

Chapter XI

It started as small grey wisps, gentle puffs that found their way around the cracks and seams of the boarded windows. It was the color of dirty cotton and swirled against the brick of the building as it gained density and bulk. In a matter of minutes, it had morphed into a black, acrid cloud that seethed from around the windows as the heat inside intensified.

The cadets stood nervously at attention, lined up along the deck. They had been standing for almost an hour, watching the instructors work. The officers moved methodically, the tasks familiar, routine. Three worked the interior, stacking bundles of hay and wooden pallets into every corner of the burn building, stuffing it like you would a holiday turkey. They would accompany the students into the fire once it was lit. Two more on the outside set up the engine that would supply the water for their attacks. Another would work the periphery as the safety officer, monitoring the progress of the burn, surveying for hazards. A separate team in full gear was standing by. They would serve as the RIT: the Rapid Intervention Team, whose sole purpose was saving the cadets' asses, should something go wrong.

Overseeing the entire effort was Daniels, standing off to the side, slowly sipping his coffee. He wore bunker pants and boots. His helmet shaded his eyes, and his gloves were shoved into the low pocket on his right thigh. His arms were crossed, as usual, and he raised and lowered his mug with slow, steady precision while he scanned the scenario, looking ahead, seeing in his mind's eye how the evolutions would unfold, who would go where and in what sequence. The students would enter in teams of three: one to work the nozzle, one to back up the nozzle man, and one to feed the hose to the two up front. The cadets would rotate throughout the day, so each would have a chance to work the various positions.

While some teams attacked the fire, others would be performing search and rescue, locating victims hidden throughout the structure. They would work in concert, synchronizing their efforts. The fires were controlled from a small operations room in the rear of the building. The instructors would communicate via radio, monitoring the progress of the interior teams, coordinating the attacks. The man in the control room would stand at the panel, his hand on the "dead man's switch," adjusting the flow of gas throughout the structure so that conditions remained extreme. "E-Stop" switches strategically mounted on the walls could be mashed in the event of an emergency, cutting off the flow of gas. The hay and pallets would provide the dense smoke lacking in natural gas fires. They would also intensify heat conditions, and it was going to be hot.

The cadets stood on deck, nerves rattling, eyes never leaving the burn building, watching the instructors as they worked. It was like watching henchmen construct the gallows from which they would swing. Every action was intended to make things as realistic as possible. The fires would be allowed to build. Only then would they be permitted to enter.

They broke the students into groups and handed out assignments. Everything started moving quickly. Timing was crucial. The instructors wanted to maximize their exposure to the heat and flames. They wanted them moving. The training ground erupted in shouts and screams as each

instructor took hold of his team, hustling them into position as the students frantically donned their masks, helmets, and gloves.

They would attack the building in sequence. The first entry team dropped into position at the door, the backup team right on their heels. The search team crouched nearby, poised to make entry alongside the attack teams. The instructors stood over them, screaming to be heard through their masks, their voices muffled, as if yelling through pillows. They used their hands to get the students' attention when their voices failed, landing a hearty *whack!* on the cadets' helmets to emphasize their commands.

Johnny, Ty, and Sam made their first entry on the backup line. They watched as Mark, Bill, and Shane crawled forward. The fire was consuming the far corner of the room, the heat and smoke just starting to bank down. As they moved forward, the fire rolled overhead until they were crouched under a canopy of flames as the heat drove them to the floor like a crushing fist. They awaited the signal from the instructor crouched next to them; they were to attack only on his command. The officers wanted to be sure the cadets experienced the full intensity of the fire before opening their lines. Just when the students thought they would have to lie flat to escape the heat, the instructor gave the signal: a forward chop with his arm through the air. "*HIT IT!*"

The cadets opened their hoses in unison, the first team attacking the left side of the room, the backup hose dousing the right. They hit it in small bursts, "penciling" the flames so the water had a chance to cool the fire without bathing them in steam. The search team was making its way through the room, frantically shoving furniture aside as they tried to locate the victims.

The teams continued their attack and the fire kept coming. They would knock it down and it would spring back to life, dancing above their heads, driving them to the floor. Sam could picture the instructor at the panel: a radio clutched in one hand, his fingers massaging the switch, a wicked grin creasing his face as he cranked up the gas.

The fire was a beauty to behold, being in the room as it licked over their heads, mesmerizing. Sam stole a quick glance at the crews and could just make out the outline of their upturned helmets as they stared in awe at its power and magnificence. The evolution seemed to end quickly. Too quickly. Their adrenaline was surging, and Sam could not help wondering how many of the men were sporting hard-ons.

As the smoke cleared, they backed out of the building, dragging their hoselines and assisting the search crews with the victims, who would be dragged right back in for the next round. They stumbled out onto the tarmac, ripping off their masks, slapping each other on the back in acknowledgment of their concerted efforts. They were ushered over to the shade where a team of medics stripped them down, monitoring their blood pressure and pulse as the cadets filled their lungs. They were given water and ordered to drink. They then made their way back to the tarmac and prepared for another entry.

The morning progressed in a steady succession of evolutions. By lunchtime, they were exhausted, famished. The fires were allowed to die down as the cadets broke for lunch, collapsing on the field, attacking their food.

The afternoon was capped with an academy tradition. The fires were relit for the final time and allowed to build. The entire class was then hustled inside the burn building on hands and knees where they huddled on the floor, tucked against the wall. And there they sat – no hoselines, no search. They were there for one reason: to appreciate the punishing heat of an interior fire.

Ty was to Sam's left, his body tucked neatly against her. There was no sound, aside from the fire eating away at the interior of the building, the flames frustrated by the burn-resistant coating. As the fire intensified, Sam scanned down the line of helmets to her right. Near the doorway, she could make out the figure of Daniels reclined against the wall, one leg out straight, the other bent, an arm thrown over his knee as if he was kicked back on the beach watching the surf. His face was hidden behind his mask, but the angle of his helmet informed Sam he was looking directly at her.

As the flames grew, the heat drove the cadets down. It had a physical dimension to it, as if the ceiling were being lowered on top of them, crushing them beneath its weight. Michaels stayed in communication with the controller, and when the temperature at the ceiling approached six hundred, they were ordered out of the building and were done for the day.

Sam was standing beside the tower, assembling her gear, when Daniels approached.

“How did it go today, Samantha?” He held his gloves in his right hand and was pulling them through his left, enjoying the feel of the coarse material against his palm.

“Very well. An amazing experience.” Sam smiled self-consciously at the impotency of her words.

“Everyone did well. A smooth day.”

Sam noticed how relaxed Daniels' face appeared, even as he scanned the tarmac. He then swung his eyes and looked directly at her, noting the faint line above her mouth from the rope, a reminder of their night at the tower. Sam dropped her eyes, wondering if the others were looking on. She wanted to look at him and, at the same time, disappear into the concrete, to melt away quickly like a drop of rain on a hot day.

“Good work, Samantha.” Daniels turned slowly and walked away. Sam continued to stare at the ground before glancing up to watch him leave. She then returned to her gear, stowing her gloves in her coat, securing her pockets. She looked up to see Ty standing near the wall, staring in her direction, not saying a word.

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It had been a remarkable day and Ty was ecstatic. They had made it through their first burn, the class was more than halfway through, and his injuries were healing quickly. The cut on his lip would leave a scar, a perpetual reminder of that asshole, Peterson, but the pain in his chest was minimal and the bruising around his eye had faded to a sickly yellow.

Ty was busy working on the air bottles, shuttling the empties to the back of the tower where they would be filled, carrying the filled bottles into the first floor. He was coming back around the building when he stopped, noticing Sam standing in front of Daniels. He couldn't hear their conversation, not that they were speaking much. They simply stood there, mostly just looking at each other, few words being exchanged.

Ty froze. Something flashed in his mind, some echo in his brain that played against the back of his skull, jarring him. Suddenly, he was back at his apartment, Aaron standing over him, the pain in his chest severe, his mind unable to focus. He was trying to shake his head clear when Aaron bent down and spoke. The words came flooding back, those same words that had danced through his nightmares following the assault. They rushed in with total clarity as Ty stood there, staring at the outline of Daniels and Sam.

"By the way, asshole, your little girlfriend is fucking Daniels!" Aaron had yelled through gritted teeth. *"I saw them come out of the tower the day Lee tried to break her, that just-fucked look on their faces. I guess he got to her first!"* Aaron had then spit on the floor and stormed out.

Aaron had been saving that little tidbit for just the right occasion. He had watched Daniels and Sam leave the tower the evening she had cut herself with the rope and he knew just when to dole it out to crush Ty. *That will fix their little "friendship."*

Ty stood there, unable to move, even as Sam returned to her gear and swung her gaze in his direction. Suddenly, Ty didn't know her. It was like seeing a stranger; a stranger who resembled someone he once knew. Sam looked over at him, smiled, but could see that something was happening; that Ty was being whisked away by a thought process that seemed as if it would drown him. He stared at her, a burning pain searing the outline of his features.

Sam stood up slowly and Ty couldn't tell if the look in her eyes was one of concern or guilt. Either way, he fled. He dropped the bottles – they clattered to the pavement with hollow thuds and he quickly grabbed his gear and headed across the field.

Sam watched him go, unable to call to him. Something had caught in her throat. She couldn't tell if it was guilt at having been seen standing so close to Daniels or the fact that a deeper part of her feared that whatever had just transpired between her and Ty meant the end of their friendship, dissolution of their bond. She knelt on the tarmac and fumbled blindly with her gear.