



First Five Chapters

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WARNING

This book contains sexually explicit scenes, references and adult language, this might be offensive for some readers. PHW Love novels are intended for ADULTS ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase was made. Please take care to save such books safely where underage readers cannot access it.



Author's Note on Language

It's the old non American dialect disclaimer.

I'm giving fair warning I'm from a little known, two island country deep within the Southern Hemisphere - New Zealand.

As such, the version of English that is standard here is what I'll be subjecting you, the lovely reader to.

Yes, it means an often weird and eclectic mix of both American and British dialect. Don't be confused seeing 'recognise' or 'apologise' instead of the covert 'z.' It's not that we don't like 'z' but with our fondness of 'u' in words like 'colour' and 'neighbour,' we don't want to be hoarders of all the end letters in the alphabet, now do we. Shall I mention we also have a fondness for double 'L.' Some vices can never be overcome.

I should also note while most of us describe our height in feet and inches. In the quaint, middle of nowhere, blessed country where I live, we use the metric system. Pounds are not used to describe weight; metres determine length, so on and so forth. I try to incorporate both in my stories, so don't feel I'm being inconsistent, I am paying homage to my up bringing while acknowledging my lovely fellow readers from different spaces.

We Kiwi's are a unique bunch, and I hope you enjoy reading from a land where six degrees of separation is more like two, and whole heartedly believe togs aren't undies until you cross the street.

Love and Light
PHW Love



Disclaimer

Please NOTE:
This book has trigger warnings.

Violence, scripted assault and discussion of trauma.

Reader discretion is advised. Please be kind to yourself.

This book is for adults only.

What Romance are you reading?

A Alien/Sci-fi

B Batting for the same team/Bi

■ **C** Contemporary

D Dark

E Erotic

F Fantasy/Paranormal



To my darling daughter
Grace, whom without her
encouragement this book would
never have been finished.





Chapter 1

Attempts to calm her Mother failed, and Charlee's words fell into silence. Having contemplated breaking her self-imposed vow of secrecy, she thought better of it, unable to describe the powerful emotions that'd rushed over her hours earlier. Would her Mother even understand? How could she? Her only daughter interested in a man. That same daughter who'd made it abundantly clear. Never again. Not after her last partner nearly ended her.

Couple that with her unflappable dedication to her career; it left an unbelievable story bouncing around like one of those crazy pinball wizards on a winning streak. To her family and friends, no man would register on her love radar again. And her Mother, well, she would dismiss it as a 'damsel in distress' infatuation, rather than believe when their eyes met, he instantly soothed her tortured soul.

It wasn't the way those smouldering dark blue eyes held her captive, or that he'd caught her off guard—half-naked. Nor was it the strength of his command during their life-and-death rescue.

No.

He held a gentle protective valour and gentlemanly honour. A respect for women that made his reverence as a fireman more alluring. It drew her in like a lamb to the slaughter.

The high-pitched screams of her name through the phone brought her back to who she could hide nothing from. "Mum, listen, I don't have my phone. Tell Tante I'm at St. Clair General, just waiting to be discharged. I need some clothes... Mum, I'm fine, honestly. I love you... I-I'll call you later." A

sigh broke her anguish as she ended the call. If she didn't, her Mother would get a word in, and it'd tempt her to ask for an answer she already knew.

She freed her feet from the restrictive blanket as she lay back down on the hospital bed. A lethal combination of wild butterflies and tightly bound nervousness still threatened to unleash chaos. And yet, that swirling tornado did nothing to halt the willingness to replay what'd happened. Her mind, again full of scandalous thoughts, wandered to him—her nameless hero. A hot rush bloomed, stoking memories like a gentle breeze. To hide from the embarrassment, her body slunk like a traitor, smiling as her face caressed the pillow.

But was it her imagination? Had she dreamed his devilish grin as she woke? Was it something or nothing at all? Did he not say or do anything because he'd merely done his job, saving her life? Were his intentions crystal-clear? Not a hint of questionable physical contact or flirty verbal banter. Unable to deny his professionalism was nothing less than admirable, but it mixed with sadness. He'd not once crossed the line, one that would confirm his interest.

"No doubt he's saved dozens, if not hundreds, of us crazy damsels," she painfully grunted, kicking her feet against the lack of comfort on offer. This immature fangirl infatuation highlighted her uncontrollable wayward thoughts, and she growled louder. How many women collapsed into a hot mess, or dare she say, bordered on cringe-worthy, asking him for a date? Burying her face in the pillow, she sighed. Had being rescued put her in the 'nope, not dating that' category?

Sheer craziness beckoned; her heart matched beat-for-beat a land speed record. She couldn't escape the way her body spoke to his as he protected her. The conversation so powerful, their separation became unbearable. It suffocated, tearing like claws. Every time he pulled away, her anxiety and anguish only grew. Surely there was something to that.

Or should she face facts, it'd been a one-way gig.

Unable to hear the discussion between him and the other firemen only added to her unrelenting despair. It'd been the sole reason she fought to be back in his arms. If she thought about it, his expression held a determination rather than anger at his colleagues, or EMTs. Perhaps people were still inside?

But she couldn't ignore the rapid emergency treatment he received before he'd even made it to the stretcher. Just how serious were his injuries?

Shit!

A hard lump formed in her throat. Where did he go? Her mind ran amok trying to remember, her eyes only left him for a second. Not entirely her fault. Needles did that.

Fresh memories of screeching tyres and ambulance sirens flooded her scrambled thoughts, handing out invites for dread and angst to join the pity party. Her head attempted to bury itself deeper into the crisp cotton cloud, only to find wetness marring her face.

No denying it. Forget emotions running amok; they'd lost the plot with endless possibilities. The severity of his predicament fast dislodged her inappropriate, lusty thoughts, replacing them with a threatening panic attack that'd consume her without breaking a sweat. How could she live with herself if he died saving her?

The derailing, well, mostly, still needed reining in. So, how could she find him? Or at least what happened? Was he in the same hospital, ward, or morgue? There she went again. Would her crazy brain ever give it a rest?

Where to begin, though? Professional women like her didn't go racing through the halls of a hospital, chasing flights of fancy. Ohhh nooooo, her restraint would never allow such candidness. The whole situation had become insufferable and unfair thanks to her stupid, stubborn pride.

Distracted by a nurse entering her room, who oddly looked like Tante, gave her mind a rest from the circles it'd been peddling. Their light blue scrubs looked a size too big. Did they too grow a good foot when mad?

Her gaze remained vigilant as the visitor glided in, and she sat to increase her presence, though it felt unnecessary the closer they got. Graceful did nothing to describe their warmth, and she relaxed into its subtle offering.

"Hello, Charlotte, my name's Sally. I'll be your nurse today. How are you feeling? Any pain? Have you managed any sleep?"

The softness didn't hide the nurse's clipped British accent, but she smiled, nonetheless. "No sleep, I feel fine, and no pain." Her gaze cast out the window while the observations continued. All too soon an awareness rose; the nurse noticed something was off.

Out of habit, she always kept a foot in the professional boot and her current psychological mindset was under serious scrutiny as that blood pressure cuff went around her arm. It wasn't until the silence ended did the heaviness floating in the air become apparent. Before she could consider her next words, others broke the silence first.

“Everything’s within acceptable limits. Dr. Landing asked me to remind you of the first-degree burn to your lower leg. It’s approximately fifteen centimetres long. He wasn’t sure if you’d remember, but it’ll require daily dressing changes to avoid infection.”

Still staring out beyond the glass, it surprised her how difficult it’d been to force her concentration to her visitor. “Thank you. Tante will help. She’s somewhat Mother Nature’s twin sister.” The nurse’s chuckle bounced off the walls, and she thought it sounded like it might’ve resonated.

“Is Tante your partner?”

Scrap that. Sally’s tone held a confused note, and she both sighed and half-smiled. “No, my Mother’s family’s from Denmark. Tante’s Danish for Aunt.”

“What a lovely endearment for an Aunt who won’t accept no.”

The comment momentarily shifted her focus while a thermometer slid under her tongue. No words could ever describe the true blessing of her Tante. Then the silence, booming louder than a concert, stole her thoughts again.

“You’re free to go once she’s here. Don’t forget to collect your discharge papers and dressing changes from the nurse’s station. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ring the bell.”

That clear pause before Sally’s last comment. She knew, they both did. The nurse probed with a temptation to offload. The question became: did she take up the offer?

“Remember, if you need anything, press the bell.”

Despite hearing words, nothing registered. Not staring at the bullseye of noise. Not the subtle movement of scrubs. Her misfiring brain refused to focus.

“I wish you the best, love. I’m glad the amazing lads at the Fire Department got you all out. Remember, I’m only a call bell away.”

Those words ‘Fire Department’ brought her reality crashing back from the fog-filled obscurity that’d engulfed it. But her donut-glazed stupor had distracted the formulation of a plan; she’d have to wing it. All while failing miserably at hiding the strain. “Thank you, Sally. I’ll collect them before I leave.”

It was now or never, even with the utter fallout brewing inside. “One more thing. May I ask you a question?” Her breath hitched, waiting. Even when Sally stopped on her heels, it failed to vacate. Suddenly, the idea of being

told no bounded through her thoughts. Her only saving was Sally's softened expression.

"Of course you may, my dear."

"The firefighter who rescued me... He was injured. Was he brought here?" Her strangled whisper almost didn't make it to the door. Another dry swallow, and her almost inaudible second question left her lips. "I'd like to thank him for saving me. Could you please direct me to his ward and room?" On the verge of passing out, she sucked in a deep breath. It grated her what a mess her private life had become compared to her ever stoic, professional one.

The anticipation while her request was considered threatened to straightjacket her permanently. How could she not end her suffering? Only when Sally sat beside her, did she think she'd get answers.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I just can't give you that information. It's against our privacy policy."

She'd been wrong.

Oh, so wrong.

Shock thrust her into a brick wall as Sally's words echoed. She questioned if it resembled what an airbag deploying on an already sensitive stomach felt like. Mercifully, without a moment in between, Sally's posture softened while leaning in. Convinced she was moments from something to use, she hung on every word, ignoring emotions staggering into her next available breath.

"But... between you and me. He's at this hospital and, well he'll live."

Relief, fear, and nervousness bundled together, making a dangerous but laughable oxymoron. One so absurd it bordered on insanity. But it allowed her body to relax a smidge out of the tension holding her ransom while Sally left. As her mind followed suit, her eyes closed. That body of his was laying somewhere under the same roof.

Powerful.

Safe.

Heaven...

A steamy deluge dampened, threatening to engulf her from head to toe. As she risked soothing her aching body and protesting nerves, she rubbed a hand over the back of her neck.

Only it didn't end the torment. Her body refused to cooperate, preferring the heated pleasure she was fast sliding into. Filled with more illustrious thoughts of his firm hold, of his breath over her skin, of his

masculinity intoxicatingly mixed with cologne. All resistance became futile as her body quivered into riding those memories.

Had his impression imprinted itself on her, determined to linger until it bound them together? Had what laid dormant faltered at his memory?

No longer in control, she became a passenger on the rollercoaster of sexual need. Fervent hunger tempted with such glorious bounty, it sent her lunging forward, expecting to find his touch.

Throwing her arms in the air at the relentless tirade, a disdained grunt blew out. No shadow of doubt. He was responsible for the newly conflicted three-way circus. One a tug of war raging between her heart and mind. The second her soul. And the third, winning the battle of all three captured and held hostage. How was she to win?

It wasn't fair. He'd not only awakened a deep desire to connect, but he'd left her to contend with an insatiable craving for intimacy. One she'd bet her career on he could satisfy over and over again.

On repeat. Over and over again.

Another sigh, another echoing reminder. He'd broken down her defences while she grappled with his mortality, and he didn't even know.

"What the hell's going on? I don't even know his name!" she demanded while glaring at the ceiling as if it held the answers. "This is crazy!" Her tone shifted to a volatile huff, still staring at the silent white barrier.

A feeling of helplessness crept over her, and she sighed into cupped hands catching her head midway. Forced to accept he was different, the type that'd rather fall on his sword than hurt a woman. It was unavoidable, really. Since surviving her last relationship, she'd been afraid of men in such close proximity.

Luckily—or maybe not, her rational brain kicked in to aid in its own rescue from those crazy town thoughts. Without admitting it, both her heart and mind were merely desperate to know he survived. Her soul, a problem for another day. Right now, she needed to regain control by logically justifying these awkward feelings.

Men couldn't be trusted.

Every fibre of her being understood the damage they could inflict.

"Enough!" she snorted while shifting to her side. Dare she beg for sleep to take away her nightmare?

Nope, still unlucky. Another thought barrelled down, ending all hopes of slumber. Only this one she couldn't ignore.

What if he was already married?

Men that dashing always had a wife. They had more options, too, never having to settle. No ring meant nothing these days.

The abrupt slap to her face stunk like a cold—wet—fish. How could women in this position discern between reality and illicit fantasy?

Least the outcome had been removed from her control. Only a duty to thank her rescuer remained. It'd allow her to put this crazy mess to rest.

Yes, that was her story.

And, yes, she was sticking to it.

But it still itched like an almost healed wound. She didn't believe in fate or karma. Her Mother and Tante were the firm believers, and they couldn't have predicted it. They'd have warned her otherwise. Though it sure felt like 'someone' or 'something' had kicked her butt.

This was her fresh start.

It'd all started rather innocently enough...



Chapter 2

24 HOURS EARLIER

Alex sat up on the bunk bed he'd been sleeping on, shuddering at the cold air accosting his bare chest. He planted his feet on the floor, ignoring his body's pleas to curl back up and forget the world. Despite his best efforts to hide its disgruntled reaction, he couldn't quite stop an exhausted sigh escaping as he hunched over.

Unable to soothe the sadness after last-night, he raked his hand through his hair, still it lingered. Never one to be told twice, the ashen dust cloud descending spoke of his priorities.

Mindlessly watching soot and smoke settle, a glint of humour rose as he solemnly smiled. No matter how hard firemen tried, that stuff stuck harder than super glue on fingertips.

New thoughts threw him under the bus, reminding him of the physical and mental strain working longer night shifts. Longer than he should; than any of them should. Another sigh broke free from its shackles, fires never worked nine-to-five. Therefore, neither did they.

Add calls like last-night, it left you emotionally spent. And if not careful, the guilt of not saving everyone ate you alive if it set up residence.

To make matters worse, the usual twenty-four-hour stand-down and debrief wasn't possible. Their station barely had enough staff to cover the core full-time roster.

His head landed in his hands, and like always, he paid zero attention to his thighs protesting under pointy elbows. Still, his thoughts drifted, wondering how long before burnout and fatigue caused a mistake. One with

fatal consequences. “One more shift,” he mumbled, hoping to rid himself of their unavoidable reality.

Jack, across from Alex in the darkened room on another bunk, replied with a half-asleep whisper, “I hear ya.” Then rolled away.

Glancing at the digital clock on the wall, he stood, stretching his arms to the ceiling: 10 a.m. “Time to get on with it,” he told his tired, protesting body. Still at war with said protest, he yanked his black pants half strewn over the bunk’s end, wearily putting them on, zipped, didn’t button and slunk into the hall.

The early winter sunlight streaming from the left end window caught his eyes napping. Under its golden glow, the oak walls and plush red carpet looked as warm as the fires they put out. “Poor buggers, the lot of us,” he muttered into his echoing footsteps the further he travelled. Not a single bunk room empty.

He understood his need for a shower, but hunger had ranked itself the number one contender. He rubbed the match-ready opponent, acknowledging its growling call. Luckily, the common areas weren’t too far away.

A year ago, if you’d told him this’d be how he spent his mornings after work, he’d have called you crazy. Twelve hours on-call, he made it to his own bed a smidge after midnight. Now, that’d fast become an exception rather than a rule.

He’d also once mused working night-shift gave him the luxury of avoiding well-intentioned attempts by family and friends playing match-maker. The corner of his lip rose at their crazy endeavours. They meant well. It just created uncomfortable situations when he stepped away. Though now, all that roster gave him was a horrific sleep debt, and he’d started to question his decisions.

Besides, he was quite capable and not the least bit shy. Women were often willing to share their company and intimacy only they could give. The problem, however, always remained the same. He didn’t want to share his private life. Why would he, the thought teased? Not when his feelings never went deeper than lust. It’s why in the end, when they deserved better, he walked away.

The growl rumbling from his stomach drove away those mindless thoughts, and he rubbed it again, letting out a small chuckle. Breakfast, then shower it was.

“Morning, my dear,” Betty Cartwell teased while watching Alex grab a cup of coffee.

Fast gauging her petite stature, he knew better than to let the fire chief’s wife’s well-dressed attire and youthful appearance fool him. That tone. You could never tell if she’d put you on her radar. Not until it was too late.

To avoid it, he returned his attention back to the task at hand. “Morning...” Damn-it, he hadn’t put a shirt on. “Excuse me, I’ll be right back.”

“Nonsense!” Betty quipped, “you’re young, handsome, and provide eye candy for the ladies who work here. They’d be most upset if I made you cover up.”

“I’m hardly young... Betty.” His eyes landed on hers. Bugger, he was a goner. Her lack of height and piercing green eyes held her head and shoulders above everyone else. You were never more on high-alert, than when she started on the prowl, and he’d somehow gotten caught in her crosshairs. Over what, he’d no idea, but sure as a flame burns, she’d soon let him know.

“You, my dear, are a spring chicken. Go have that shower I know you wished you’d had first while I make you breakfast... Ohhh, and tomorrow’s your night off. So, 8 p.m. our place for dinner. I won’t take no for an answer!” Betty smiled, seeing defeat in his face, and turned to make him breakfast.

There it was. The queen of the jungle had just cornered him. Yes, a queen. Because, truthfully, men never wore the crown. How the hell did he decline? Ten years in and he was still clueless. That bloody stare. A hard lump formed in his throat, forming a body-wide goosebump rebellion, he’d nearly dropped his coffee mid-sip. His next step meant everything. What came to mind, escape, before his mere presence caused more chaos. Unconvinced it’d work, he with stealth precision and utter silence backed away, no telling how long he’d get between inquisitions.

While everyone universally understood you said ‘yes,’ her invitation had never felt so direct. “It’s exhaustion talking, she’d never...” Rattled in his misfiring brain during the mad dash towards the showers.

Did this fall into the ‘treating him like a son’ category? It wouldn’t be the first time, having become part of that affair within weeks of arriving at the station. But, so insistent on dinner, why? He felt beyond exhausted, his body ached, and he held zero interest in socialising.

“She’s not a match-maker,” his whisper fell into the silence. Sure as his next breath, it failed to dispel the idea. If anything, it grew the unease.

He reminded himself she was different, more like his own mother before she passed. Besides, she'd never played match-maker.

At least with him.

The idea of dating made him cringe, and he sped to the showers. The last woman would've scared the hardest man, they'd not been between the sheets or together long, yet she wanted to skin his hide when he respectfully declined her pleas to reconnect. She'd unnerved him more than he dared to admit. It was enough to avoid dating like a deadly plague.

Resolute to stand his ground flooded his thoughts as he watched the water drain away. Irony not lost on 'flooded.' Warm water fell over him as he rested his head on the tiles. Betty had better be offering a safe space for counsel with her husband given last-night. Not this crazy nonsense he couldn't shake from his gut.

He knew he'd been hiding in the shower far too long, wondering if Betty had thrown out his breakfast. It'd be plausible she thought he'd gone back to bed, or worse, avoiding her.

Didn't really matter.

He'd have to face the music either way.

Forgoing the smoke-stained apparel, he wrapped a towel round his waist with plans to use spares he kept at the station. In his haste, clothes in arms, he flew out the door, missing Janet Mason, who was almost upon him. Stunned as his body crashed into hers, he still managed a step towards her, and with a gentle but firm hold, took her by the arm.

Janet's face blushed. Alex, in nothing but a towel, looking moments away from failing. All his sexual power swallowed her whole as she gazed into his handsome wet face dripping water over his chest. If he spoke, she'd be too delirious to reply. How could he look so godly straight from the shower, his mousey brown hair hanging without a care, yet so perfect over his forehead. The paperwork in her hands fast became a barrier between her chest and his eyes, hoping he wouldn't notice her arousal. "I'm sorry, Alex. I should've watched where I was going." She managed, her voice weak, like on her knees—weak. Both edged on the verge of collapse when he straightened his body, closing the gap between them.

"No, I'm sorry. I should've looked before stepping out. Are you okay?" Concern laced his words while loosening his grip still holding her steady. He felt terrible for knocking into her. She might be taller than most

women, but she was still slight. Then it crossed his mind. “Are you still here from last night?”

The continued touch startled Janet. Was it a sign? “No, I’m fortunate I go home when my shift ends. Though I came in early to help.” Convinced she’d sounded more puberty-stricken choirboy than cool, calm, and collected, her eyes darted away, trying to hide the lie. That didn’t mean she wanted the dream to end, and keep him talking cycled in her thoughts. “I heard last night was bad.” Her focus faltered when he hadn’t left, and that towel did nothing to hide the manhood behind it.

“Yes—yes it was...” His voice trailed off while lowering his head. Then he noticed for the second time his shirtless position and released his hold. Did his nakedness cause her altered expression and shuffling papers? “Janet, you sure you’re okay?” He focused, searching her brown eyes for the answer.

Breathless. Janet had no other word to describe it. His commanding, husky tone always added an extra layer of seductiveness when speaking out of concern. The pain oozing off his words, she wanted to soothe him, offering her body, anyway he wanted it. So turned on by the notion, it took all her composure just to usher a mere nod while lowering her gaze, hoping to hide the horrific blush.

“If you’re sure you’re okay, I’ll take my leave before I catch a chill.” It had to be his lack of clothing embarrassing her.

Having never seen him that close to naked before, Janet’s eyes refused to leave his dedicated gym body. Her mind drew itself tantalising thoughts, demanding her body do the same. She didn’t like he was removing himself, but had little choice and mustered the strength to smile. As soon as she had her back to him, a sigh consumed her steps, only to worry he might’ve been watching her walk away. That, however, both tempted a turnaround and raised concern he’d see how much he affected her.

Janet leaned back in her office chair as she sat, reminiscing over what she’d seen in their five years of friendship. Aware of his dating struggles, it’d always been the same. Short-lived and never serious, at least for him. No one at the firehouse could forget the woman who’d thundered in, intent on committing grievous bodily harm. That woman should count her lucky stars it’d been him, and not a less refrained buffoon. Never had she borne witness to such restraint while being viciously attacked. He could’ve easily inflicted injuries in self-defence, but simply wrapped her in his arms. He even tried calming his attacker until the police arrived.

No wonder he didn't date, Janet pondered. "We must look like crazy stalkers!" Come to think of it, she'd never actually seen him pursue any woman. It didn't surprise her. All too busy chasing him. Although playing the game differently hadn't made him notice her, either. Time ticked by, and before long, she'd have to speak her truth. She'd fallen for him.



He made his way toward the kitchen, unsurprised the place still resembled a ghost town. He'd hoped to see Janet on his travels, no way was she okay after nearly kissing the floor at his expense. That conversation would have to come later.

Betty, as usual, had whipped him up a 'feast fit for champions.' Code for cooked breakfasts in the Firehouse. But looking down at his plate, he wondered how long he'd been missing in action and shot a glance at his watch.

Four hours. How?

Still, she'd gone to the effort, and so he sat, struggling to swallow what resembled stiffened cardboard. His thoughts drifted back to how much peace he'd get before she cornered him again.

Then he saw it.

Our place tomorrow night
8pm. No exceptions xxx

A solid grunt rode the mouthful fighting its way to his stomach, how could he get out of it unscathed? Her wrath was legendary. All he wanted was sleep during his days off.



Her fist thumped on the door to the building manager's office, giving away Charlee's fist thumped on the apartment complex manager's office door. It gave away her impatience far more than she cared to admit. It had already been a tortuous twenty hours. The delayed then heaving-at-the-seams flight across country was one thing. But the cramped airport transfer, that was just plain cruel. Now unsure if ending said ride early had been smart when the walk between a grocery store and her apartment building fared no better.

Louder and harder she pounded the solid white door. So focused on gaining someone's attention and not her grocery bags, she scrambled as they threatened to slip through her grasp.

As that fiasco ended, her grunts met with the eerily empty space. She had to accept she'd come up naught. Another sigh erupted as she slumped against the ominous grey corridor, begging for what resembled the deep, dark bows of a ship to swallow her whole. "What the hell am I to do now!"

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

Her body bolted upright, nearly falling on him. Perhaps hope still existed. Though he sounded much younger in person. "Are you Mr. Roland?"

"No, ma'am, I'm his son, Jed. Maybe I can help?"

Maybe he just might. She was, crap, eight hours late. "I missed my appointment with your Father. I'm the new tenant for 6B."

"Ahhh, you must be Charlotte Fletcher. I'll get your keys. I can't tell him of your arrival until tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"Sounds perfect, thank you." If only the rest would go smoothly, she thought, grabbing her own paperwork. Then she'd find peace soon enough. At the desk, they stood silent while she fidgeted, and they finished the last signature, knowing she was minutes away from her new home.

"Miss Fletcher, would you like to run through the safety procedures? Or do it tomorrow, with my Father?"

She'd tried not to, but her reply was rather curt: "Tomorrow's fine. And I'm sure I'll find my apartment." She hoped her smile would convince him. She was over people, luggage, and life.

Back in the main foyer, its thick, wooden-panelled walls warmed her frazzled nerves. Soft shades of cream accentuated the carpet, and furnishings matched the brass lighting and other ornate metal scattered throughout. While she'd been told of its recent renovation, she considered they'd done a wonderful job keeping the magic of yesteryear alive. Yes, it paled against its neighbours, but its small elevation gave it a homely, almost secret feeling to it.

All too fast, her reflection taunted back in the full mirrored elevator the moment she entered. Laughter erupted, bouncing off the tinted glass right back at her. Without question, she mimicked a train wreck fashion victim.

It wasn't her fault, the smile still riding her curved lips. How could she have known the sheer volume of people using St. Clair's city streets? Nor did she think a pastel pink, flowing dress equated to 'risqué.' She'd worn it plenty of times without strife.

Only now—now it felt 'tart-ish.'

She'd lost count how many eyes burned through its fabric, positive they'd gazed upon her figure. It'd become so nauseating she pressed the dress against her hand, just to check it wasn't see-through.

To make matters worse, her soft denim jacket offered no protection against what fast felt like a walking pop-up peep show. And as for shoes, nothing short of steel caps going forward. Positive her toes came under fire over twelve dozen times.

The elevator chimed its impending end, pulling her from the existential crisis she continued falling into. Those thoughts then smited to ash as she stepped on the soft carpet. The foyer to her floor matched the one downstairs, and she paused a moment, inhaling the smell of new carpet and fresh paint.

Only once reminded of her clothing malfunction did she shake herself from the hold the space held over her and towards finding her apartment. To her relief, it didn't take long. Which, in defence of the wall opposite her, its overbearing board with gold plaques and black inscriptions hadn't made it hard.

To the left, apartments A-M. To the right, O-Z.

Twenty-six private apartments on a single floor seemed unfathomable in such a small building. How the hell did they fit? She had to take her hat off to the architects, they were block gamer gods.

As her wonder continued, she made her way towards the left and found, to her surprise, her apartment was at the end of another, going past eight apartments on her travels. "Least I'll be fitter than I've ever been." Her chuckle through the empty hall reminded her of her solo attempt to find her apartment.

"Where are they?" Her impatience plummeted into the negatives while rummaging for the keys. Angry she'd put them in her handbag to begin

with, she grunted wondering if she'd developed a new language. Not her fault. The day just wouldn't relent.

Forget relent.

It upped the ante every chance it got. Those darn grocery bags weren't helping either, threatening to land spread-eagled on the floor. Again! She grasped the villainous culprits the moment the clink of metal teased her ears, snatching them before they toyed with her more. "Won't be making that mistake again!"

More surprise caught her tired, overwhelmed mood. Struck in awe, she stood motionless in the doorway, mesmerised by the charm of her new apartment. Those windows, floor to ceiling, stood proudly along the entire outer wall of the living space she had one foot in. It gave way to a captivating horizon, pink and golden hues kissing the sky goodnight.

Dreams on a rainbow.

And simply breathtaking.

Ripped from that daydream when the bags made another bid for freedom, she smiled. "Actually, I could get used to this."

And she closed the door, flicked on the heating, and sighed. Space and privacy at last.



Chapter 3

He needed a distraction, eating hardened food hadn't bode well. Next time, he'd just throw the damn thing out. To ease what churned and twisted his stomach green, he considered hitting the rec-room. It might also afford him space from his idle, tired mind. To his surprise it was empty, not just empty. Baron. The rostered crew must've gone for a nap or snuck home for a few hours.

Newspapers scattered over the table snatched his attention as he strode in. Reminders of the fire overnight plastered across the front page forced him to reconsider staring at the ceiling. "Should've stuck with the ceiling," he grunted, catching the first bold sentence while plonking himself on the couch nearest the door. Gossip ran rife with their two-cents worth without knowing the facts.

Dare he pray they'd get a quiet night and finish dinner? He sighed, his bored breath flickering the paper's edge while opening it.

Bugger.

He'd just jinxed them.

And the mere thought of dinner turned his stomach from green to sludge. Sleep sounded a better option at this point.

"Hey Cap, you working again?" Max Preston asked, puzzled as he strolled in. He'd blinked twice certain his tired, bloodshot eyes deceived him.

He flicked the paper in his death grip, pretending to read, hoping his monotone response would slip past his friend's radar. "Steve's wife is booked to have the twins tomorrow. I'm covering for him so he didn't fall asleep in

theatre.” He didn’t bother sitting up when catching Max’s grin, instead he stretched out, knowing where it was headed.

Max chuckled, unable to help himself. “Sooo, Cap... When you gonna settle down and have your own tribe? Or you plan on staying the station’s resident wingman?”

Jack entered the room, his smirk catching Max’s attention. Who could blame him for adding to a perfect moment and his best friend’s torment? “Ohhh nooo, Alex will forever be the groomsmen, never the groom!”

His eyes darted from the newspaper to his friends. There they stood side-by-side like a poorly executed comedic duo. Until he caught Jack’s sly expression, he braced himself; they were far from finished.

Their bellowing laughter accosted his ears as their heads flung back with hands on their hips. In revolt of their taunts, the poor newspaper suffered under his grip as it flicked with sound. Pity it didn’t highlight his unimpressed attitude, so he lowered his head. That, he hoped, would put an end to it.

But no.

Could he, sleight of hand, avoid the topic altogether if his eyes remained firmly on the lines of text he’d still not read? “Don’t you have a family waiting for you, Jack? You’ve been here as long as me, surely Rachel wants you home?”

“Well, actually...” Jack tapped Alex’s shoulder as he strolled past, considering how to convey his wife’s suggestion. Rachel worried these extra shifts his friend pulled from staff shortages would cause trouble, and she had plans. “She said I had to work tonight. You know—keep my eye on you. She’s determined to have you as a brother-in-law.”

“What! Am I not good enough! He’s not the only bachelor, you know!” Max’s tone rippled with annoyance at the exclusion.

He, and it seemed Jack too, ignored Max’s outburst. Everyone knew Max was a ladies’ man. He had more dates than hot meals. Even so, a grin crept in, his friend loved being the centre of all female attention. “By all means, Max, have a double date with Jack and Rachel.” He caught Max’s smirk, and Jack’s narrowed glare, but none of them noticed Betty in the doorway to the rec-room. An ominous shudder travelled down his spine, that woman held more stealth than a F-22 Raptor.

“You do know Alex is like a single Father round here, policing you lot”—Betty’s hands landed on her hips—“You kids are on your own tomorrow.

He's busy with us. No exceptions." She then with oomph wiped her hands on her snug fitting half-apron, spinning on a dime back towards the kitchen.

It never ceased to amaze him the lengths the Cardwell's went to. Everyone, including those at the station, knew he'd lost his father and two older brothers in a fire that ripped through their ranch; and how much it ate at him, his eleven-year-old self was just far too young to save them.

And if it'd not been for Betty, losing his mother months after arriving at the station, he'd have derailed completely. His only blood family left were two younger sisters, and like them, this extended family who'd welcomed him into their fold, he'd never take for granted.

The rest of his early evening slipped by rather painlessly. No more chatter about his absent love life, thank heavens. He welcomed Betty's roast lamb with all the trimmings. Perfect for the early icy December weather and hopefully his excuse to decline her questionably formal demand for another round in twenty-four hours. It was only weariness screaming with ulterior motives that demanded caution. Her roasts were legendary, like her prowess.

His boss, her husband and Fire Chief Denis who sat opposite him giving weird glances during said blissful meal, stayed just as late. United partners in crime, they took their roles seriously. Though tonight it felt personal. Didn't help Denis for a man in his sixties with barely an ounce of grey in that brown mop, held his energy and thoughts better than men half his age. Definitely personal he grunted, trying and failing to rub away the ache in his overfull belly. Saying no to Betty was equally hard as turning down her cooking when hot.



Lost in the allure of her new abode, Charlee continued her exploration, taking mental notes along the way. With groceries on the breakfast bar left of the front door, her stomach demanded food, but she overrode with thoughts of soon. It put up a wild fight, food before fashion faux-par on repeat, threatening through ever increasing gurgling sounds.

That tug-of-war quickly faded as the mesmerising view changed from magical sunset to charismatic city lights. She wondered how dangerous this sublime time waster might become? Or how she'd manage if the master

bedroom offered the same being a corner apartment? Her wide smile grew, imagining that dreamy view as she drifted off to sleep every night.

To know those answers, she sucked in a breath, taking steps further into her new home. Just past the kitchen, she found a hall and halfway down; she popped her head into a spare bedroom on her right. They didn't have the same large windows, a false wall perhaps covering half. Didn't matter really, they'd still be perfect for when family came to visit or when Tante's house overflowed with her brothers and their families, or parents.

Several steps deeper through the hall, she found to her left a small laundry and study. The study suited her needs perfectly. Beautiful wood lined the room, warmed by the daylight peeking through the hall's wall. She'd winningly lose late nights there instead of the booming silence in her new University office. Next open door caused an excited smile finding the bathroom, centred around a decadent spa bath. She envisioned countless hours spent sipping wine and reading research under the dim light of scented candles and bubbles.

The door to the master, she'd say boudoir, but it'd only ever be hers stood facing her as she returned to the hall. At the end, it stared back at her, tormenting with the mountain of boxes spilling out. A sigh broke free from her already tired body seeing the chaos.

She stepped in. No, it more resembled mountain climbing without a harness. Another sigh, another realisation and she paused, considering how to manoeuvre this minefield.

Scrap that. The view out the corner of her room snatched her breath through two full-height windows. Perhaps she'd need to board it up too? Office—bedroom. Neither worked with that distracting view. Sleep. Work? What were they again? Come to think of it, she couldn't see her bed? Now a forgone conclusion, this mess would never see her finding something to wear. Still, it didn't deter her from her futile attempts.

Two clumsy steps in, she stumbled over a box, causing a disgruntled growl as it caught her shin. Regret marred her thoughts, filled with frustration she'd not packed an overnight bag. Desperate to make light of her first-world dire problem, she let it slide. "Surely it's not that bad." She hoped, no, prayed, something resembling comfy lay in the boxes underneath her. She'd even take running gear, then she'd work off this nervous energy.

Without trying, her time kept evaporating in a mix of beautiful city lights and lonely thoughts. It'd been a while since she'd drifted to her single

status. Not that any of it mattered now she'd become a social recluse, or, as her Mother argued, 'socially reserved.'

Her thoughts weren't new. The little girl inside occasionally liked to break-free. She'd once dreamt of falling in love with her perfect prince, but life showed her a crueller, deadlier version. Sure, she'd dated, had boyfriends. But the moment that changed everything was her partner she'd spent six months living with. In a single night, he'd gone from the man she'd loved and respected, to a crazed beast violently trying to end her for something she still didn't understand.

Yes, she'd restored her professional life, but her private one had retreated. Now her only male company were kept to colleagues and family. All others weren't trustworthy. In fact, they terrified her.

As for relationships—forget it.

She'd never love again.

Her thoughts dragged themselves back to her mission. Clothing and yesterday. The comfier the better, given the alternative was sleeping in her birthday suit. It dawned on her as she gazed at box after large brown obnoxious box; she had enough clothing for five people. Rather than sending out a search party, perhaps she should consider herself grateful to find anything that'd allow for a decent sleep.

After rustling through several monstrosities, the best option over formal work clothes, or scrubs, remained an over-sized white t-shirt, and a black lacy thong that left little to the imagination. With them marginally better than butt naked, they teased with the truth, they beat nothing at all.

A sigh escaped the moment she accepted defeat. Which then became a sultry smile. "Live a little. No one will know." She may've sworn off men, but it shouldn't stop her from being cheeky in private.

Now that she'd somewhat clothed herself, she put on her favourite playlist and phone on the kitchen bench. All by herself, no one could debate how bad her taste in eighties music was. It'd be just the jam needed while getting down to the business of feeding her stomach that'd taken on a war dance of its own.

She didn't make a habit of dancing while eating, but the freedom broke more than tight joints. It removed the shackles she'd not known had caged her thoughts. Only briefly did she stop, considering other high-rise apartments might see through her windows. In the end, she didn't care, they'd never meet.

While she would've loved dancing the night away, in reality, she required order before bed. Nothing major, just a start. If she managed that, tomorrow would flow freely, or at least she hoped. With a full day, meeting after meeting, she could ill afford to appear uninterested.

Her own candidacy was her sole reason for moving. After the government closed the research project; the University of St Clair picked it up immediately. They understood their city held some of the highest fire callout rates in the developed world. When you added under staffing, that lethal combination left frontline responders operating in unsafe conditions and at risk of horrific burnout.

All that, though, could wait until tomorrow. Her immediate agenda was rest. That started with finding potential bed options seeing her bedroom resembled a war-zone, and her floors didn't appear all that charitable.

As her eyes landed on the only piece of furniture outside of a bed she'd dragged across the country, she grinned. Her trusty sofa, and with the bedroom off limits, old faithful, it was.

That thing saw her through University, several break-ups, even a few make-ups. Such sentimental value lived in that ghastly seventies décor, she hadn't the heart to reupholster it. Old faithful, she grinned, was the perfect way to celebrate her new apartment.



It must be getting on Alex mused as super late-night dribble echoed in the background. Eyes closed, he stretched out on the couch, hoping, praying; whatever worked for a peaceful twelve hours. Yes, he'd avoided anything close to that 'q' word. It'd see everything derail.

Hurried little footsteps swinging into the rec-room redirected his thoughts. This was it, the conversation he'd masterfully avoided all day. To be fair, eight hours between rounds was a new record for Betty.

Fast making her way towards him, Betty lifted his legs, placing them over her as she sat. "Alex, son. Tomorrow, I know what you're thinking. But it's a family dinner. I'd like you to join us... Being family." Betty caught Max, Jack, and Harry McKinnon darting to attention. She returned her default

death glare, demanding they hide interest. She knew they understood she'd skirted the truth. The question was—had Alex.

He felt the burning sting of her stare boring right through his chest. There'd be no way she'd allow him to avoid it, and his eyes opened to slits. "Do I have any choice on the mat—"

A strong resounding "No!" echoed from their unified response.

"It's settled!" Betty stood and smiled, winking at the lads for their corroboration.

He closed his eyes, tight, wanting nothing of that temptation. Sleep was his current mistress, and she'd done a marvellous job at seducing him. Besides, tomorrow was still behind the horizon, leaving him time to plan a polite decline.



Charlee found dragging old faithful from the corner beside the front door to the large living space remarkably easy. To be fair, wooden floors had done most of it. Now centred in front of those magnificent windows, she rationalised there held a convenience to it. Parallel with the breakfast bar to its left meant when she rested her head on its armrest, she had an uninterrupted and spectacular view.

With that, she slunk into its ancient seat cushions, ones she'd spent years molding to her body. With her stomach satisfied and mind unwinding, her favourite rock ballad music became a magical carpet ride as she gazed out those windows. The beautiful skyline with everything from plane lights to twinkling stars might have her TV gathering dust.

It didn't take long before her tired eyelids failed with the promises of slumber, and within minutes she was fast asleep.



Chapter 4

The all-familiar jolt of the fire station's bell startled him from sleep. He squinted into the rec-room's light burning hotter than the sun as his tired and no doubt bloodshot eyes cast to the wall clock. 10:45 p.m.

A quick scan, he caught Max and Jack had woken in the same ripped from your soul way. Least being snatched from slumber surged adrenaline through their veins. It gave them energy despite their exhaustion to leap from the couch. As he raced past Max, he slapped him on the shoulder with the now rolled but still unread newspaper. "You guys ready?"

Max already in motion fell in behind Alex. "Course Cap." Truth be told, he'd follow his friend into the pits of hell. Heck, Alex wouldn't have to ask, it'd be a given.

He made quick work, racing across the firehouse to the dispatcher's office while his crew geared up. As Janet came into view, a smile found its way to his taut jaw. She not only did her job well, he'd still not managed to chat with her. It meant after this call-out, he could. Right now, however, he had more pressing issues. "Janet, what are we facing?" His tone rather demanding. He'd have grunted or outwardly shown his disdain if it'd not been for his earlier error.

Janet quivered at his tone, imagining him commanding that authority in bed. Though she knew it wrong to fall into those scandalous thoughts during a callout, but she'd failed on every other front to seduce him. They'd never socialised together outside of meals around the firehouse table. It forced her while heading towards him to saunter her hips, pushing her breasts flush

against her blouse buttons. To up the ante having decided her disclosure countdown had reached zero, she stood closer than professional etiquette expected. “It’s another newly renovated apartment block.” Caught by his aftershave, she inhaled his scent, losing herself further.

“Another One!” he barked. Goddamn-it! He then caught her closeness and her blouse’s top button undone. He often wondered if she was just really friendly or super flirty.

Janet inched closer, making sure their hands touched while extending the printout she’d taken from the fax machine. When his attention faded into nothing but the paper he held, she considered flirting more, but the breeze of his abrupt movement whipped her from those lusty thoughts as he barrelled out the office in a sprint.

She tried following, her fears intuitively thumping her chest into oblivion in a way it hadn’t before. To her dismay, she fast found heels stopped her from matching his pace. Add to that, her lungs couldn’t suck in enough of the fear filled air to relay what he held. He, like the other captains, preferred verbal handovers.

Didn’t mean she could give up, though. Her career was important to her. “Its six floors, mixed composite. Fire believed to have started left rear corner, level four. Building managers not answering their phone, but I’ll keep trying. Floor plans aren’t uploaded to the city office, and there’s no known occupancy with both floors and apartments. Emergency calls have been recorded by residents on floors four and five.” She hadn’t intended to yell, but with how he’d not acknowledged her, he can’t have heard a word.

The space between them kept expanding, so Janet stopped. Something about this callout made her heart sink to her boots, well, heels. “Be careful Alex, it’s one with a centralised gas system. Not just electrical. It could go marginal—fast!” Surprised by her stammered words, it gave life to the terror trembling off her lips.

While he only had a few yards left, the unnerving fear riding Janet’s tone as he raced through the hall gave him cause to pause. Unsure what’d greet him, he softened his expression as he turned. “Janet...” A sigh escaped seeing her distraught. All he had was mouthing barely above a whisper, “thank-you.”

Janet’s heart landed in her throat, pounding her breath into submission when certain his eyes saw through her. Now unable to help herself after his softened features and restrained voice, she begged like his worried wife, “Please, be careful.”

The anguish reminded him of his mother and sisters when he'd told them of his career choice. While it pained him witnessing a friend distraught, he was in charge, and they were understaffed. It left him with nothing but a promise on his soft smile and gentle wink before taking the last few strides to his waiting apparatus.

As he sat in the front passenger seat while screaming through the city streets, he sighed knowing they'd arrive first. And as they specialised in both fire and rescue, with pump engines, EMT first responders, occupant retrieval and mobile command, they'd have to access and set up. Fast putting on his gear as they neared the scene, the booming crackle from despatch over the comms stretched his focus.

"Engine One from District Despatch: First due. Complete initial assessment. Mobilise command."

A quick survey of the scene as they pulled past gave him a line of sight over three sides of the building. Damn, it didn't look good, and he put on his helmet before grabbing the radio. "District Despatch from Engine One: Copy first due on scene. 7709 Broadway Close. Pulling past. Six stories. Composite material, mixed construction. Recent renovation, multi dwelling occupancy. Delta clear. Alpha smoke fifth floor—quadrant one. Bravo fourth floor confirmed, well developed working fire. No auto extension, or air-track. Known active gas-lines. Establishing Fireground Comms: activate secondary alarm. Repeat! Activate Secondary Alarm!"

He exited the fire truck alongside the rest of his crew, putting his jacket on. An urgency crept in as he straightened its collar, erupting in shivers down his spine. It wasn't unusual, but tonight, something felt different. He couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but it forced a hard lump in his throat as he marched to the nearside of the apparatus. There, he'd get a much better view of the front entrance. It didn't surprise him when the radio on his jacket crackled again.

"Engine One from District Despatch: Copy Alpha. Bravo. Delta. Affirmative gas, utility company to shut-down at junction. Confirm secondary alarm activation. Command Chief: 1, 6. Engine: 17, 23, 45. Ladder: 7, 14, 36. Ambulance: 10, 16, 18, 24. Wagon: 12. All units to copy redirect to 7709 Broadway Close."

He sucked in a breath hearing the sheer amount of secondary alarm units copying in, and his words would only add to the pile. "District Despatch from Engine One: Copy gas-lines, and redirect. Fireground Command live. Awaiting Chief. Forward lay set. Alpha entry ready."

“Engine One from District Despatch: Copy. All Fireground units switch to Fireground frequency.”

With despatch now aware, he shifted his focus momentarily, making a call to the Firehouse. “Janet at Fireground. Any update on building manager?”

“Affirmative Alex. Mr. Arnold Roland, en route ETA two minutes.”

“Copy Janet.”

While he waited for this Mr. Roland, he helped his team set hose-lines and pumps with assistance from the newly arrived second fire truck. His ladder crew led by Max, readied for high-rise window retrievals. It grated him they were treading water until the city had deactivated the gas-lines. Only then could they enter and set the standpipe. Frustrated by that heavy doom looming he grunted, rolling his shoulders. All he could hope for was an absence of a repeat performance.

His attention landed on the entrance, it narrowed watching a flood of occupants in a mix of angst and haste rush onto the street. “Max, go set a fire-line and evacuation point.”

“On it Cap.”

A rare smile broke through his taut jaw as Max bolted off. His friend, no question, would get apartment numbers, names, and occupancy details. People naturally gravitated towards him, and his memory was beyond razor sharp.

He returned his uneasy attention back over the front of the complex, dread riding his bated breath for any glimpse of trapped victims hanging out windows. To his relief and concern, he saw none. Yes, it meant hopefully occupants weren't trapped, but it highlighted the fire had no ventilation either. His thoughts of remedying that were distracted by despatch on his radio.

“Fireground from District Despatch: Affirmative gas-lines shut-down.”

His shoulders tightened as they rolled, finally. “District Despatch from Fireground: Copy gas-lines. To start entry for standpipe. Main hose-line activated.” With those damn lines off, he picked up pace towards his engine.

His focus had been so blinded on gearing up he nearly collided with a man who'd gone beyond the tape. Thoughts of the evader being a journalist faded when he noticed an architect tube under his arm.

He snatched the barely extended blueprints, darting to the nearest EMT pickup's bonnet while unrolling it. “Mr. Roland, the standpipe—wet or

dry?” Normally he’d remain restraint, but they were chasing ghosts and this building manager had delayed entry.

“It’s wet. There’s also gas-lines in the building.”

“I’m aware. It’s been shut-down.” He paused, waiting. When Mr. Roland wasn’t forthcoming, his tone barked. “List of occupied apartments, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Yes—yes sir. Here they are.”

“Anything I should know about the residents? Any mobility, impaired, or compromised individuals?” His eyes darted to Mr. Roland while taking the paperwork in a more dignified manner. Least he saw the man going floor-by-floor in his head.

“No compromised, wheelchair bound, or disabled persons. 6B was due to arrive today, but Miss Fletcher never turned up. We also had a squatter in 6F, but cleared him out yesterday, and changed the locks.”

“Thank-you Mr. Roland. Please move to the designated safe-zone with the tenants. If we need further assistance, someone from my team will get you.” Fortunately, the manager had nothing else, bolting for safety, so he returned to scanning over the blueprints.

Other apparatuses from neighbouring firehouses started arriving. He’d like to find safety in their fast-growing numbers. But with no Command Chief as yet, he remained in charge. And that stopped his crew from entering. It cast his thoughts to last night. It’d fast gone from routine to nightmare in minutes. But tonight, that nagging feeling kept growing, something was different. Unsure what lurked, could he pay it any attention? No. Thoughts became things, and he clenched his fists to distract himself, only to grunt when the blueprints crumpled under the pressure. But they needed to clear that damn smoke and find the bloody fire.

If not.

A shudder ran down his spine.

Dare he pray for the fire to vertically self-ventilate? Heck, he’d settle for anything—broken windows included. Without it, he knew survival conditions would fast deteriorate. Their only way to save all souls meant putting that damn fire out.

Itchy feet. It’d be the only way to describe the urgency cursing through his veins. He could ill afford to fail again. It forced his decision: he’d hand over Fireground Command. Sure, he was currently the most senior captain at ground zero, and his crew the most experienced; but those were the

very reasons his team held the best chance of fire control and rescue. “District Despatch from Fireground: Fireground Command to Engine twenty-three Captain Howard. Debrief given. Engine One to initialise standpipe, and interior attack. Forward lay-hose charged. Passports activated, commencing entry.” A radio crackle broke the tension as he led his crew inside.

“Fireground from District Despatch: Copy handover. Confirm entry, Engine One.”

Only once they’d activated the standpipe did he take a sigh. The second breath of relief came once they’d secured both stairwells. But their work was far from done, and he pointed up the stairs barking through his mask, “Harry, secure vertical ventilation if none’s tracking. Check all stairwell doors are closed.” As the man nodded, he tapped his shoulder. “Thanks Harry.”

With both forward lay hose-lines and standpipe set, he led his crew to the fourth floor. At each level, he implemented the standard two-by-two rule. Two firemen broke off at the wave of his glove as they reached each floor. His instructions clear, check all apartments.

A glimmer of hope sparked like the fire as they arrived at their level, the stairwell door intact. But he also knew better, and his remaining team alongside him took a deep breath. While the fire had shown its well-established self externally, where it’d tracked from was the secret it wouldn’t give up without a fight.

And that spoke nothing of the threat that’d started it all. Gas ignition, cooking, paper, cigarettes, heck, it could’ve been kids playing with lighters. That’s what scared him, scared all firefighters, the unknown. It’s why he held his breath while sliding the door open a crack, praying a flashover wasn’t about to smite them from life.

While they’d been spared that tomb, he still cursed under his breath the moment his focus landed on the turbulent, dark, thick smoke. Forget working fire, try well-developed, busting at the seams, determined to turn their bones to ash.

He sighed, thrusting the heavy fireproof door open. This was always the problem with renovated historic buildings. Modern facelifts burnt like the sun, succumbing to advanced fire behaviour faster. “Fireground from Engine One: Confirm any horizontal ventilation. Fourth floor fire over fifty-percent involved. Initial advanced fire behaviour noted.”

“Engine One from Fireground: Negative ventilation. Structural spotter reports all sides and quadrants intact.”

He sucked in a big one from the oxygen tank, it'd been the answer he dreaded. “Fireground from Engine One: Copy.” Damn-it, fast feeling they were losing the battle. They needed ventilation STAT.

Just like previous floors he gave a command signal while making his way towards the fire, hose in hand. He trusted his crew. Trusted them with his life. Like a brotherhood they were, their bonds ran deep. Not unlike the homeless or any other creed, but no one would die tonight.

Not an elderly couple.

Not a child.

Not a squatter.

No one screamed on repeat through his mind as they stretched the attack. Once set, his thoughts shifted with the all-important call in. “Fireground from Engine One: Water on fire. I repeat water on fire.”

“Engine One from Fireground: Captain Stratford, Command Chief Mitchell here. Confirm direct interior attack. Any update on horizontal ventilation.”

Harry, having finished the roof's survey, waited until silence hit the comms before relaying what he'd found. “Fireground from Engine One: Fireman McKinnon. Minimal ventilation achieved. Extreme delicate roof integrity. Bravo significant distortion, heat moderate, smoke visible.”

He couldn't deny his relief Harry found ventilation, albeit minimal. But it also meant the fire had engulfed part of the fifth and sixth floors. It created another foreboding sigh at the unfolding situation. Would the St. Clair Fire Department survive being plastered over the front page again?

The explosive sound of glass shattered over both the roaring fire and hose. Adrenaline demanded he, like them all, scan for a back-draft, knowing it meant they'd just achieved horizontal ventilation. Unsure if he could count their blessings, the magic maker tapped his shoulder. He'd have jumped if his nerves weren't already skirting the edge.

“Where do you need me, Cap?” Harry asked, sucking in his breath.

Truthfully, he needed more men. The upward traction of the fire meant occupants could become trapped, injured, or worse, dead. “Not again. Not tonight!” he grunted louder than intended.

“Is everything okay, Cap?” Harry asked, concerned. His Commander appeared more than frustrated. It was alarmingly out of character.

“Yes.” He shifted his head to meet his radio comms. “Fireground from Engine One Captain Stratford: Urgently requesting backup engine crew STAT. Fire not locked down, tracking vertically fast. Possible occupant retrieval still required.” He couldn’t discount Max’s findings. Some on those floors had remained inside if neighbour reports were accurate.

Harry sighed, now understanding what’d eaten at his Commander. He, too, found it hard. They’d lost an elderly couple the night before. He just hoped this building had better construction, and free from shoddy workmanship that’d prevent them from reaching any trapped victims before it became too late.

“Engine One from Fireground: Copy. Engine 45 on way. Meet at fourth-floor stairwell.”

“Harry, follow me,” he commanded before heading towards the attack hose-line. He refused to allow another tragedy.

“Jack.” His frustration still hadn’t shifted a damn, which made his temper worse.

“Yes, Cap?”

“I’m going to the attack stairwell. Engine 45 to begin search and rescue of floors five and six. I’ll be gone ten-minutes.”

“Copy that.”

True to his word, ten-minutes later he was back at the fire which had receded. That, though, spoke nothing of the floors above them. In fact, they could’ve already succumbed to flames. That’d put his crew, any team for that matter, in danger of a roof collapse if it continued to rage uncontrolled.

His mind fought listening to the messages that flew over the comms between crews and the Fireground and his exhaustion. They’d kept the fire at bay. Contained, yes, but just. It’d become a losing battle, these old renovated buildings never fared well. Their best hope rested in complete evacuation, then controlling the burn until it flamed itself out.

“Engine One Captain Stratford from Fireground: It’s Ross. Alex, I need to see you.”

The nagging feeling that’d been clawing in his gut just took a sizeable chunk. Ross’s tone demanded an audience. He reached for Jack’s shoulder, his friend had been hand on hose the entire time. They both needed a refuel and re-tank. “Jack. Follow me.” In true form, Jack without a word, followed suit.

As his foot landed on the sidewalk, he turned off his passport. He heard Jack do the same, keeping pace as he raced toward their engine with

nothing but Ross in his line of sight. The closer he got, his attention shifted to Mr. Roland beside the Command Chief, pale and shaking. That unease swirling in his gut morphed into a pit of hell when Ross's face fared worse. What the hell was going on?

"Alex, we have a problem." Ross barked, wasting no time conveying the dilemma they faced, knowing the urgency.

"What is it Ross, do I need to get my crew out?" He returned with the same haste. It was the only logical explanation. What he didn't understand was the radio silence.

"No," Ross paused briefly, "structurally the building's stable—for now. How much longer, I can't say. We're waiting on the Fire Engineer's report. We were setting to shift towards an aerial attack, however, just before we made the call, we got some news. Mr. Roland's son saw the fire on the news and gave his father an update on occupancy."

Cursing rather loudly, Jack couldn't help himself. "Damn-It! How bad. How many? Which floors!"

Ross gave an agitated glare towards the building manager. "The squatters a friend of Mr. Roland's son, and back in 6F. 6B did in fact turn up, just late. And neither has exited the building."

"How much time do we have, Ross? What's the sixth floor's current status?" His tone a shade darker than his Command Chief as he fast moved round the engine, gathering what he needed.

Jack joined in after catching Alex change out his SCBA gear and reach for the larger personal survival kit. He understood what his Captain was planning. And he damned if he'd let him go alone.

"Alex..." Ross paused, understanding the risks. "In all honesty, I shouldn't be sending you in—period. But I knew if you caught wind of this, you'd go anyway. Hence why I want you and your most trusted man prepped."

He wondered if his week could get any worse. Distraction, and STAT. All he had was breathing in the faint smokey air before back to the sterile stuff he'd been inhaling for hours. Time reminded him they were fast running out of it. "Mr. Roland..." He paused, drawing in another. Who knew when he'd get his next? "Is 6B and the squatter of sound mind and body? Anything important we should know, and what's the name of the squatter?"

Mr. Roland's reply showed his embarrassment. "No, they're both able-bodied. My son's friend is Romeo, he's back in 6F, and 6B is—"

“Miss Fletcher, I remember.” Yes, he’d grunted. But he’d argue a large oxygen tank smacking his back while rolling his shoulders to adjust its placement caused his agitation.

“Her name’s Charlotte.”

“Thank-you Mr. Roland.” He turned, signalling to Jack his desire to move.

He reached the threshold first with Jack hot on his heels. Despite his exhaustion, knowing lives were at risk breathed new life into his protesting body. Though he questioned how much he had left after racing to the sixth floor stairwell.

His brief discussion with engine 17s Captain Turner gave him and Jack the floor’s current status. As expected, he’d been allocated a fireman as a point of contact should he require assistance, which did nothing to relieve the growing unease. That was confirmed as he stepped into the floor’s foyer, fate felt in control and about to hurl him a curveball.

Forced to refocus by the swirling black smoke greeting them, he wondered when the pressure keg building would give them a break. He couldn’t see or hear the attack line down the hall on his right. It served as a reminder they were fiercely fighting against the clock. His hand rose, notioning to Jack to follow as he stepped left according to the blueprints.

He took a moment as they arrived at apartment 6F. For the first time since losing his mother, as Jack arrived beside him, he prayed. Prayed what he knew his friend was also thinking. The increasing creaking noises lurked like the grim reaper. If they didn’t up the ante against what never showed mercy, it’d be four souls lost.

Jack’s fist pounded like a pub brawl on the door, clearing the noise inching ever closer. “Romeo. This is the St Clair Fire Department; we need to evacuate everyone from the building.”

His grunt fogged the mask. It wasn’t until the blur faded did he catch Jack’s had succumbed to the same fate. Jack went to thump again, but he caught his forearm, shaking his head for them to wait a moment longer. But as those seconds ticked by...

Silence.

So loud.

It bellowed over the fire.

Those moments came and went, and he reluctantly gave the nod, unwilling to die by flame. When Jack broke open the door with his crowbar,

he sighed. At least the room held minimal smoke, and it appeared Romeo had merely become well acquainted with an empty bottle of whisky still clutched in his hand.

“Damn-it Alex! This won’t end well!” Jack growled, knowing as his Captain did, it’d take them both to get him out.

No way would he let the young fool cost another their life. Jack and himself were one thing, but another civilian. No, not after last night and he leant into his comms, barking his demand. “Fireman Cooper, it’s Captain Stratford. Do you copy?” To distract from the impatience that tore his composure to shreds, he tried rousing the sleeping drunk on the makeshift mattress with his boot.

“Copy Captain Stratford. What do you need?”

“Fireman Cooper. Two firemen to 6F STAT. Squatter’s been located. He’s intoxicated and unconscious.”

“Captain Stratford, copy. On the way.”

He nodded to Jack, and they pulled a still incoherent Romeo to his feet. As they assisted him to the door by an arm each, his radio crackled. Dread flooded his veins, wondering if this incoming communication was responsible for his continued unease.

“Fireground to all Units: Evacuate building. Structural integrity compromised—going marginal. Repeat! Evacuate Now!”

In a rare event, Jack heard Alex curse. Okay, it’d been muttered, but it was in that stoic type way, ironically, like his friend. He didn’t know if he found comfort in Alex acting human and fallible? Or afraid, as it meant death’s breath lurked over their shoulder. It then hit home just how grave the situation had become, Alex would still try rescuing 6B.

As they reached the ajar door, he first thought his eyes defied him. Unwilling to believe their lies, he blinked repeatedly, but it remained the same. A lone fireman racing towards them. The moment he came within earshot, which was debatable over the fire, his tone barked, “Cooper, where’s your fire buddy!” He could add through gritted teeth to the nightmare gaining traction. On what planet was sending a single fireman ever acceptable? It made three firemen against two occupants. Worse still, one drunk as a skunk, and the other—unknown.

“Sorry, Captain Stratford, everyone’s evacuating. I’m only here because I agreed to assist before the evac call. My captain’s going to have my hide for this.”

Jack, unable to contain his anger, sounded much less restraint. “You Damn-Well know, it’s a two-by-two system. Now we’re a bloody man down. This idiot’s so drunk he’s passed out, and we still have 6B down the hall!”

His friend was right. But so was Cooper, he’d have to speak with Captain Turner. Right now, however, none of that mattered. “Let’s not lose our cool, we don’t have time.” He notioned to the young fireman. “Cooper, take over holding this man.” As they switched positions, he continued, “you need to take this man out.” He hoped luck still lingered and 6B would be coherent, or at least fully capable of taking herself down the stairs. Then maybe—just maybe he’d rescue her without making a Mayday call.

Jack swallowed hard yanking his mask off, determined to show his seriousness. “Cap, No! You’re breaking your own cardinal rule, never go in alone.” He adjusted the idiot propped up in his grip, damn-it! “Call for a second, or Mayday. Don’t do this! It’s not worth your life!” It failed, Alex didn’t move. So he tried lightening the mood. “Besides... Rachel will kill me, remember?”

“Go. Now. Jack. That’s an order!” He had every intention of following, at least eventually. They just had to make a start, and he took his radio. “Engine One Captain Stratford to Fireground: Any Fireman still in building? Need urgent assistance with second occupant. Fireman Poole and Cooper exiting with intoxicated squatter.”

“Fireground to Engine One: Negative. Continue with evacuation of squatter. Will attempt rescue of last occupant via window.”



Chapter 5

He'd been contemplating his options, radio still in hand when the fire tore the choice from him. The hall's roof collapsed, separating him from the squatter, Jack, Fireman Cooper, and their only exit. It hadn't blocked his view fortunately, but the debris burned angrier than hell, scorching the air around them despite being several feet away. He'd never be able to climb over it.

Jack spun around terrified, unable to form words in the heavy air. The raging wind, heat, and continued noise as he did, told him exactly what the fire thought of them. They were next. That ominous reality forced out a tone that outmatched the crackling flames and twisting metal. "Cap! Alex! You Okay!"

Well, that depended. Alive, yes, but his nerves, no. Shot to bloody hell. "I'm alive, still in the doorway. Fireground said they're attempting a window rescue of 6B. It's my only option. Now go Jack—that's an order!" Damn, he'd not hidden his concern.

Jack's nerves didn't settle seeing his Captain's form peeking through the haze. If anything, the flames intimately dancing with its smoke only added to his angst, taking their continued presence as a challenge. And how could he leave Alex? If the mass in front of them fell victim to the burn, what fate lay ahead of his friend, he couldn't. Only he couldn't not. "Hurry it up then, would you!"

He made quick work of the remaining hall arriving at 6B. Mask in hand; he thrust it onto his helmet. That's when the thick smoke teased his

lungs with promises of death. His fist pounded her door, knowing she could take it either way, but they'd run out of time. "Miss Fletcher, this is the St Clair Fire Department! Are you awake?"

Nerves fidgeted as he waited for a response that never came. Again, he knocked, louder this time. "Miss Fletcher, this is the St Clair Fire Department. Are you awake? We need to evacuate the building." The silence had chosen its side, and it wasn't his.

Damn-it.

He'd have to break the seal.

Crowbar in hand, his knuckles whitened under his agitated grip. Just when he thought upstairs was handing him a break, it taunted with a 'jokes on you.' Well, if the heavens wanted it that way, so be it, but they'd not win tonight and he rolled his shoulders, grateful he never skipped out on gym workouts. And sure, his body carried extra muscle making six flights of stairs harder after hours on call, but it gave him added strength in moments like these.

A sigh escaped as he placed the crowbar, the dark smoke caressing his senses as the lock broke. Dare he hope he'd taken enough care to avoid damage, the damn thing still had to shut securely, otherwise they'd lose the only barrier they had. Aware he might cause an uproar as he stepped in, he called out again, "Miss Fletcher. This is the St Clair Fire Department. Please don't be alarmed." Still, the silence toyed with him.

Not willing to accept it foretold a bad omen he closed the door, forcing it into place before what oxygen remained in the apartment lost to the smoke. He scanned the space, determined to orientate himself and who he was dealing with. The sole dim glow that barely gave him anything came from subtle down-lights over the breakfast bar. That's when he heard a faint hum. He took a shuffled step further and the sound of eighties music became clearer. It created a grin that broke the tension consuming him, he liked her taste.

A flash of light from a chopper through the full-height windows pulled him from those wayward thoughts. It gave him a split-second moment to gather enough intel to confidently enter this woman's home. Though that wasn't without mounting problems. Yes, it appeared to be the living space and those windows also gave a dim light, but he couldn't see much past his extended hand, as it remained surprisingly dark. It kept him from ascertaining furniture or obstacles in his way. In fact, the closer he got, it appeared as

though she'd not unpacked a thing aside from perhaps an old sofa. Least it looked like one from where he stood.

It wasn't until he towered over the old thing that he found his target asleep. Against it, she dwarfed in comparison, her petite form little more than 5ft 3in—on a good day. If she remained unconscious, with her small size, it'd be easy to carry her out the window. He clearly held a good foot in height, and maybe a hundred pounds of muscle on her.

He fixated on her sleeping form, noticing both his movements and voice had failed to rouse her. His thoughts raged, tempting his hands into fists while he scanned her immediate vicinity. Lucky for them both, not a scrap of alcohol or drugs muddied her rescue. It meant maybe—just maybe, things would finally work in his favour. He let out a sigh as he crouched, putting them at eye level to avoid alarming her.

Then it happened.

His world crashed to a standstill, ripping his breath from his chest.

Her beauty paled against any he'd seen before. Her hair, thick and lush; the perfect shade of blonde stole his breath more. Unable to look away, his gaze trailed its freefall, carelessly ending over her chest. That view slammed his moral restraint into oblivion, finding taut nipples flush against her t-shirt.

Dared by raging hormones, his eyes cast downwards. He attempted to suck in that missing breath, only to find it rapidly seeking more air. Great, he'd pass out himself, especially seeing her damn t-shirt had ridden up, exposing tempting underwear that did nothing but the bare minimum to cover her feminine beauty. Never had he been left so affected, no tormented by a woman before. NEVER!

And now he didn't know which was harder.

The solid lump in his throat.

Or his groin.

It forced him to adjust his pants before the strain of the hardening mass enticed his view elsewhere.

Shock.

Disbelief.

No, both. They thrashed his thoughts like the demanding hardness between his legs. He had to refocus, the view already tempted. It'd never see him freeing them from this fire if he didn't get it together. Only it wasn't working. His mind teased with thoughts of her under him.

Think.

Damn-it!

Think!

As he sucked in a breath he turned his attention to the ceiling, and relief railroaded in. So did the rising predicament swirling above them. Dark, thick, and ominous. With smoke now filtering in, the threat behind her front door inched ever closer. Irony not lost on him, it wasn't the only thing 'rising.' An embarrassment steamrolled over his composure. He'd been less than professional towards her. Didn't matter she'd not seen it.

He'd have to keep a safe distance for his own sanity. "Miss Fletcher, I'm from the St Clair Fire Department—Miss Fletcher..." He grunted, tasting the smoke when she didn't stir.

Goddamn-it!

Had the slightest hint of smoke rendered her incapacitated, or had she suffered a medical event?

He shifted to his knees, shuffling in just enough to reach out. Wrong move. It beelined her heavenly scent straight to where it shouldn't. Could things get any worse?

No, it seemed, as his arousal thundered against his briefs. If he didn't rein it in, she'd misread it, and that... Well, that would explode bigger than a nuclear bomb.

With nothing else left, he dragged in a breath like those who enjoyed that 'green stuff.' Goddamn-it! When would ironies stop throwing him to the wolves? Another deep inhale, this time he fought choking on the smoke. And yet, it still paled against the nightmare proving itself the mistake it'd been.

So, he held his breath, his touch soft despite the hint of nerves. As it gentled on her exposed shoulder from the oversized neck, a smirk peaked on the corner of his mouth. Her soft, heaven-sent skin raided his own flesh. None of this, or her, were helping. "Miss Fletcher..." Before he could say more her eyes bolted open, wild like an animal that'd been cornered and caught. Still, they lured him in.

That was until.

Those piercing green emeralds filled with terror, watering under tension he didn't understand. Just as quickly, her delicate form rocked on its fast-failing hinges under his touch. An instinctive violent wrath thundered its way through him.

What the hell made that her default reaction to a man?

To him!

Within seconds she would've noticed his fire-suit. It couldn't be that. Her terror looked firmly rooted in him—his masculinity. Who the hell did this to her? His temper flared dangerously more lethal than the incoming fire. That was until the violent shaking of her body dragged him from thoughts that'd land him in trouble. Dare he keep his hand still, hope it wouldn't backfire? Would his softened tone reserved for those he rescued work? "Miss Fletcher..."

When her posture didn't change, he tried, softer still. "Miss Fletcher...?" All in, he lowered his head further, raising his eyebrows, desperate to appear the least bit intimidating. "Can you understand me? Can you repeat your name for me, please?"

Her heart demanded release from the binds shackled to it. Of all the crazy situations she'd woken to, never did a man, a fireman, cross her thoughts as one of them.

But as her attention focused on him, his devilish grin fluttered her stomach. He was the most attractive man she'd ever seen. As her eyes drifted even though hidden, his body was larger than most.

And that...

That terrified her. If he came in any closer, she'd pass out from panic. Hang on? Why was he there? She sucked in a deep breath to ask, first taken by his statuesque stillness, then forced to hold back a choking fit at the smoke. Ohhh, now he made sense. Bugger, it meant the building was on fire. Crap, what if they were trapped?

She now feared two fronts. A man—and a fire. Though the man fast felt less of a threat, speeding towards something altogether different.

Despite her confused efforts, she couldn't turn away from what was capturing more than her attention. His touch, she mused, heated her skin more than the fire he'd been sent to put out, forcing her gaze back to his. The moment their eyes met, his expression softened further, had he read her fear? He must've and her body followed suit, the panic reduced to simmering no longer threatening to spill over.

What she failed to comprehend while staring into his eyes holding her ransom, other than family, no man had read her fears before. Had he just blown past all her defences? Read her like an open book? Did that make him dangerous?

“Miss Fletcher...” he barely spoke with an even tension. The calm status quo had to remain. If she didn’t respond, he’d just make plans before she went catatonic with shock and needed more than carrying out the window.

“Sorry. Yes, my name’s Charlotte Fletcher. How bad is it?” Should she sit up? Or would that remove his hand? Would shying away for a hot minute to regather her thoughts have him doing the same? Unable to take the risk, she merely blinked, which confused her more. What was wrong with her?

He was surprised she’d returned from the brink of incoherency to asking questions. It had him consider being honest while she had a moment of clarity without scaring her. “Miss Fletcher, we have to evacuate the building. We’re just waiting for a Ladder Truck. We’ll be exiting through the window. Are you alone?”

The distraction of his hand on her shoulder didn’t hide his lack of honesty, but she couldn’t ignore it gave birth to a sensation she couldn’t describe. It wasn’t lust, or gooey eyed infatuation. No. It felt altogether foreign. It not only scared her, but oddly relieved too. Her decision to remain still proved the right choice. He’d not moved either.

Wait...

What?

“Why can’t we leave through the front door? It’d be the less dramatic way.” She still wasn’t convinced she’d heard right.

He couldn’t help but smile. She wasn’t wrong. “The hall to the main stairwell collapsed, blocking our exit as we headed your way. Your window’s our only option. I promise I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. My crew is on their way. We’ll have you free in no time. Can you please confirm if you’re alone? I have to radio in.”

Parts of her she didn’t know existed became intoxicated watching a grin creep over his mouth. Same could be said for the rising smoke adding a darkened hue. Was it wrong she stared like a possum in headlights? Or that it took a moment before her mute brain realised he expected an answer. “I’m alone.”

A shudder rippled her thoughts, not since her brush with death had she acknowledged her solo status. Same for a man’s touch. Before now she’d have jerked away, may still after he’d become a memory. It left her beyond confused, struggling to override the blindsiding emptiness when he removed his hand, rolled off his knees to his heels, and went to stand.

Her body revolted, thrusting itself forward before she could think. Clouded by her actions, she hesitated mid-breath. Had he seen her weirdness? Would he think her crazy with the mess she was creating?

Cornered by another surprise, he didn't know what to make of her lunge towards him. He understood she was no longer confused about any fire, and her behaviour wasn't emergency attachment or shock. No. Her fear squarely focused every inch on him. It had been the sole reason he moved away. And now she wanted him closer?

Be damned if he couldn't make sense of her actions, but his body sure as hell wanted to accept her request. He returned to his previous position hoping to ease what they both wanted, making sure his eyes met her gorgeous ones stealing more than his breath. "Miss Fletcher; am I okay to leave you for a few minutes? I need to radio in and organise our evacuation?"

A calmness swelled deep within her once he'd moved back in. What confused her more, she didn't understand her reaction. She didn't even care her body still lay exposed for his viewing pleasure, despite resting on her elbow. He somehow felt gallant, trustworthy, and that aroma of his aftershave when this close tickled parts of her that'd lain dormant for years.

Scared by that thought, it yanked her free from the weirdness. "Yes, I'll be fine. I can smell smoke, though. Can I get a glass of water?" Unfortunately, it hadn't stopped her voice from sounding like a strained whisper.

His body rose quicker than his groin still causing chaos. "Yes, only if it's bottled." He then took large strides towards the windows, hoping to gauge the Fireground and radio in his position away from earshot. "Engine One Captain Stratford to Fireground: Located occupant 6B. Alert and able-bodied. ETA on ladder. Smoke and back-draft rapidly building."

She found a gnawing feeling building in her stomach the further space opened up around them. To test her theory, she raced back, extending a bottle of water the moment she became close enough. His gracious smile, she wished, had ridden a wink or at least a flirty smirk. And when he mouthed 'thank-you,' throbs pounded in all the wrong places. Places she vowed wouldn't be vulnerable or at the mercy of a man again.

Her heart jolted, brought back to life when their hands touched. Shocked by how disruptive his presence had become made the silence unbearable. If she didn't hear his strong voice soon, she'd beg, probably like a pathetic fangirl to boot. "Have they told you how much longer?"

“Not yet. I’m waiting for their response.” He raised the bottle in acknowledgment. “Thank-you for the water.” Then turned his gaze out the window, took a sip, and rested his forehead on the tinted glass to avoid her any further embarrassment. “Miss Fletcher, if you have better clothing available, now would be a good time to change. They’ll provide protection against the cooler air outside.”

Her cheeks bloomed fire engine red. She’d forgotten her near-on nakedness. And the way he’d turned his head only confirmed his valiant chivalry at her predicament. He was only doing his job, and her fear might interfere with that. She had to do better, be better. He deserved it, if nothing else. “This is the best I’ve got. Aside from what I arrived in, I’m afraid. And honestly, they’re not much better.” She didn’t dare state it felt more see-through than her current ensemble, nor did she want to admit leaving his presence tugged on her chest.

As his gaze drifted back, his eyes never left hers. He’d thought it the safest place, his body needed little encouragement. Nor did he want to offend her by becoming aroused again.

Scrap that.

His body fought a double jeopardy just staring into the sparkling green pools he wanted to drown in. He fought the grin and following sigh knowing he could ill afford that unprofessional issue. “No matter. They’ll bring a blanket up the ladder, anyway.”

A smile of her own crept over her cheeks. His masculinity was unlike any she’d been around outside of her family. It equally enthralled and hypnotised. Those windows had competition. No, they didn’t compare.

Obsessed, she stared—stalker like. What made him different? Why did the thought of gazing over him indefinitely tingle down her spine in wicked delight? It had to be more than his handsome features and powerful body. She’d been so lost in her wayward thoughts, it wasn’t until uncontrolled coughing burned her chest did she notice his behaviour had changed. But it also caused other realisations. She hadn’t been staring.

She’d been lost in a daydream.

A fairytale...

He found himself reluctant to turn away from her beautiful gaze. She proved a wonderful distraction, and he needed to concentrate. Their air significantly changed a few minutes ago. They were reaching flash-point

far too fast. He'd have to make the call no firefighter liked, but he never played hero.

"Miss Fletcher—"

"Charlee. Please call me Charlee."

A barely visible sigh rode the breath he forced out. Her request to use a nickname meant she'd become somewhat comfortable in his presence. The timing couldn't be more perfect. "I'm afraid the fire has plans of its own. I may say—or do things you find frightening. My promise remains the same. I will get you out safely..." He paused, taking a shallow breath to avoid flashover toxins. "Do you have a cloth you can wet? I only have one mask."

She nodded, talking would lead to coughing. But his soothing, husky tone drifting into her space encased her body in promises she couldn't read, but somehow understood. Instincts demanded she more than obey his directive, and while submitting to that terrified her, she still made haste with his request to the kitchen.

Watching her run made his heart race, and balls twitch. Tempered by thoughts he couldn't act on, he struggled to shift the rigid tightness in his pants. His eyes, as he did so, never left her perfectly rounded form as it bounced while she jogged.

Hmmm...

More than his hormones were driven crazy. He needed that mayday call if he ever wanted a chance with her. And he sighed before taking in a larger breath.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Trapped sixth floor. Alpha quadrant three. Engine One: Captain Stratford, search and rescue. One SCBA seventy percent. Two souls. Unable to bailout with PSE. Need urgent ladder extraction, back-draft building. Have activated emergency passport."

Her hand wobbled as she extended the wet cloth, fear having brought friends with each word she overheard. Even his smile he cast towards her while speaking into the radio on his jacket did nothing. But it afforded her more pieces to the puzzle that made him different. Search and rescue made sense, and at least he'd decent oxygen. But 'two souls,' that—that rung the danger bell louder than a church wedding. Yet, alone with him. There was nowhere else she'd rather be.

All was not moonbeams and rainbows, however. She didn't understand his last comments; it gave her the perfect opportunity to ask and

hear his voice again. But her mouth got no further than open when the crackle of his radio stilled the space.

“This is Fireground: Priority radio traffic only. Mayday call made. RIT team Go! Ladder crew STAT. LUNAR report received. Sixth floor Alpha quadrant three. Engine One Captain. Search and rescue. One SCBA. Unable to use PSE. Passport located; we have a fix on you. Sit tight!”

“Copy Fireground. Use window five. Civilian has thermal jacket and SCBA. Window of survivability rapidly declining. Back-draft guaranteed. Have EMTs times two, ready.” His thoughts now ran two races.

One—this fire and their safety.

Two—still feeding his own heeded desires.

As he took that wet cloth her delicate thrust his desires into thoughts of her naked. Of her underneath him as he devoured her, bringing out her pleasure until the sun rose.

He’d been unable to hide his grin at such devious thoughts, but he managed to stop it showing his carnal appetite—just. Lies. It forced him to clear his throat while raising the cloth. “Thank-you.” He’d hoped making eye contact kept him sane. Fail. Epic fail.

Her mind swirled, lost, falling into terror. Perhaps already with the words she’d just heard over the radio. Sure she found comfort he was a Captain, meant he was skilled. And it made sense, he commanded authority. But why have EMTs on standby? What did he think would happen?

Her foggy brain then processed his words, now speed-racing for answers. Not entirely true. It was his movement. He’d removed his oxygen tank and had started on his jacket. “Stop! What are you doing?”—her hands went to his forearms—“what’s happening? What’s a PSE and passport, what’s this back-draft you’re so concerned about?”

Her lip came under fire the moment his muscled chest came in closer. Tight and in a white t-shirt. Normally it’d drive women and once her crazy. But on this man, this fire Captain, it teased her like the devil and that damn tempting apple. If it weren’t for the danger fast cornering them, she would’ve forgotten where they were.

“Miss Fletcher a—” The moment he gazed into her eyes, a green fury stared him down, stopping him in his tracks.

“Apologies, Charlee...” He wasn’t certain that’d been the reason, having just spit-balled with a prayer he’d been close enough. He needed her in

his mask and jacket, and this banter wasted precious time they didn't have. But her intense glare hadn't lessened. And felt oddly familiar.

He blew out a sigh landing in her hair as he inched closer. The quickest way to gain her compliance would be giving into her demands, whatever they might be. That meant he'd go for next on the potential list. "A PSE is a personal survival emergency kit. A passport is this locator right here..." He pointed to it once his jacket wrapped around her shoulders. "—it pinpoints our exact location. And a back-draft means, the second they break that window..." Again he paused while pointing to the glass "—your apartment will go off like a bomb, and I need you protected. So please, can you do as I've asked?"

She stilled at the severity of his words, her eyes never leaving the very window he pointed at. The reality he'd been serious got caught in her throat, forcing her attention to him. Which infinitely became worse when she caught the swirling fire at her door, bringing tears to her eyes. He needed his jacket. He was at far greater risk of being injured. Fireman or not, this wasn't in his job description. "I'm sure it's not that bad. You said your crew will be here soon, anyway."

Caught in more of her angst while trying to protest, she hadn't noticed he'd put his jacket over her. And now, he stood mere inches from her without a thread of fear terrorising her very existence.

An almighty crash bounded beyond the front door. He brought her up tight against the length of him, putting his body between her, and whatever chaos now threatened behind them. He forced a swallow while facing the closing-in menace, pleading to the heavens they had more time. But the walls had fast succumbed like paper to the advancing fire.

Turning his head back, her heart thundered against his chest, and he understood she had to be notably afraid he'd handled her body without permission. Unsure if she could support herself, he kept his arm wrapped around her despite knowing his continued touch had to be responsible for her fast rising panic. The trembling taking over her delicate body crushed his own masculinity, so he lowered his head, if nothing else than to keep his words calm and at a whisper, "If you wouldn't mind putting that mask on, I need you safe and protected."

Her scared senseless state at the unfolding situation collided with her rapidly rising arousal. Since when were those emotions backseat bus buddies? His soft tone as it caressed her hair, lit up her lady-parts that'd lain dormant

for five years. It ended the debate on whether they'd been broken, and that spoke nothing of the comfort his embrace offered.

So taken aback, without thought, she rested her head against his chest while clutching his shirt over the steady beat of his heart. When his hand remained steadfast, she fell into the dangerous combination of panicked anxiety and curling up in bed with him. It sent shockwaves throbbing through her core and straight to her breasts. Consumed by lusty thoughts, her body sought his, only for embarrassment to rip her from that magical moment. What if he noticed?

Not sure how he'd caused her to seek him out with her current level of trepidation. It created a plethora of polarising signals and thoughts.

North. His mind confused as hell.

South. He'd hit a home run. Several times over.

He could probably let her go, but truthfully, he enjoyed the closeness. And he could indulge knowing, at least for now, she did, too.

It also enabled him to focus on strategising their next step while affording her the greatest protection. Their rescue would be difficult, and he wanted her calm and prepared. "Charlee... I really need you wearing my mask." He took a step back, reluctant had nothing on the feeling it left him with as he placed it over her face.

She did as he requested without protesting. Tears threatened as the removal of his body spiralled her fear of being alone. To right her crazy thoughts, her eyes drifted up to gauge his expression. It hid the peril they faced behind his soft smile, but his wildly intense steel-blue ones didn't. They were in mortal danger.

Panic rose the longer she lost herself in his tender gaze and gentle smile. She didn't want him to get hurt or die. Tears that'd threatened broke free, pooling in the bottom of her newly fitted mask. Fog fast clouded her view with every rapid breath she took, her body scrambling to exhale and find freedom.

Unable to get a foothold on the building tension, her old foe anxiety didn't just knock, it sledge hammered its way into her brain. More fear and panic tailspun the incoming carnage she was losing the battle against. No matter how hard she fought, the demons she'd put to bed stirred to life.

Nothing worked.

Not A Damn Thing...

Violent dizziness spun her head into a blank space, and her heart thundered so loud it drowned out everything. Put on notice. She knew...

A panic attack was imminent.

Knowing that threw her heart and soul under the same bus faster than if she'd just hitchhiked. Still, nothing worked. How could she survive falling victim to a conscious-altering attack in front of him? What if he hurt her? Somewhere deep inside her soul aggressively rebutted her callous mind. Trust him.

Her mouth choked on its own dryness while swallowing—hard. Now a foregone conclusion. Incoming and fast. She clambered around, desperate to grab chunks of his shirt as her consciousness faded to black.

“No, No, No. Charlee can you hear me? Charlee...” He felt her body falter long before he saw her laxed form sloop. It tore at him, he'd been the reason. But now he had no choice. Her body, limp in his hands, singed dark thoughts at her previous suffering.

Damn-it, he had to get it together, his frustration had sent her head slipping backwards. He collapsed to his knees, not just for better air or it being the best place for them, but wondering how he'd ever get close enough to prove he'd rather die than hurt her.

If all he had was this single moment, he'd take it. Besides, flush against his chest protected her from the swirling hell lurking behind them. With little time left he placed the wet cloth over her legs. When that window broke, he didn't want her suffering deep burns.

“Cap, it's Max. Do you copy?” He'd used special thermal imaging from the top of the ladder. From there, he saw Alex kneeling on the floor holding a civilian.

Never had he been so grateful for perfect timing and leant into his radio. As he did so, his cheek brushed against her chin. Relief rushed through him as she stroked her face on his. “Copy Max. ETA?”

“Look up.” Max chuckled with a grin.

“I see you.” He couldn't help notice for the third time she'd lunged for him when he'd moved away. Though he'd like to savour the moment, he sucked in a larger breath, having been skipping them. “Max. Miss Fletcher has passed out. In thirty seconds, I want the glass broken. Have the ladder platform at the window's edge. Be prepared for a back-draft, the force will push me out. I don't want any guesswork. Make sure the platforms empty. That includes you.”

“Alex, you aren’t wearing your jacket. You’re putting yourself at risk of severe burns. She’ll exit first in your arms. You’re fully exposed from the waist up.” Max, now beyond worried about his heroic Captain. A severe burn over a fireman’s back killed if big and deep enough. He also didn’t like Alex remembered their last attempts to catch a fireman. Sure, the man survived, but several others were injured in the process.

“Why do you think I want the platform flush against the building. I don’t plan on sticking around in here. There’s another reason she has my jacket. Thirty-second countdown starting now!”

“Well, isn’t that just typical!” Max jested to his Captain. Alex had always been a chivalrous hero, but it didn’t stop him from trying again. “Copy countdown Cap. Don’t think she’d care, though. Bet she’d rather you protected yourself.” Ignored as expected and he sighed. “Thirty—twenty-nine—twenty-eight...”

Rising to his feet, she remained locked in his firm hold while making their way towards the windows, where he kept just beyond the reach of breaking glass. While he counted down in his mind, he lowered his head, his tone the softest yet, knowing what he had to do. “Charlee, can you hear me?” She nodded, but didn’t look at him. “Can you trust me?” Another nod, but again she offered nothing else.

“You’re safe in my arms. I won’t let you go. You have my word. We’re about to leave through the window. It’ll likely be frightening. Just grab my shirt if you need to. But don’t reach behind me. It’s going to get very hot—very quickly. I will protect you from it as much as I can.”

Deliberate in his breath, both over her and large enough to draw in what oxygen remained, he adjusted her before going there. “There’ll also be a deafening noise. I’m sorry, I have nothing that’ll protect you from that.” He paused, by his countdown they had seconds left. Max’s five fingers turned to four, which reduced to three, and he relayed his previous offer without taking his eyes off two fingers. “Remember Charlee... If it becomes too much, reach for my shirt, I’ll be there. You can trust me.”

She could hear him talking, even understood his words. But her body lay ruined, exhausted in the aftermath. She didn’t even hold the strength to respond. It took all she had left to grip at his shirt, hoping he knew what it meant.

Before she could think past her predicament of getting through to him, breaking glass roared through the space, crash landing in her ears. No

sooner had that happened did she find herself thrust forward with violent intent and extreme force.

This close to his chest, every chiselled muscle that'd once teased now rippled as it worked at depths rarely seen, let alone felt. Rough and savage would never come close to describing the power oozing off every inch of him as he moved. Her panic then soared hearing his heart race at speeds she was certain meant he'd suffer a heart-attack. All this terror faltered her senses, creeping darkness in to take her again.

Heat dragged her back kicking and screaming. Just as he'd said, it got hot. Not just hot—a scorched earth burn. And her leg though wet under that cloth, it singed hotter than the sun. In a fevered attempt, she kicked ferociously to escape the pain despite the risk she'd fall from his hold.

Then came that noise he'd warned her about. It wasn't just loud. It matched a hundred jet planes nosediving into the ground beside them. Her ears chimed in tune with a bell tower before they popped, followed by a ringing silence. The continued onslaught wouldn't relent, leading her consciousness down the garden path of passing out, promising to keep her safe. And despite knowing it did no such thing, she found it harder to resist its tug yanking her consciousness with each breath.

On the edge of accepting the offer, she felt them lunge forward as a guttural war cry vibrated through him, and washed over her. She braced herself, positive they were about to die. In a frantic need, she reached for his shirt. This time, when the void tugged at her, it did with such ferocity... She fell into the abyss it'd created.

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