



Through the Fire
by Shawn Grady

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Even smoke runs from the fire.

But I find myself compelled to enter hell's havoc and the swirling chasm, to take for my own the taming of the element, screwing my courage to the sticking place. When blackness billows heaven-bent from hallways, and flame tips lick lintels like a serpent's tongue, the Sirens stand singing. Mast ties won't hold fast.

Enter the cloud.

Enveloped by heat.

Vanquish the destroyer.

I come from a family of firemen. And borne into my blood was a gift. It arrives at times in whispers, other times more subtle. But beyond the beckon of skeptical sensibilities I've become convinced.

The fire speaks to me.

I know where it is going. I know what it will do. Some call it heightened intuition. Others credit Irish luck. But I know that it's more.

And it was this very thing, this brash self-confidence, that propelled me down a fateful course one thirty-first of October.

Captain Butcher slammed his palm on the clipboard sliding off the dash. He cursed. "We ain't doing nobody no good if we don't get there alive, Aidan."

I winked at him, tightening and relaxing my grip on the steering wheel. His silver-laced moustache rowed back and forth like a set of oars. Our normal driver had taken the day off, so lucky for Butcher, I stepped up as acting operator.

I hung a hard right and the clipboard fell again. This time he missed. He grabbed the side of his door and slung my name with a slew of expletives.

I couldn't help but grin. "Nice alliteration, Cap."

"Nice *what*? Watch out. Slow down."

We threaded through the glowing Reno arch, under its mainstay mantra, *The Biggest Little City in the World*. South Virginia Street stretched out before our blaring Pierce Quantum pumper. I laid on the air horn through intersections and wound the grinder into a high wail. The burgundy hues of the autumn sunset filtered through the foothills, bathing building sides with amber tones and glinting windows.

A pillar of black cloud rose from the south.

Deep into District Three. We'd be third engine in coming from downtown. I hated being anything but first in. But third was better than second. At least we wouldn't be stuck hooking up the water supply.

Static crackled from the radio, "All units, be advised we have reports of occupants trapped."

I pushed the pedal to the floor. The rig surged like an elephant charging. Cars and businesses passed as blurs. The guys in the back strapped on their packs, cranking open the air valves to the *beep-beep-beep* acknowledgment of the built-in motion sensors. Butcher flipped through the map book.

Another transmission, "Battalion Two, Engine Three on scene, large footprint concrete tilt-up, retail building, heavy smoke showing from the roof. We'll be in live-line operations."

It was McKinley. I heard the strain in his voice. Not high-pitched or excited, but almost muted. Like he was trying really hard not to sound high-pitched or excited. He had been a good fireman, an excellent operator, and now that he had promoted to captain, I knew he'd prove the same.

Butcher directed me down a side street so we'd be out of the way of Engine Five laying their hose from the hydrant.

I pulled us up near the ladder truck. The aerial elevated and rotated toward the roof. The Engine Three crew flaked out their hose line to the front doors. A small sea of disquieted faces gathered in the parking lot, shopping bags in hand, children clinging to shoulders.

I set the brake and hopped out of the rig. The tang of burning wood pierced the air. Fire crackled, spitting and popping. I strapped on my air pack.

Butcher came up to me. "Word is, a mother and her son are trapped in the back. They were last seen by the dressing rooms. Smoke's banked down to the floor."

I grabbed my flathead axe and started with him toward the front doors. There was no way they could breathe in that.

"Truck Three is committed to topside," he said. "Battalion Two assigned us and Rescue One with search, but I need to coordinate with him and Captain McKinley. We'll split into two teams. Timothy Clark with me. You take the new kid and head on in."

"Got it."

"And Aidan . . ." He stopped walking.

"What?"

"I'm trusting you with our probie." He held my gaze for a second longer, then turned and strode over to the battalion chief's rig.

Probie firefighter Matt Hartman's eyes circled wide like china saucers. He pulled on his air mask and tightened his gleaming yellow helmet. This was his third shift.

We advanced to the door. "Ready, bud?"

Fog filled his facepiece. "Yeah," he said with a muffled voice.

"Lightweight truss," I said. "Looks like it's running the rafters hard. Be heads-up."

At the entry I strapped on my mask, the smell of rubber meeting my nostrils as I seated the nose cone. Thick gray smoke hovered in the doorway, greeting us like a silent apparition. A chainsaw started in the parking lot.

I clicked on my voice amplifier and pulled rope out of the small bag on my air pack. I carabinered it to a door handle. “We follow this to get out. Keep a hand on my shoulder.”

Hartman nodded.

We crouched and entered the maw. Sounds of the outside faded, and warmth pressed in around my hood. Our flashlights penetrated only two feet in front of us. The sound of hose streams hitting walls rumbled to our distant right. A dull roar like a freeway overpass reverberated above, interspersed with metallic groans. My hands found the smooth tile of a walkway alongside a carpeted section. I trailed a glove and pushed us on toward the back of the store.

Bump. Bump. Bump.

The ladder truck company made the roof, sounding out each step with a tool. I reached out with all my senses.

I listened beyond.

Searching.

There you are.

Rolling like a tumbleweed, tearing through the trusses . . . south . . . southeast.

I stopped.

“What is it?” Hartman said.

I looked behind us. Orange flickers danced through the smoke. “We don’t have much time.”

We moved on until I felt the rope bag tug on my waist belt. I unclipped it and dropped it on the pathway. “Matt, connect your tag line to mine.”

“What tag line?”

“The red bag on your air pack.”

He twisted like he was doing the hula hoop. “I don’t have one.”

We were a hundred feet in, and out of rope to follow back.

The smoke swirled around us. If we ran out of air we’d suffocate. We ran the risk of getting lost in an everyday retail mart, our final breaths taken beside the baby toys and discount-movie bins.

This is how firemen die.

I looked at the rope bag, then ahead into the graphite abyss. Somewhere in that lay a woman and a child.

“All right,” I said. “Stick close. Let’s go.”

Rumbles and groans crescendoed. I quickened the pace, tapping my glove to feel the tile every dozen steps. The temperature elevated.

Two white lights swung through the haze. A pair of firefighters materialized in front of us, a woman’s limp body clutched between them.

“You guys Rescue One?”

The firefighter at the head moved backward, struggling. “Yeah.”

“Where’s the kid?”

“What kid?”

I followed alongside. “We heard there was a mother and a child.”

“We . . . searched the whole . . . back there. Nobody else.”

I stopped. “No, we heard there was a kid—”

In my mind I saw a vision of a sudden bright flame.

Southeast corner.

Under the roof, by the wall. By McKinley's crew.

I grabbed the radio from my jacket pocket.

"Engine Three, get—"

A tangerine flash filled the room.

Pressurized heat pushed over us. I tackled Hartman to the floor. Rescue One scrambled low, dragging the woman with one hand each, scooting on their sides. Hartman made his knees and scuttled after them. Wicked links of lit barbed wire wove in the air. The store glowed like a volcanic cloud.

"Matt!" I yelled. "Matt!"

He turned.

I motioned toward the rear of the building. "This way."

He stared at me and turned toward the front.

"Matt!"

He looked back again.

A transmission burst from my radio. "Battalion Two to all units, evacuate the building. Repeat, all units evacuate the structure. We are going defensive."

Fire rolled overhead.

"Come on, Matt! We can still find the kid."

He didn't move.

"Matt, come on!"

He pointed to the front. "They're calling us out!"

A thunderous bang hit ground not far from us.

"Now's the time," I said. "Let's get back there."

I turned and crawled toward the back, certain he would follow me.

I felt the frame of a doorway and swiveled my head to make sure I still had him. But he hadn't moved. He knelt, frozen with indecision, as though his knees and gloves were affixed to the floor. There I saw in his face, through the clear curvature of his mask and beyond the gold-lit reflections of the fire, the simple look of a child, innocent and uncertain.

And then the roof collapsed.

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