His brows raised. "That's unusual. Are the incident reports done?"

"I just finished them. But don't get too excited. One was a kitchen fire that we put out with an extinguisher. Another was for a sparkler that flamed and set a blanket on fire. Again, no hose. And the last was..."

"Car accident on Fourth Street near Meadows Park. Rescue Squad, Truck 3 and Engine 2 go into service."

“Sorry, Cap. Gotta go.”

Grateful that he felt like a different man from the last shift he'd been here, he headed to his office and sat at the desk. For a minute, he thought of Beth. Things would be different with her now. He accepted that.

Digging out the incident reports, he read through them. The Rescue Squad got called to the first two because the firehouses nearby were busy. For the last, it was a car fire, put out easy and a simple extraction but the chief never underestimated what car fires could do after Lynn Lucas got caught in the middle of the blaze.

He booted up his computer. He had to check his email and had avoided doing it on his phone. There were several in his personal account: from the girls, from Beth, from Olivia and, ah, from Nicholas. He ignored them all and called up his work missives.

Ones from Redman, Tim, Jarek, Noah and Tommy. Redman asked how the Halloween Fair was shaping up. It was an annual event that rotated among fire houses. This year it was going to be held at Adam's house in the parking lot behind the academy. He'd assigned Kay and Sean to plan it and they would be ready. Unfortunately, every firefighter in his house was required to work at it. Not his favorite thing.

He'd called up the schedule for this month to review it when someone rang the firehouse doorbell. At home he could ignore it. But not here. He went to the side entrance and opened the door.

For a moment, his heart filled with warmth. She was heartbreakingly beautiful in maroon full-legged pants with a

jersey blouse to match. Her hair was fluffy and her makeup light. But the expression in her eyes could cut glass.

Well, he'd dealt with this before. He could again.

"Come on in, Beth."

Not responding, she walked inside. "I need to talk to you."

"All right. Let's go somewhere private. The cooks for next shift could come in anytime." He led her to the office, not waiting to see if she was following. But her scent drifted to him. Bath Splash. They went inside and he sat on the other side of the desk; she took a chair in front of it.

She scrutinized his face. Finally, she said, "So, the old Adam's back."

"How do you know?"

"You didn't walk beside me to the office and your face is familiarly blank. I always hated that."

Leaning back, he tried to break the pull of her. He'd be kind, of course. "I'm sorry, Beth. I can't do the new man anymore."

"I know this thing with your mother threw you. Where'd you go?"

"To a motel. I won't bore you with the sordid details of the last three days, but in the end, I pulled myself together."

"I figured you were doing something like that. But I wish you'd called or emailed us."

The blank stare.

"The girls and I were very upset."

That dented his armor. “You’re right, I should have thought of you three first. I’ll call them tonight if I have a chance.”

She nodded. “What about us?”

“I can’t be the man you want.”

She smoothed down her pants, a telltale sign that she was trying to calm herself. “I see. Because your mother came back and you felt debilitating emotion.”

She knew him so well.

He nodded this time.

“Why don’t you go see Suzanne Delaney?”

For a few seconds, he considered it. Then he realized what the psychologist would put him through. “No.”

“Not for me and the girls? They were so happy you changed, that we were getting together again.”

“You don’t want me like this. I accept it.”

“What if I did?”

“No, you’d try to change me. I *cannot* be that man again,” he repeated.

Tears welled in her eyes. Dripped down her cheeks. “I love you. And I know you love me.”

“It’s not enough.” He swallowed hard. “We had that before and we divorced. Better to leave things like this.”

It took her a few minutes, but she got herself under control. She stood, turned and walked out.

Adam couldn’t move. He’d never felt worse in his life.

* * *

Beth drove to the gallery. She was on the later shift and the girls were home alone. *Damn Adam.*

No, she didn't really feel that way. He had deep, deep scars. He'd been horribly abused as a child and never had a real childhood. She hadn't known anything about his family life because he refused to discuss his early life. All he said was his parents were dead. She understood now why he avoided emotion. That cold man didn't surface, though, until after Aaron died. When Aaron died, Adam had been face-to-face with what his father had done to his brother and him. He couldn't stand the emotion that ambushed him. So he changed.

She walked into the gallery and found her assistant in the office. "Hi, Mary Kay."

"Hey. We've had a profitable day."

"I want to hear all about it. But first, remember I'm meeting with the local artists at five o'clock."

"Of course. I'm staying till it's over to watch the gallery."

They sat at the desk. She was all smiles. "We sold four paintings today. A Worthington, one of the landscapes and two by Jenkins."

"I'm not surprised. I love Jenkins' work. You can call the others and give them the news."

"Always a pleasure. Except for Reg. Can I email him?"

"That's a better idea."

“You okay? You seem sad.”

“I’m overwhelmed a bit.” She left the office and walked out to the floor and to the small conference room off it.

The artists would arrive in a half hour. She had time to call the girls. She punched in Janelle’s number.

“Hi, Janelle. Is Janey with you?”

“Yeah, we’re watching a movie. Our homework’s done and we cleaned up after we ate the pizza we ordered.”

“Thanks. Could you pause the movie and put your phone on speaker so I could talk to both of you?”

“Sure.” The sound went off and Janey said, “Hi, Mom. Did you talk to Dad?”

“Yes, I did. He rented a motel for the last three days. He said he needed to be alone to think.”

“That’s not right.”

Janelle put in, “It’s like him from before when he was so strict and unyielding with us.”

Beth said, “At least he’s safe.”

“Why didn’t he call us to tell us that? He knew we’d be worried.”

“You’ll have to ask him about that. He might not call tonight because he’s on at the firehouse. I’m sure he’ll contact you before school tomorrow.”

“I feel bad for him, Mom.” Poor Janey.

“I do too, honey. We have to be kind and sensitive to his needs right now.”

“We will. Should we tell him about seeing Elle?” Janelle asked.

“It’s best not to keep secrets. Remember to lock the doors and windows.”

“They are, Mom.”

“See you in a few hours.”

She disconnected. She didn’t have time to analyze the call because the local artists began arriving. At least she would enjoy seeing their portfolios.

* * *

The next morning, Adam pulled up to the house at seven and sat in the car. There was plenty of time to talk the girls. Maybe he’d even drop them off at school.

Man, he didn’t want to do this. His fall from grace would be in his daughters’ eyes, even though they’d be sweet to him. He parked in the driveway, then went to the side door. Knocked, but didn’t let himself in. Beth opened it. “You know you don’t have to knock.”

“It’s better this way.”

Hurt, deep and ugly, in her eyes. He had to look away.

“Come in. I’ll call the girls.”

“We’re here, Mom.” Janelle was entering the kitchen.

Janey rushed to him. “Hi, Daddy.” She wrapped her arms around his waist. “I’m sorry you’re sad.”

He gave her a perfunctory hug. “Can we sit?”

“I’m going to get dressed.” Beth left.

They sat. Janelle linked her hands on the table. Janey’s expression was hopeful.

“I’m sorry I left in a hurry a few days ago and didn’t communicate until today.” He raised his eyes to the ceiling, struggling for the right words. “I couldn’t handle what happened.”

“Mommy told us. I feel bad for you.” Janey was the most forgiving. “You had such an awful childhood.”

“I did. One I truthfully can’t think about.”

“Poor Daddy.” She fell back into the babyish terms.

“Yeah, well,” Janelle said, “you weren’t much of a Dad going through this, were you?”

Taken aback by the hostility in her tone, he said, “No, I wasn’t. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t always cut it. Those are your words. From before.”

He reached for her hand. She snatched it back.

“I’ll try to make this up to you.”

“How?”

Janey scowled. “Janelle, don’t be so mean.”

She aimed a laser beam gaze at him again. “We talked to our grandmother after you left and Mom had her for dinner the next night.”

“*What?*” He never expected this.

Beth walked back in. “All that’s correct,” she said coldly. “You left me to deal with the situation and that’s how I dealt with it.”

“By bringing that monster back into my home?”

“She’s not a monster, Dad.”

Janelle was silent.

“Do not ever allow her into your lives again, girls.”

Beth had it with him. “You don’t have the right to make that decision. I’m the only sane adult here and I assure you I’ll do what’s best for my girls.”

He slapped the table, making both children jump. “No!”

Janelle still glared at him. Janey began to cry. Beth raised her chin. “I’d like you to leave now.”

“Not until we settle this.”

“It’s settled. Go get ready for school, girls.”

Janey ran out of the room.

Janelle said, “You’re pathetic,” and left.

“Are you proud of yourself?”

“No. And I’m not proud of you either.”

“I’m trying to be kind to you but you’re making it impossible.” She went to the side door and opened it.

“Get out, Adam. Or I’ll call one of your Brothers of Fire to come and intervene.”

“Fuck!” He stood. “This isn’t over, Beth.”

“I’m afraid a lot’s over now, Adam. Leave my home.”

* * *

Beth waited in the kitchen, trying to settle down. The girls would miss the bus, but they needed time, too. Eventually, she went upstairs and to the doorway of Janelle's room. "When you're ready, I'll drive you to school."

Janey was still crying.

Not Janelle. She was brushing her hair.

Beth went back downstairs and eventually, they came down. "We're ready." This from Janelle. Her tone was so deadly, it made her *mom alert* go on.

"Janelle..."

"I don't want to talk."

"Janey?"

"No, I don't wanna talk again because I'll cry."

Beth didn't know what to do. Finally she grabbed her purse and drove them to school. Janey hugged her goodbye, but Janelle got out with no hug. Beth felt hopeless. And helpless.

She started to drive. She was supposed to go in to the gallery at eleven, so she kept driving. And found herself at Tim Daniels' house. She hoped Ava hadn't left for school.

Tim pulled back the door. "Hi, Beth."

"I'd like to see Ava."

"I'm sorry. She already left."

She swallowed hard. “I wanted to talk to her.”

He grasped her hand and drew her inside. Pulled out a chair for her. “Coffee?”

“No. I’ve had too much of it today.”

He dropped down across from her. “What happened?”

“That’s for Adam to tell you.”

He sat. “He quit the Brothers of Fire.”

“*What?*”

“Two days ago, when he was at the motel. By email.”

“You let him go?”

“We decided to give him time, but no way are we letting this go.”

“He’ll need you.”

“I think so, but he doesn’t know that. Still don’t want to tell me?”

Fuck this. She poured out the whole sad story.

“Whew! He’d never told us about his childhood. He was adamant about that.”

“We didn’t know either.”

“This must be so awful for you and the girls.”

“He was so much better, opening up, being the old Adam.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What will you guys do?”

“I’ll meet with the guys before we go into work. We’ll find a way through this. I promise.”

“I hope so, Tim, I hope so.”

* * *

Adam was on his second night shift so he went back to his condo on the river. He didn’t know what else to do. Upset, angry and exhausted, he lay down on his bed and begged God for some relief.

He startled awake. What time was it? Holy shit. He’d fallen asleep for three hours. The doorbell, which must have awakened him, rang again. Dragging himself out of bed and in rumpled clothes with hair sticking up, he trudged through the living room to the foyer and opened the door.

Olivia stood on the porch. He’d forgotten all about her during this mess.

No greeting from her.

So he said, “You’re all better?”

“It’s been a week, Adam. Yes, I’m better. I waited for you to contact me, then Sara insisted I concentrate on myself. I did.”

He swallowed hard. “Olivia, I’m sorry.”

“Save it.” She brushed past him and walked inside, into the living room and faced him, chin raised. “I deserve an explanation.”

“I can’t get into it again.”

“Again?” Her sad blue eyes narrowed on him. “Ah, I get it. You were with Beth. She called to say she talked to you, that you were all right. She said she couldn’t discuss anything more. So, *she* knows all about what you *can’t get into*.”

“It’s not like you think. Something happened. It concerned her and the girls. And more people. But seriously, I can’t...”

“Stop!” She’d raised her voice. “Either you explain to me or we’re through.”

He jammed his hands into his pockets. “We’re through anyway, Olivia. I can’t be in a relationship now.”

Her face softened. “If you’d just explain...”

“I’m sorry.” He started to the foyer. Eventually she was forced to follow.

At the door, she said, “You can’t unring this bell Adam. We’re finished.”

“Yeah, Olivia. A lot of things are.”

Exhausted from the emotional display, he went back to the bedroom and dropped onto the mattress. But images haunted him. His mother, tearful in his living room, trying to get him to forgive her. Beth, hurt and confused. The girls...he could barely think about them. Janelle had been angry, which was so unusual it worried him.

He went into work early. The day shift was out on a call, so he used his key and entered the empty firehouse. Without turning on lights, he strode to his office and called up the folder for evaluations he had to have in soon. He didn’t even

get a start on them when the lights went on in the house; a few seconds later, all four of the Brothers of Fire marched into his office. They looked like a posse from the old west.

He stayed where he was. They leaned against the wall or took chairs in front of him. “I don’t want to talk—”

“Shut up,” Jarek said. “You don’t have to talk. You have to listen.”

“No, I don’t.” He started to stand.

Tim moved to block the door and folded his arms over his chest. “Four against one. You won’t win.”

He dropped back down. “This is ludicrous.”

“Beth told me everything.” Tim’s voice softened. “You must be suffering in a way we can’t understand. But we’re not going to let you cut us out.”

“Why? We let Carson leave.”

“Which was a grave mistake.” This from Noah. “One we aren’t making again.”

Tommy straightened up from the wall. Even he seemed angry, which was a big deal. “So you’d best stop fighting us.”

Pushed to the edge, Adam bolted up. And yelled, “*What do you want from me?*”

“We want to keep you in our lives and we’re going to fight for you.” Tim made it sound like the most normal thing in the world.

“Why can’t people leave me alone?”

“We love you, man.” This from Noah.

That pierced his armor. He felt perilously close to breaking down. But the house phone rang. He'd turned off his cell.

"Let it go," Tim said.

He did, until a voice message came on. "Adam, it's Beth. Janelle skipped school and she didn't come home. I need help..."

He scooped up the receiver. "Beth, I'm on. Tell me exactly what happened."

* * *

Beth was crying by the time she finished.

"Hang on. I'll be right there. I'll get a sub for tonight." To his friends, he said, "Janelle never made it to her classes. One of her friends said she walked out the door as soon as I left. The computers were down in the whole district so they didn't have an accurate count of absences."

"We'll go with you," Tim declared. "You might need help. I'll call Joe Redman on the way over."

Tommy rode with Jarek, Tim with Noah and Adam.

True to his word, Tim punched in a number and put the phone on speaker. "Ellie, this is Tim Daniels. I have to talk to the chief. It's an emergency."

"I'll put you right through."

Then, "Tim, it's Joe. What's wrong?"

He told the chief about Janelle. “I know this is a lot to ask but Zenko, Keaton, Mancini, me and Stark of course need subs. I’d guess that there won’t be five officers—”

Joe cut him off. “No worries. I’ve been wanting to take a shift somewhere and it’ll be good for the battalion chiefs to do the same. This is an emergency.”

“Thanks, Joe.”

“Go find that little girl.”

Adam said when he clicked off, “She’s not a little girl anymore. She could be anywhere.”

When they reached Beth’s house, Adam bolted out of the car, and raced to the side door. He flung it open and found Beth and Janey in the kitchen. Adam rushed inside, the others right behind him. Janey ran across the room. “Daddy.”

He held her. “Shh, pumpkin. We’ll find your sister.”

Janey let go and he crossed to Beth. Hugged her, too. When they parted he asked gently, “Did you call the police?”

“No. If I said our daughter skipped school, they’d laugh at me.”

Tim sat down. “Let’s map this out.” He slid over the legal pad that was on the table. “First off, what is Janelle wearing?” He wrote down the description.

“Next, did you call her close friends?”

“Yes. Your girls didn’t know she skipped. They thought she was home sick. But a friend of theirs, Carrie, saw Janelle go out the same door she came in. Carrie ran after her but Janelle jogged away.”

“Any chance your girls are lying, Tim?”

“No. They know what’s at stake here. Where does she hang out?”

“They go to the Crystal City Diner sometimes when they don’t have after school activities. They hung out at Carrie’s pool in the summer. Otherwise, they go to the movies, to each other’s homes.”

“What about Elle’s house?” Tim asked.

Adam paled. He couldn’t explain.

So Beth did. “Elle is Adam’s estranged mother. She was here twice. She spent time with the girls. Maybe she’d go there.”

Janey had been quiet. Finally, she said, “Mom, I know about something. There’s an abandoned house out on Lake Road. High schoolers go there sometimes.”

“It was brave of you to tell us. Honey, have you been there?”

“No!”

“Has Janelle?”

“I don’t know, Dad. She said mostly druggies skip school and crash there. She thought they were stupid to do that.”

Tim continued to write. “Is there any teacher she’s close to. My daughter Kathy loves the senior English teacher.”

“Her name is Mary Baker,” Beth put in. “Janelle sings her praises all the time.”

Tim stood. “All right, we’re going to divide up these suggestions. “First, I’ll call my buddy at the CCPD to ask him to inform his patrols to keep watch for her. Then I’ll take Adam’s mother. Give me her contact info, Beth.”

“I can do that, Tim. I’d rather it be me.”

Adam remained stoic.

“How about if Adam and I go to the abandoned house?” Tim suggested. “I can call the police on the way.”

“I’ll take the teacher. I loved my English teacher, too.” Noah wasn’t his cheery self.

Jarek said, “I’ll drive around to see if I can spot her.”

“Thanks, guys.” Beth’s voice was wobbly. “Don’t you have to work tonight?”

“No. We got subs.”

“All of you?”

“It’s a long story,” Tim said, amused. “But yes.”

Adam took Beth’s hands across the table. “I know this is my fault. We’ll find her, Beth.”

“I hope so.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

Once in Adam’s car, Tim punched in the CCPD. “Crystal City Police Department. Who can I connect you with?”

“Chief Lincoln, please. This is Captain Tim Daniels from the CCFD. It’s urgent.”

Adam raised his brows at Tim going straight to the top of the police food chain. Then he focused back on Janelle. Where

could she be? Her running away because of him made him feel like shit but he forced himself to focus on finding her.

* * *

He knocked on Beth Stark's side door. He'd been here a lot and used this entrance. Beth opened it, a phone at her ear. She motioned him in. "No, Elle, it would be better if you didn't come here right now. Adam's in a state as it is. He thinks it's his fault she ran away."

She disconnected the phone, set it on the table then walked to where Carson was standing. She hugged him. He hugged her back. "I came as soon as I heard. It's all over the department. Everybody's been notified to watch for her when they go out on a call."

She stepped back. "How did you get out of work?"

"I got a sub. Tommy's wife was free. She used to be on my crew."

"Do you want coffee?"

"No, thanks." He nodded to the list Tim had made. "May I?"

"Of course."

Hmm. Okay plans. But they left one thing out. "I have an idea."

"What?"

“Canvassing the stores.” 7/11, the liquor store, the smoke shop but he didn’t name them. “Maybe she stopped at one.”

“For what?”

“Something rebellious. Beer. Cigarettes. Something like that. And she’ll need sustenance to hole up somewhere.”

“She doesn’t smoke or drink,” Janey protested.

“She’s upset, honey. She ran away. That’s what kids do.”

Beth cocked her head. She was such a beautiful woman, inside and out. For the hundredth time, he wondered how Adam let her go. “How do you know all this?”

“Past experience.” He glanced at Janey then back to Beth. “I ran away when I was in high school, too.”

“That was twenty years ago, Carson.”

“Kids don’t change that much. Now do you have a photo of her?”

Janey went into the living room and returned with one.

“Thanks, Carson. The guys will be so happy you’re helping.”

“None of that’s important now.” He kissed Beth’s cheek, then headed out. His heart was beating fast. It was hard to go to Adam’s house. But contrary to public opinion he could put people’s welfare above his own.

He sped to town in his Porsche. Blanked his mind as best he could. He started at a 7-11. “Hey, there, Charlie,” he said as he walked in.” His uniform got him special treatment. “Have you seen this girl?”

Charlie took a look. “Yeah. This morning. About 11.”

“What’d she buy?”

“She didn’t. The boy with her did.”

“A boy?”

“Yeah, he hangs out around here sometimes. He had ID for the beer and smokes, but I worried that both things were for her. Nothing I could do about that, though.”

“All right, thanks.”

Next, he hit the bakery, then the bank. The teller hesitated. Carson told him to call his boss. When the manager came out, he faced the man squarely. “Hello, Peter.” Carson was a customer here like most of Crystal City. “I’d like to know if your tellers have seen this girl.”

“Glad to see you Carson.” He glanced down at the photo. “We don’t usually...”

“I’m a firefighter, Peter. And well-respected in this town.” The guy nodded. “So you know I save people. I don’t harm them. Her parents are firefighters, too. They’re worried out of their minds.”

“She been gone all day?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll talk to the teller.”

She’d been there. Withdrawn money.

Next he visited the sub shop. Sure enough she’d bought one turkey sub and cookies. How odd, he thought as he got in the car. She’s running away and bought sweets.

But as he drove out to the river, his mind tumbled back to Linc. They'd both been mad at their parents so they skipped school, went to a private part of the river and smoked, drank beer, ate subs and munched on brownies. He guessed buying cookies wasn't so odd, after all.

She wasn't in the spot he and Linc had gone to back then. Carson kept driving along the road. No sign of her. Maybe he was wrong. Just as he was about to retrace his steps, he caught sight of yellow. Blond actually. He swerved into a recess on the side of the road and got out of the car. He made his way over the rocks and picked his way down to the riverfront.

Janelle was seated on a large flat rock when he reached her. For a second, she seemed like she didn't recognize him. Then she said, "Hey, Carson." All the kids in the BOF called them by their first names.

"Hey, Janelle." He motioned to the boulder nearby. "Mind if I sit?"

"No. I'm caught anyway."

The rock was hard as hell. "How long have you been here?"

"Since about eleven." It was now six. She held a beer in her hand.

"How'd you get the booze?"

"This guy I know set me up with his older brother."

He gestured to the Marlboros. "You smoke those?"

"Two. They made me feel sick." She lifted her chin and reminded him of Adam. "The beer made me braver."

“Booze will do that.”

“How’d you find me, Carson?”

“I ran away once. With my best friend. This is exactly what we did.”

“Why?”

“We were mad that our parents wouldn’t let us go to this concert down in New York.”

“Did they let you go afterward?”

“No. Both of our fathers grounded us. But my mother was frantic with worry, so I felt bad I did that to her.”

Her bravado disappeared.

So he continued. “Want to talk about why you ran away?”

“I was confused about my father, his mother, my mother and father together. Then it boiled over. So I bounced.”

She started to take another sip of the beer but he stayed her hand. “I can’t let you do that, sweetie.”

The can hit the dirt.

“Did you figure anything out?”

“Nope. And I don’t feel better. I was mad. Now I’m sad.”

“Life is full of sadness, kiddo.” He stood. “Let’s gather these things here and head home. It’ll be dark soon.”

She was quiet all the way to Beth’s house. As he drove, he phoned Beth, gave her the news and said he was headed back with Janelle. “Can I talk to her?”

Janelle’s eyes widened and she shook her head vigorously.

“Why don’t we wait till we get there.” He disconnected.
“You’re gonna have to talk to them, Janelle.”

“Not yet.”

He reached the street and driveway and shut off the engine. They both got out and walked up to the house. Beth stood outside, waiting for them, the side door open behind her.

Janelle flung herself into Beth’s arms. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“We’ll talk. I’m just glad you’re back home.” Her voice broke, affecting even Carson so it must be killing Janelle.

Over their heads, Carson saw Janey crying in the kitchen. He walked around Beth and her daughter and went inside. Janey threw herself at him. Still crying she said, “Thank you so much, Carson.”

“You’re welcome. Your sister is safe and sound.”

He let her hug him, then when she drew back, he said, “Go say hi to her.”

It dawned on him then. Beth would have called The Brothers of Fire before he got here. They’d show up any time. But Carson couldn’t leave now. All the women in the house were crying.

* * *

Adam bolted out of Tim’s car as soon as it stopped. His heart was in his mouth. He knew she was safe at home, but he had to see her. Touch her.

He found them in the living room. A bedraggled Janelle sat on the couch next to her mother and sister...and Carson was across from them in one of the chairs. “Sweetheart,” he said when he saw Janelle.

She disentangled herself from Beth and Janey and rushed to him. He grasped her tightly. Brushed a hand down her hair. He could smell the beer and cigarettes. “I’m so sorry, Janelle. So sorry. I know it’s my fault you ran away.”

“I’m sorry too, Dad. I felt so bad, I couldn’t go to school.”

“I understand.”

She pulled back. Her eyes weren’t glassy at least.

He asked, “What do you need now?”

“A shower. I know I smell awful.”

He got his first glance at his wife. She seemed ravaged. “Beth?”

“Of course. Do you want me to come, sweetheart?”

“Janey can come with me. You can run me a bath, sis, and we’ll talk.”

His younger daughter stood and grabbed Janelle’s hand. They took the stairway up to the second floor.

It wasn’t what Adam wanted—he wanted to hold her tight and never let her go—but he’d do what she needed. He turned around to see all the brothers arrived and hovered in between the kitchen and the living room. Carson stood. “I’ll get going now.”

“Not before this.” Adam crossed to him and bear-hugged his long lost brother. “I’ll never be able to repay you for this.”

Carson didn't answer. Instead, this time, he hugged back.

* * *

Beth sat on the couch across from them while Adam and Carson hugged. She knew that embrace signaled a milestone. When Carson drew back, he said, "If you need anything Beth, call me."

"I needed what you did. Thank you."

Carson turned to leave. When he got to the kitchen, he mumbled something to the Brothers of Fire and they followed him outside.

She braced herself for Adam joining the brothers, but he crossed to her instead. Sat. Took her into his arms. She let go, then, all of the pent-up emotion bubbling into the familiar shoulder.

"She's home. She's okay." He kept repeating the words until she stopped crying.

He confessed, "I'm sorry I was the cause of this."

"I must have done something wrong with Elle, too."

"All that doesn't matter now."

It felt so good to bury her face in his chest again. Beth wanted to stay like this forever. She was silent for a while, then she moved back. "We have to figure out how we'll handle this."

“Well, she reacted to something I caused. We’ll have to work that out. And we can address the drinking and smoking, later.”

“I agree. We just have to be there for her.”

He nodded.

“Meanwhile, please don’t be stern and unyielding with her. Find that other Adam, if only for a while.”

His defenses were down now, too. “I promise I’ll find him.”

Chapter 9

Adam awoke. The sun was up and he guessed it was his usual time of five a.m. when he was on the day shift. A heavy weight rested in his arms. Janelle. He kissed the top of her fresh smelling hair. Next to her were Beth with Janey at her side. He and Beth were fully dressed but the girls had put on their pajamas after the bath.

Last night, after enough time, he and Beth had gone upstairs and to Janelle's room. Then Janey's. They found their daughters on Beth's bed. His bed...

She'd asked, "What do you need, girls?"

"We want to sleep here. Like we used to when it thundered."

"Fine by me." She turned to Adam. "You?"

"The same." He kicked off his shoes. Rolled up his white shirt sleeves and yanked off his tie. Beth ditched her shoes and pulled a band out of her hair. He slid on the bed and let Janelle cuddle. Janey made room for Beth and they'd stayed that way a long time.

They reminisced...

"Remember when you took us to Disney?"

He could almost hear the noise of the rides. "Don't remind me. I got sick on Space Mountain."

"Mom didn't. She was great."

“I liked the Haunted House,” Janey put in.

Both he and Beth groaned. They’d gone through the famous attraction with screams and eerie music and fog at least ten times until Janelle put her foot down. Her choices weren’t much better. Five times on the Peter Pan ride, four times on the Alien ride and too many times on It’s A Small World. They all sang the song for two days.

The girls fell asleep with those beautiful moments in their heads. Beth slept too. But Adam stayed awake and thought long and hard about what he wanted out of life.

Everybody else woke at seven. “We gotta get up for school,” Janelle said sitting up.

“A few more minutes,” Janey’s words were muffled by the pillow.

Eventually, he went down and made them chocolate chip pancakes. After they all appeared in the kitchen, they sat down and gobbled up their pancakes.

The girls cleaned up and then Janelle asked, “What’s going to happen to me at school?”

“What usually happens for truant students?” Beth asked. She was all ruffled from sleep with wrinkled clothes.

“They get detention.”

“You’ll have to abide by their rules.”

“I’ll miss play practice.”

“Explain it to Mrs. Baker. I’m sure she’ll understand. Noah went to talk to her to find out if she knew anything.”

“That’s okay. She’s cool.”

When the girls headed out to wait for their busses, Adam said to Beth, “Do you want me to go?”

“No.”

“I don’t want to either.”

They heard the hissing of the buses, their grinding gears as they took off. Beth stood and held out her hands. Led him upstairs.

He said, “I need a shower.”

“After.”

The lovemaking was tender and sweet, it brought tears to Beth’s eyes. Adam also shed a few. They immediately fell back to sleep.

When he awoke an hour later, he showered, put on a uniform that for some reason still hung in the closet. He left her a note on the pillow. It said simply, *I love you*. Because he did love her. But he knew in his heart he wasn’t a good enough man for her. Yet.

Twenty minutes later, instead of going into the firehouse annexed to the academy, he took the steps up to the second floor. It was early, but Joe Redman was in his office. Even the chief’s secretary wasn’t here. Adam knocked on his ajar door.

Joe stood and circled his desk. “Hey, Adam, thanks for letting me know Janelle got home. How are you doing this morning?”

“A lot better now. Carson found her.”

“Carson? I thought you were all estranged from him.”

“I thought so, too.”

Joe's brows rose. "Think he'll go back to the Brothers of Fire."

"I hope so."

When he left the chief, he saw a light on and the door open to another office across the way. He crossed to it and Suzanne Delaney gave him a sympathetic look. "Hey, Adam. I was notified about Janelle last night. I would have come to see if I could help but I was in Elmwood giving a presentation to the Flying Solo group."

"Thanks for the thought."

"She okay?"

"As well as can be expected at this point."

"If I can do anything, let me know."

"You can. But not for Janelle. I need to have some sessions with you. There's a lot that caused her to run away."

A smile spread across her face. "I'm glad you came to me. When do you want to start?"

"Do you have room today?"

"You going back to work?"

"I have one more night shift."

"Come back at three o'clock since you're right downstairs."

"Three it is."

Though there was a sick feeling in his stomach, Adam walked away relieved that he was going to have some help to ease the searing pain of his past.

Chapter 10

Two weeks later

Severed heads screamed. Sounds of a chain saw grated. And chilling, spooky laughter came from the Halloween maze cloaked in black plastic situated in the Rescue Squad's parking lot.

Adam stood with Kay and Sean in front of the entrance to the maze. "You two did a good job."

"Thanks, Cap." This from the cackling witch otherwise known as Lieutenant Kay Kramer. "I can't wait for my kids to see it."

Sean, a joker with a deck of cards on the front of his green costume, smiled. "I liked doin' this more than I thought I would." He glanced over Adam's shoulder. "Look at that."

Adam turned and burst out laughing. In the light from halogens set up around them, he saw a real posse coming toward them.

Tim, the leader, tipped his cowboy hat. "Howdy, partner."

Adam scoffed. "Not very original."

Each of the Brothers of Fire wore name tags. Tim's said Marshall Matt Dylan, with Ava the saloon proprietor Kitty. Doc Adams, aka Jarek, greeted Adam. On his arm was another saloon girl, sexy, though Lacey had a very visible baby bump.

Two other gunslingers from the old west were next. Tommy and Stef were Jesse and Frank, the James brothers.

Then the last two moved up right behind them. “Hey, Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Yo,” Chloe said, gorgeous as ever. She had a smaller stomach than Lacey but she was visibly pregnant.

Carson was not with them. Adam had hoped he would be.

Tim hiked up his gun belt. “Where are your lost boys, Peter Pan?”

Adam had dressed in the silly costume to prove to himself he could be whimsical. He’d had an intense first week of therapy and had been going twice a week since then. He suspected the process might take months, maybe years of more introspection, but he was making progress. One of the next hurdles was seeing his mother, which he couldn’t do yet but dropped his objection to the girls visiting with her.

He glanced out over Tim’s shoulder. “Ah, one of my lost boys is coming now with Tinkerbell.”

Janey choose to be the little skunk and Janelle had picked Tinkerbell. Beth had bought her a yellow leotard, with a skirt over it. Wings feathered behind her, she wore her hair back like the fairy in the movie.

Waiting behind was a gorgeous Wendy. “I-I...”

Dressed in nightclothes of a tight bodice with bloomers, she walked up to him. At least she wore a blue robe over them. “Hello, Peter Pan. You do look cute.”

“Huh. You’re pretty hot for Wendy.”

“You hush now, boy.”

“Can we go inside now?” Janey asked.

“Of course.”

The girls went ahead. Kay was still at the entrance. She pulled back the plastic. “Come inside, my pretties.”

The girls giggled.

Beth turned to Adam. “Think you want to escort me in, Peter?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

The interior was dark and foggy. A Chuckie doll on strings floated down in front of them. Beth started back. Right into his arms. He held onto her for a few seconds, then drew her into a private space off against the side wall. He turned to her and before she could object, he opened the robe and slid his arms around her waist. Bending in, he nuzzled her neck. His hands moved to her rear end.

She moaned. “This isn’t anything like what happened in the movie.”

He chuckled. “Nope.”

She moaned, then lowered her hand to his groin. “Arrgh,” he said.

“We’d better stop.”

“All right.” Adam reluctantly conceded. “Woman, you drive me crazy.”

“You drive me crazy too.” She whispered in his ear, “But sometimes, in a good way.”

“Can we go to the house right now?”

“No. The girls...”

“Oh, shit.”

“I’ll be glad when I’m home.”

They’d been seeing each other, making love, but they still lived separately until Adam could get his head on straight.

“It’s hard waiting till Christmas to move back in.”

“I know love. But it’ll be worth it.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Easy for you to say.”

Beth laughed a full, joyful laugh. It drowned out the weeping and wailing of the haunted house.

For him, it was the best sound in the world.

* * * * *

Read on for a peek at the final book in the Brothers of Fire, [COMING IN HOT](#), Carson’s story.

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

Did you like Adam Stark in previous books? He's a part of the Brothers of Fire and often pulls through for them. But he withholds the details of his past. He also stuffs his emotions. I was on the fence about him as I wrote him in each story and I didn't know how I was going to turn him into a likeable hero.

But I've always been a sucker for wounded heroes. And boy, was Adam wounded. Initially, happy with Beth and the girls, he's able to bury his memories and ignore his scars from growing up. Until his brother dies and he's slapped in the face with the memories those awful memories. So, to survive what haunts him, he cuts himself off from as much emotion as he can.

I loved Beth. Although she regrets the divorce and in the other books, hints that she might want to get back together, she's gone on with her life. She's a great mother and an excellent businesswoman and creates a good life with the girls.

Yet, she and Adam still gravitate to each other. And when the young firefighter dies, she's there for him. After that, they can't ignore their feelings and don't really try to.

Then the worst happens. His mother crashes back into his life. He wallows in his misery and true to form, he reverts back to the “old Adam.”

I struggled to find a reason he’d rise above his hurt. I decided that his children would be the only catalyst that could make him do this.

And weren’t those Brothers of Fire all dolls for coming to Adam’s side? Even Carson. I was shocked when he showed up at Beth’s house to help find Janelle. I was hoping this would be the turning point for him to come back to the BOF. But it wasn’t. It did, however, set the stage for his return which you know he has to do in book six. These are romances after all.

Best,

Kathy Shay

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Don't Miss All of the *Brothers of Fire* Stories



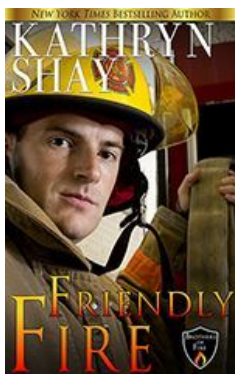
[ALL FIRED UP](#)

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 6

COMING IN HOT

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Ms. Lansing’s classroom.”

The person who opened the door gave him a beatific smile.
“I’m Grace Lansing.”

His jaw dropped. She looked like a highschooler herself. Gathering his wits, he said, “I’m Captain Taylor from the fire department.”

Now an amused smile. “I could tell by your uniform. Come inside, Captain. We’re ready for you.”

He followed her into the room, an overly large area with several sections. The main space was set up as he’d requested when he’d emailed her for the date and time. The kids were in two rows of four each. Room for a demonstration spread out in front of them. The students were fifteen years old, and his task was to present fire safety information.

“Say hello to Captain Taylor everyone.”

In unison, they greeted him.

“I’m here today to talk to you about fire safety. First, I’ll show you how to get out of your house if it catches fire.”

One student raised his hand. A big kid, he had shaggy brown hair and a challenging expression on his face.

Ms. Lansing said, “Go ahead, Jackie.”

“I thought we were gonna get on the floor and act out things we should do if *we* catch on fire.”

“It’s called Stop Drop and Roll. I’ll get to that next. But we will do something else that requires movement from you.”

He frowned. “I wanna do Stop and Drop now.”

Ms. Lansing went to his desk. “Jackie, we talked about listening to guests who come in and do what they ask us to do.”

A scowl now. He sat back in the chair and crossed his arms.

Carson walked to the white board. She moved to the side.

He wrote,

Exit the house immediately.

Then he explained, “Get out of your house as quickly and safely as possible. If there’s smoke in your house get down on your hands and knees, keep your head up, and crawl outside.

“The next two will have to be worked out with your family.”

Know two exits.

Set up a meeting place outside.

He glanced at the students. They seemed interested.

“So, first, let’s practice getting out of a smoke filled dwelling. I’d like you to get up and stand single file in a row.

I'll demonstrate how to exit the house, then I want you to repeat what I did."

"Ms. Lansing, can you close the blinds, please?"

Carson dropped down on all fours, kept his head up and crawled to the classroom door. There he stood up and turned off the lights. It got dim, like it might be in smoke.

"Please do this one at a time. Jackie, you can go first."

He stayed where he was.

Again, Ms. Lansing crossed to him. "Jackie, would you like to go to the timeout room for the rest of this presentation?"

"No."

"Then, do what he asked."

The boy got up and dropped down on his hands and knees, looked down and crawled to the door. There he stood up.

"What did he miss, class?" Carson asked.

"Keep your head up," one girl said.

"Want to try it again, Jackie?"

The boy's face reddened.

Ms. Lansing started toward him.

Jackie rushed Carson and shoved him against the white board. Carson crashed back, hit his head hard and fell to the floor. The room blurred.

But he could see Ms. Lansing grab hold of Jackie and drag him out of the room.

Carson managed to stand. When she came back in, she crossed to him. “Are you hurt?”

He touched the back of his head. His hand came away bloody. “Just get me a cloth. I’ll stop the bleeding then I can finish.”

She crossed to a cupboard and brought back a small towel. He held it on his head. She turned to the others. “I can tell by your faces that you’re scared. Everything is fine. Captain Taylor just has a bump on his head. Now, sit down in your seats and put your head on the desk for a few minutes.”

They obeyed. She turned to him. “Let me see the wound.”

“It’s just a goose egg.”

“Please, let me check it.”

“All right.”

Up close she smelled like bath splash. Fresh and clean. Her touch was gentle. “You need ice. Shall we go to the nurse’s office?”

“Do you have ice here?”

“Yes. In the small fridge.”

“Let me put it on my head for a bit. Then I’m sure I can finish the lesson.”

“Whatever you say.”

She told the kids to talk among themselves.

In ten minutes, he took off the ice. “There, it feels better. I can teach the rest of the lesson.”

“Are you sure?”

This close, he could see freckles on her face. And her eyes were tinged with green specks.

“Yes, ma’am, I’m sure.”

“All right kids, get up and go back in line to take your turn.”

* * *

Grace was mortified that one of her students attacked the firefighter. But she pretended to be calm when the kids performed the crawling exercise. The bell rang just as they finished and she shepherded them to an adjoining room for math. Then she got the firefighter another ice pack.

Sitting again, he put it on his head.

“Captain Taylor, I’m shocked and embarrassed by what happened with Jackie.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I feel responsible.”

For some reason, he wanted to erase that stricken look on her face. “The others were well behaved and you were calm and knew how to soothe them. Concentrate on that.”

“Thank you.” He was so sweet to say that. And boy, he was easy on the eyes with that black hair and sparkling, navy blue eyes.

“Grace.” He said her name with affection. “I’ll still come back tomorrow for the last part of the lesson.”

“All right. Tell me what the students should do tonight for homework.”

He wanted them to draw a floorplan of their houses and find two exits. “Can they, um, do this?”

“Yes, Captain Taylor. They’re Special Needs kids for a lot of reasons. And I’ll send an email to all the parents so they can help.”

He studied her. “You should call me Carson.”

“All right, Carson.”

“What will happen to Jackie?”

“It’s nice of you to ask. The team I work with, including the vice principal, will meet and decide what to do. Meanwhile he’s in a timeout room with supervision.”

“Don’t be too hard on him.”

She smiled again.

He stood and handed her back the ice. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Grace.”

“I’ll look forward to it, Carson.”

* * *

“OMG, a fifteen year old took you down?”

“Cap, you must be losin’ it.”

“Poor Cap. Do you need to go lay down for a while?”

“All right, all right, you can stop the razzing.” Carson wasn’t sure he would have told them what happened but they found him putting ice on his goose egg. It hurt like hell and he had a dull headache.

“The poor teacher was mortified. I felt bad for her.”

“Her, huh? What was she like?”

“She looked like a teacher. Conservative clothes, no makeup. Brown hair pulled back in a bun.” But she sure smelled great.

“So no prey for you then, right?” Patrick O’Neil teased. A veteran firefighter with a lovely wife and three kids, had the best sense of humor in the group.

“I don’t prey on women.”

Pat laughed. “I meant they prey on you.”

“Stop with all that.” He checked his watch. “It’s almost time for training. Nick, would you still like to conduct it?” In the event of Carson’s absence, the easy-going lieutenant would be in charge.

“Sure. I like being the officer when you’re not here.”

Rachel Peterson, a paramedic and firefighter, and married to another firefighter, said, “I want to take a look at your head.”

“Yeah, okay.”

She crossed to him. Tall, lithe but strong, she was gentle when she moved his hair. But not as gentle as Grace. “Hmm, looks okay. Alternating the ice on for ten minutes, off for a half hour till noon would be enough.”

“There’s ice in my office and I have a few things to do. But how about we have the training in an hour?”

Once in his office, he grabbed an ice pack from the fridge. He couldn’t do much in the ten minutes but hold the pack, so he studied his surroundings. The room was almost obsessively neat, painted a creamy white, with built-in shelving and storage cupboards on the bottom, one of which held his fridge. He’d paid for those units out of his pocket. The oak desk he’d inherited from his grandfather was uncluttered and held only his computer and an inbox for messages.

After ten minutes, he ditched the pack and called up his emails. One from Joe Redman, the fire chief, asking how the training went. Every year, the department went into high school classes to teach fire safety. This year, he’d been chosen because the chief thought he could handle the special needs kids.

Damn, Carson would have to come clean and tell him what happened. He wrote back giving the chief the gist of it. Joe responded that he shouldn’t worry about Jackie’s behavior and asked if Carson wanted to go home for the day.

He just started to answer the next email when the P.A. came on. “Whirring noises coming from a wall. Engine six, go into service.”

“Why us?” Patrick O’Neil asked.

“There’s a list of firehouses to go to routine calls like this. We won’t get another for a while.”

They dressed in all their turnout gear and headed to the scene without sirens blasting or horns honking. At the given

address, they dismounted the rig and walked. Cold November wind blew in their faces as they trudged up to the medium size ranch up on Third Street. They left their SCBA in the truck. Carson knocked on the door.

A woman opened. “Hi, I’m so glad you’re here.” She led them to the bedroom. Sure enough a vibrating sound came from the wall.

Carson asked, “Was this a constant noise in here?”

“No. I was vacuuming. I hit the wall. Then the noise started.”

“Is there access to this wall?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there an opening anywhere?”

“Um, I don’t think so. I just moved in with my girlfriend so I’m not sure.”

“What do you think, Rachel?”

“I think we have to open up the wall.”

The woman’s brows rose. “Oh, well.”

“We’ll just cut a small square of drywall exactly where the sound is,” Nick explained. “It shouldn’t take much to put it back, spackle it and repaint.”

“Do you do that?”

Owen Kingston snorted. The newest member of the squad in his early twenties had trouble keeping a straight face.

Carson said, “No, ma’am, we don’t.” He turned to his crew. “Get the small saw, O’Neil. Nick, you access the wall.”

The saw buzzed loudly, but it didn't take long for a piece of drywall to fall out. The noise got louder. Nick reached his hand inside. He pulled out something that was indeed whirring. Nick snorted a laugh, O'Neil said, "Holy Mother of Christ" Rachel shook her head.

"What's that?" Owen asked.

"Cap," Rachel said, "This is all yours."

"Owen, it's a vibrator that was accidentally turned on by a vacuum cleaner." He could barely keep a straight face.

"A vibrator like what a woman...oh, I get it."

Carson stood.

"How could that in get there?" the woman asked.

"Well, ma'am, somebody had to put it there."

Her eyes widened. "My girlfriend?"

"Unless it's been there a while. How long has she lived here?"

"Ten years at least."

"Then I suggest you take it up with her."

They gathered their things and left. They made it to the truck before they all guffawed. Even Carson.

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](#).