

PROLOGUE

Flames shot up in front of him. Heat knocked him backward.

The noise deafening.

Smoke and cinders flew about in the firestorm like evil imps dancing to the tune of the monster raging around him.

Sweat ran down his face.

His mask fogged. Cleared.

His turnout gear plastered to his body. What little of his skin was exposed stung. Blistered.

Bill.

He had to find Bill.

“Bill! Where are you?” he said into the radio amplifier attached to his mask and gear.

Thick smoke and wild flames raged around him.

Which way had he gone? He tried to get his bearings. Where was the exit?

They’d been unable to get across the lower part of the warehouse and instead went up the side stairs to the metal bridge-like structure along the side of the building. There they split up, trying to see the kid they’d been told had been dragged into the burning building.

“Over here, Deke. To your left.” Bill’s voice sounded over the radio.

He swung his gaze that direction. There he was. About ten feet away, near the edge of the scaffolding they were standing on. Safe.

“Any sign of the kid?”

Bill shook his head no.

A rumble sounded above them.

They both looked up. A hole in the ceiling open up. Flames whooshed upward.

Another rumble shook the building. A timber gave way and half the roof on the far side of the warehouse came crashing down, throwing Deke against the outer wall of the building. Bill flew backward onto the shaky scaffolding.

Deke held on to a window ledge as he tried to get his balance. He glanced out. Two figures ran away from the burning building. The larger one had the smaller one by scruff of the neck, hauling him away in the opposite direction of the fire engines out front.

Damn, the night watchman had been right. There had been a kid with the arsonist.

“Kid’s okay, Bill. We need to get out of here.” He signaled down just in case his partner hadn’t heard him.

Bill nodded. “Meet you down below.”

Deke was halfway down the stairs when the loud creaking started above. He looked up.

The remaining roof broke into two parts. It dangled by a few metal beams. Right over Bill.

Another rumble.

The metal gave way. Hit the scaffolding.

One minute Bill was there, the next...only flames and twisted metal.

“Deke!” Bill said, then silence over the radio.

“Bill!” He tried to climb back up.

Another beam came loose. It hit him. Slamming him down the stairs, it knocked his headgear and mask loose. Flames all around him, hot metal landing on the side of his neck, something liquid seeping down into his turnout gear and searing his chest.

Screaming sounded in his ears.

His screaming.

Deacon Reynolds tumbled out of the bed and landed on the floor in a tangle of sweaty sheets. Willing his breathing to slow, he wiped his hands over his face.

“Dammit.” His words were followed by hacking coughs.

Jeez. He must’ve been screaming again. He didn’t do it every time he had the dream, but when he did his voice box complained with a coughing fit. The docs said the damaged vocal cords couldn’t take the trauma of making harsh sounds. He thought he’d had it under control. At least the screaming part. The dreams hadn’t been this bad in months, maybe even a year. What had triggered this one?

He ran his hand through his wet hair. His whole body was covered in sweat.

It had to be the summer’s heat.

Untangling himself from the sheets, he strode naked across to the bathroom and poured himself a glass of cold water. Drinking it slowly, he worked on letting his throat relax as he stared at his naked chest in the mirror. The thick cords of scar tissue extended from his jawline down his neck, across the left side of his shoulder and chest. Docs said he was lucky the movement of his shoulder hadn’t been damaged and that the burns hadn’t gotten too deep near his heart.

He barked out a harsh laugh.

Lucky. Right.

Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn’t have been better if the fire had claimed him right along with Bill.