

Terry and Jane : Flashover

By Kate Simon

Terry Russell shut down his computer and rolled his eyes. Ever since he made captain he'd been drowning in paperwork and administrative crap. He joined the fire department thirty years ago to fight fires and help people. Now he only went out on major calls and then only to run point for his squad. He glanced at his calendar and knew he was only six weeks from retirement. He never thought he'd look forward to retirement, but then again, he never thought he'd wind up a desk jockey.

He walked out to the common room and grabbed a coffee. The on call squad were having breakfast. They were a good group. Terry remembered when each of them came to his station. He'd been just like them. He and his buddies had signed up together. Duane, Chris, Brian and Terry had all graduated from the academy in the same class. Now they had all moved on to other assignments or retired. Duane had gone farther than all of them, becoming the chief of the department.

"Hey, captain. You want a Danish before these vultures finish them off?"

"No, thanks Taylor." He smiled and patted his waist. "Gotta watch it." He thought he saw a strange look in her eyes before she shrugged.

"Okay," she said before sliding the Danish toward Rimmer. "Here you go, Jaws."

Rimmer had a reputation for being a bottomless pit. He ate constantly and never gained an ounce. Jane Taylor was a firefighter/EMT. She was an excellent firefighter but her primary duties were as an EMT, and she was brilliant. Terry couldn't count the number of lives she'd saved, including some of this lot after a brutal fire. He never could figure her out. She kept her personal life personal. He didn't know whether she had a boyfriend or a girlfriend, not that it would matter. She was tough as any of her colleagues, but she had girl next door quality. She never wore any makeup or jewelry. The only thing about her he would call girly was her long, sandy blonde hair. She kept it in a tight bun, regulation length from her collar. Jane Taylor was a squared away member of the squad.

"I assume you'd all be ready for an inspection," he said as he topped off his mug.

"Yes, captain," they replied in unison. Terry smiled and headed back to his office.

Jane tried not to be obvious as she watched the captain walk back to his office. She admired Terry Russell as her captain. He was a good man who'd treated her with the same respect he treated all his people. He'd encouraged her work and corrected her when she screwed up. He treated her no differently than any other firefighter. That was very different than what she'd experienced at the academy and her other assignments. That was enough to earn her respect. But that wasn't why she'd caught a glimpse of him as he left the room. Terry Russell, the man, made her heart race. His bright blue eyes and lopsided smile made her feel like a school girl with a crush. His broad shoulders and ripped physique made her feel like anything but a girl. There was just something about him, an energy that fascinated her almost to the point of distraction. She thought of requesting a transfer to night shift, where she'd be less likely to encounter him but didn't know how she could explain it. So she did her best to focus on her job. And not his damn smile.

The alarm called them from their breakfasts. Jaws opened the direct line to dispatch. "Station Fourteen."

"Possible heart attack, Fourth and Colburn."

"Roger that."

Jaws looked at Jane and she shook her head. "Well, shit." She turned to her partner, Charlie Reynolds. "Let's move."

"Not without backup." Jane saw Terry in the doorway. "Jaws and first squad take the truck. Nobody goes in there alone. I'll make sure you have a police presence."

"Yes, captain," said Jane. That area of the city was notorious for gang members to take pot shots at police and firefighters. In the last few months many had been fired on, one police officer had been killed. Even if this call for a heart attack was real, it didn't mean they weren't still targets.

Jane jumped out of her ambulance and cursed to herself. An older man was laying on the sidewalk. They would have to treat him out in the open. She grabbed her kit and ran to the man's side. She looked for bullet wounds and found none, so this could very well be a heart attack. She checked the man's pockets and found his id, but nothing else. The hospital gave them care instructions. Charlie established the IV as she was measuring the medication. She injected it into the IV and stood. "Let's move."

She heard it before she felt it. It burned like hell. She looked at her arm and realized she'd been shot. Everyone looked to Jane as she yelled, "You heard me, move!" She helped Charlie get the man on the gurney and jumped in her seat. Charlie gunned the engine and peeled out, as best as an ambulance could. The squad followed behind her as she listened to them reporting to the station that they were headed to the hospital with the patient. Then she heard Jaws break protocol.

"Captain, Taylor's been shot."

"What?!"

She grabbed her mic. "Captain, I'm okay. The police were there. They're handling it."

"Reynolds, make sure Jane is treated. I'll meet you there."

Charlie took the mic. "Roger that, Captain."

Jane pulled a piece of gauze from a box and pressed it to her wound. The pain didn't shake her attention from the fact that for the first time ever, he'd called her by her first name.

Terry used lights and sirens to get to the hospital as quick as he could. He'd had crew get injured, but never shot. Never Jane. He had to focus. This was a member of his squad. He parked his car and ran into the ER. He saw his squad standing in the hall. "Give me an update."

Charlie walked forward. "It was a heart attack. The guy's going to make it."

"Not him, Jane."

He gave him an odd look. "We're not sure yet, but she seems fine. She no sooner got shot then she was yelling at me to pick up the patient."

Jaws laughed. "Plain Jane never misses a step."

"Excuse me? What did you call your squad member?"

Jaws hesitated. He knew he was in trouble. "It's just a nickname. She calls me Jaws."

"Yeah, well you've earned it. I never want to hear that name again." He looked at the rest of the squad. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," they said, properly chastened.

Terry was grateful when a doctor he knew came out to see them. John Whittaker had treated lots of injuries for the station over the years. "John, how is she?"

"She fine. It's just a graze. Hurts like hell, but she'll be fine. Of course I tell you that, but I know you'll want to see to believe."

He smiled and put a hand on John's back. "Thanks." He led him back to an exam room where Jane was laying on a gurney in a hospital gown. She smiled when she saw him, then seemed to catch herself.

"Hello, Captain."

"Jane, the doctor tells me you'll be fine."

"It's no big deal."

He walked closer. "It's a very big deal." He realized he was close to crossing a line and he pulled himself back. He pasted on a fake smile. "I understand you didn't miss a step. You got the patient secured and got out of there. Reynolds said you yelled at them."

Jane chuckled. "I just gave them a verbal slap upside the head. I think they were surprised."

He didn't resist the urge to take her hand. "Sometimes that's what they need. You'll make a great captain one day." He smiled at the look of shock on her face.

"Thank you, Captain."

John walked back into the exam room just in time. Terry stepped back from her bed. "X-rays are back. Nothing's broken. All I need to do is stitch you up."

"Do you have someone I can call?" he asked. "I'll have them pick you up."

"No, Captain. I'm fine. I'll catch a cab."

"Like hell. I'll send the squad back to the station and I'll drive you home."

"Captain?"

"No argument."

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Jane tried not to focus on the pain of getting stitched up. Her adrenalin was starting to wear off and she was dizzy. She was glad she had a ride home, even if it was from Terry. She hoped she'd picked up her laundry. Was there food? She couldn't remember. She'd call for take out. The doctor finally put her in a sling with instructions not to move too much. He didn't want her to pull out the stitches. Terry walked back in the exam room just as she finished buttoning her now ruined uniform shirt. The doctor joined them and handed her discharge papers to the captain.

"Hey, isn't that my paperwork?"

"Yes, but you're recovering from a gunshot. If my guess is correct," he looked at her and smiled. "and it always is, the pain is finally hitting you. You need to get some painkillers and lay down as soon as possible." He turned to Terry. "I included a prescription she needs filled. I want to see her again in a week. Until then she's off duty."

"A week? For a couple of stitches?" she asked.

The doctor lost his smile. "Here's the deal, Taylor. You've been shot."

She indicated her sling. "I'm aware."

"Whether you think so or not you're body has experienced a serious trauma, physical and emotional. There may be repercussions."

"I don't do emotional."

He looked back at Terry. "Is she always like this?"

"Oh yeah. Toughest one in the unit."

"I believe it. She barely flinched when I was sewing her up. Okay, you have her papers and fill the script."

"I..." she started.

"Stop arguing. Now let's get you out of here." He extended his hand to the doctor. "Thanks, John."

"Thank you, doctor. I'm sorry. I usually not this surly."

“Ah, it’s okay. When you get shot, you get a pass.”

Jane laid her head back against the seat while the Terry filled her prescription. She closed her eyes and tried not to think of the pain. It was nice to have someone looking after her. She spent way too much time alone, and she knew it. After her break up with Michael she promised herself she wouldn't get stuck in that trap again. She thought dating a cop would be good. He'd understand why she choose the career she did. She didn't consider her career just a placeholder until she got married and had kids. She wasn't opposed to marriage and maybe a kid, but she'd wanted to be a firefighter since she was a kid. She wasn't about to give that up because Michael wanted a wife and kids at home.

The back door opened and Terry put in two large shopping bags. "I'm guessing that's not all my pain med."

"I didn't know what you had on hand so I got some ginger ale and some soups. Those pain meds can be tough on stomach."

"Thank you, Captain."

"You're welcome, Jane." He smiled at her and her heart did double time.

Terry carried the groceries into Jane's condo and set them on the kitchen counter. He caught Jane wincing. "You go get comfortable and I'll bring you your med." She sat down on the couch and leaned back. "What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable?"

"You're wearing a torn, blood soaked uniform. Go get changed and get into bed." She looked shocked. "Go. Now. I'll give you a few minutes and then I'll knock." She walked upstairs and he heard a door close. He set the soup cans on the low shelves. He figured she wouldn't want to reach. He put the extra bottle of soda in the refrigerator and saw she was like him, eggs, bacon and a bunch of take out containers. She poured the soda and grabbed the medication and a some saltines. He looked at the walls of the stairway as he walked up to the second floor. There were old family pictures, some of Jane when she was a child, but nothing else. There were no current pics of friends, male or female. He knocked on the one closed door. "Are you ready?"

“I’m decent.”

He opened the bedroom door and saw Jane was tucked into bed. He set the soda down on her nightstand. He opened the prescription bottle and handed her a pill. “Take this.” She looked like she was going to argue then took the pill with a sip of soda. “Is there anyone I should notify?” She shook her head.

“No. My parents are gone and I was an only child.”

“Is there a boyfriend or a...,” he stammered.

“Captain Russell, are you trying to ask me if I’m gay?” she laughed.

“I only ask to know if there is someone who needs to know. Other than that, your personal life is none of my business.”

She giggled and started rubbing her nose, a sure sign the med was kicking in. “No, Captain. I am not gay. I was with Michael Costas for two years but we broke up six months ago.”

“Costas? The sergeant at the twelfth?”

“That’s him. You sound surprised.” She slid lower under the sheets.

“No, it’s just that, well, he’s a tool. You could do better.”

Jane laughed. “You do know him!”

“Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, I’m good.” She looked at him and smiled “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“You’re very welcome.” He closed the bedroom door and wondered what the hell had gotten into him. He could tell himself he was taking care of a squad member, but he’d be lying.

Terry looked at the calendar. He was down to five weeks before retirement. He still had no idea what he was going to do when he wasn't a firefighter. He didn't want to be one of those guys who hung around the station. There was only so much work he could do around the house. It wasn't that big a place. Just two bedrooms and a nice yard he rarely saw. He'd moved to the smaller place after Evelyn divorced him. She wanted out but she got the house. Fifteen years later and he was still pissed. At least they hadn't had any kids to put through that crap. Maybe he'd get a dog. Jesus, he was pathetic.

"Excuse me, Captain." He looked up and saw Jane standing in the door.

"You're back." He indicated the chair in front of him. "Have a seat. I assume you got the all clear from your doctor."

She smiled and handed him a signed form. "I've been officially released."

"How's the arm?"

"Fine."

"The truth"

"It's a little stiff but the doctor said that's to be expected. He said it will get better. I'm cleared for full duty."

"Okay, but you need to tell me if it gets too much."

"I'll be fine."

"Jane, please."

"I promise. I'll say something."

He sat back and smiled. "Well then, get back to work, Taylor."

She stood up and smiled. "Yes sir, Captain."

Jane got in the back of the ambulance and made sure everything was where she liked it to be. Charlie was a great EMT but everyone had their own way of doing things. She was packing up her kit when Charlie stuck his head in.

“Hey, you’re back. How ‘ya doing?”

“I’m good. Cleared for duty.”

“Hey, um, I wanted to say the guys and I, we’re sorry you got hurt.”

Jane chuckled. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t shoot me.”

“No, but the guys, I feel bad.”

She jumped out of the back and closed the door. “Don’t worry about it.” She headed toward the break room. “Any Danish left?”

He touched her good arm. “Listen, the guys and I, we’re sorry about the nickname.”

It stopped Jane in her tracks. She knew they called her ‘Plain Jane’ behind her back. She let it go because they were a good team. She’d faced a lot worse than that in her ten years with the department. “What do you mean?”

“The Captain heard us and well, he wasn’t happy. He told us to knock it off.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, he seemed really concerned.” He gnawed on his lower lip. “Look, Taylor, you can tell me to piss off but are you and the Captain...are you?”

“What?! No, of course not.”

“It’s just he was really worried about you. Like more, than he normally would.”

“You listen to me, Charlie. There is nothing going on between me and the Captain.”

Charlie pulled her aside. “Look, Jane, I know you, we’re partners.” He looked around to see if anyone else is near. “I know you have a thing for the Captain.”

“Charlie,” she whispered. “Don’t say such a thing. You’ll ruin me.”

“I would never say anything. No one else noticed but I see the way you look at him. I think he may have a thing for you.”

Jane shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. He was just concerned for one of his squad.”

Charlie looked at her and nodded. “Okay,” he said quietly. “Let’s get some Danish before Jaws eats it all.”

Jane’s first day back went well. Two calls, both non-life threatening. One traffic accident with a broken arm and one dog bite. After meeting both the kid and the dog, the kid had it coming. She packed up her gear and was heading to her locker when she saw Terry was still in his office. She looked around before knocking. “Excuse me, Captain. Are you busy?”

“No, come in. How was the first day back?”

“It was fine, sir. Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Charlie apologized for the nickname the guys gave me. They said you heard it and told them to knock it off.”

“I’m sorry you heard about that.”

“I knew about the name.”

“You did? Why did you let them get away with it?”

“Because it’s not so bad. I’ve been called worse.”

He suddenly looked very angry. “By one of these men?”

“No, of course not. These are good guys. I’ve been with the department for ten years. There are a lot of men who resented me. So these guys came up with a nickname. It not so bad.” Jane was startled at the look on Terry’s face, like he was trying to compose himself.

“Look, Jane. It’s not like I’m the most modern guy, but there are some things that even I won’t tolerate. You are a superior firefighter and EMT. You save lives. The fact that you’re female doesn’t give anyone the right to ridicule you. You deserve respect.”

She was overwhelmed at his sincerity. “Thank you, Captain.” She stood and tried to compose herself. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

It had been a quiet couple of weeks and Terry was still had no idea what he was going to do when he didn't come to work anymore. He thought maybe he'd go fishing and see if that sorted things out. His cabin was one of the few things Evelyn didn't want from the divorce. She never liked being on the mountain. She said it was too quiet. For him, it was perfect.

"Hey short timer."

Terry looked up and saw Duane in the door. He stood and extended his hand. "Hello, Chief. To what do I owe this honor?"

Duane laughed as he shook his hand. "Shut it, jackass. You've known me since before either of us could shave." He sat down in the chair opposite his desk. "So what's the plan?"

"You mean other than finishing the endless reports my boss wants?"

"You've got two weeks left. What are you going to do?"

Terry sat back and sighed. There was no point in hiding from Duane. They'd known each other since high school. He was godfather to Duane's son. "Honestly, I don't know. I thought I'd spend some time at the cabin."

"That sounds good. For about two weeks. What will you do after that?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

"If you want to stay on, I can arrange it."

"Thanks, but I know I'm done. I'm too old to ride the truck and too young to sit behind a desk."

"There's the academy. We can always use great instructors."

"Teach?"

"Yeah. Teach the young bucks how it's done. You've trained some great people over the years."

"They're a good group."

“How’s Taylor doing? She wasn’t in the hospital long enough to visit.”

“She’s great. One of the best we’ve ever had.”

“I heard when she got shot she hardly flinched. Secured the patient and got the hell out.”

Terry smiled with pride. “Yes she did. She’s very focused.”

“Do you think she’d make captain someday?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

Terry stood in his doorway and gave a piercing whistle. “Taylor! My office.”

A minute later Jane appeared. “Yes, Captain?”

“You have a visitor.”

“Chief Harrison?”

Duane stood up and extended his hand. “Taylor, it’s good to finally meet you.”

“It’s good to meet you, sir.”

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about you.”

“That’s good to know, sir.”

“How do you like being at the fourteenth?”

“It’s a good group. I have some excellent colleagues.”

“How’s the arm?”

“Fine, sir.”

“I’ve been following your career, Taylor.”

“Sir?”

“You’ve got quite of collection of superior reports, not just from Russell. You can go far, Taylor.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jane smiled.

He turned to Terry. “I’ve got to go. More damn meetings. Let me know about the academy. The new semester doesn’t start for three months so you’d have the summer off.”

“I’ll let you know.”

Jane looked at Terry and smiled. “Wow. I never saw that coming.”

“You deserve it.”

“Thank you, Captain. What was that about the academy?”

“The chief offered me a training position after I retire.”

“Well, that’s not for a while yet.”

“Two weeks.”

“What? Captain, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because the guys would want to make a fuss and I’m not a fuss kind of guy.” He was surprised when Jane looked angry.

“Of course they would but it’s not all about you. They’d want to honor the man they trusted their lives to for all these years. It’s about honoring the tradition.” She pointed at him. “Get ready for the best retirement party in the history of retirement parties.” She turned on her heels and Terry was sure she was going straight to the men. Any other person would be thinking about the chief of the department telling her she had a bright future. Jane Taylor wanted to give him a retirement party. If anyone else had talked to him like that he’d be pissed. All he could do was smile.

It was a beautiful spring day, not too hot, slight breeze. It almost made Terry want to stop and watch the birds. Instead he was fighting traffic to get to work. Normally he'd swear at the guy in front of him who kept riding his brakes. Ten days from now he'd be sitting on the deck of his cabin drinking coffee and wondering what to do with the rest of his life.

He entered the station to find everyone getting their gear ready. "What's up?"

"Fire at a warehouse complex. It's Station ten's area but they've already gone to two alarms. If they hit four, we're up," said Mike Kramer. He was from the night shift and he and the rest of the squad should be on their way home, but they were staying until they knew the fire was under control. He nearly made it to his office when the alarm went off again with the alert that the warehouse fire was being called three alarms. He put down his coffee and suited up. In less than five minutes the fourth alarm was called and Terry was riding shotgun in the lead truck.

Four alarms meant every truck that could be mustered was brought to the scene. Terry moved toward the command center that had been set up. The captains from the tenth and twelfth were already there. "What have we got?"

"Gas line explosion. Multiple injuries inside the warehouse. Teams are being scrambled ."

"Do we have a count on how many civilians are inside?"

"At least ten."

He glanced over at his men who were already going into the burning structure. Jane and Terry were suited up, but standing by their ambulance along with the EMTs from the night crew. An explosion ripped through the roof of the building. Terry's heart pounded as he saw each team come out with a civilian.

"Report!" Terry shouted into his com. Each team reported except one. "Jaws, Mike? Are you clear?!" All the civilians had been rescued but Jaws and Mike were still unaccounted for. He grabbed an air tank from one of the exhausted men on the ground.

"Captain! What the hell are you doing?" It was Jane.

“These men can’t go back in.”

“I’ll go.”

“Like hell. Stay put. That’s an order.”

Terry ran into the building and searched the section Jaws and Mike were last seen. He listened, trying to hear his men over the sound of fire. He heard a pounding on the wall next to him. He pushed through the stuck door and found his men trapped under debris. He pushed debris off Jaws and the two of them got Mike free from the large duct that had trapped him. Jaws pulled Mike up and helped him toward the door.

“Go! Go!” Terry shouted. He saw just enough to know Jaws and Mike had cleared the door when the next explosion hit. He was knocked to the ground and before the lights went out he thought, “So much for retirement.”

Jane was helping Jaws and Mike to triage when they were all knocked down by fireball shooting from the door. She forced herself back up and looked at the men. Charlie was by their sides.

“Where’s the captain?!” she yelled.

Jaws stood and pulled off his mask. “He was right behind us.”

“Charlie, do you have this?” she asked.

He was checking Mike’s pupils. “Yeah, I got this.”

Jane ripped the tank and mask off Jaws and put it on.

“What the hell?” he asked.

“I’m going after him.” She didn’t wait for an argument. Terry didn’t have that kind of time. She held herself low and pushed through the smoke. Her eyes spotted the red of Terry’s helmet. He was face down on the floor under a section of ceiling and metal duct. He wasn’t moving. She forced her attention on Terry and not her racing heart. She grabbed his hand. “Captain! Captain! Can you hear me?” She wanted to cry when she

heard his moan, but it wouldn't do either of them any good if she didn't focus. This building was going to be engulfed very soon.

Jane spotted a pipe that had been blown free of the wall and grabbed it. She could feel the heat through her gloves. She stuck it under one end of the duct and forced it up. She grabbed his free arm and pulled as hard as she could.

"Shit!" he screamed.

"Good, scream. Stay with me."

"Jane?"

"Can you push yourself? Try with your other arm." He pushed the rest of himself free of the debris. "Roll over."

"Get out now, Jane. That's an order!"

"Shut up, Terry! I'm not leaving here without you, now roll the fuck over!" He pushed himself over on his back and she caught him under the arms. She dragged him to his feet and pulled his arm over her shoulder. She dragged him to the door just as the flames covered where Terry had been. He was pulled away from her as she fell to the ground. She looked up at the sky and whispered "Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Charlie as he pulled off her gear.

"I wasn't talking to you." She was thanking God for getting them both out.

"Holy shit!" said Charlie as he pulled off her gloves. She hadn't noticed the gloves been burned by the pipe. So had her hands. They were burned and bleeding.

"Where's the Captain? How is he?"

"They're working on him. Now shut up and let me fix my crazy ass partner."

"I couldn't let him die."

Charlie smiled. "I know."

Terry opened his eyes and saw cheap acoustic tile. The fog in his head started to clear and heard machines beeping and voices. God, he hurt. His arm, his chest, he hurt like hell. He tried to sit up to see what was happening.

“Shit!” he yelled. They definitely hadn’t given him any pain killers.

“Hello Sleeping Beauty.”

“Duane?” His friend stood next to his bed. “How long have I been out?”

“About an hour. You’re pretty banged up so you’ll be riding the rest of your time from your cabin, not your desk.”

“I’m just sore,” he said as he tried to sit up and immediately regretted it.

“Just sore? You have three cracked ribs, a punctured lung and a compound fracture of your right arm.”

“Jane! She pulled me out. Is she okay?”

“She’s going to be fine. Burned her hands. I’m told she used what must have been a red hot pipe to lift several hundred pounds off you so she could drag you out. She’s something else.”

“She’s insubordinate. I gave her a direct order to stay put.”

“Yeah, how about that?” he smiled. “Instead she saved you from burning to death. And speaking of insubordinate, what the hell were you doing in there instead of the command center?”

“My men were trapped.”

“Yes they were, and you saved their lives. That is before you needed saving yourself.”

“Shut it, jackass...” he smiled. “Jackass, sir.”

“Look, I have to go. I have to call Denise because she’s crazy worried about you, then I have a press conference about the fire.”

“Any fatalities?”

“No, only some minor injuries.”

Terry groaned. “Minor?”

“You got the worst of it. Now, do what you’re told. Get some rest and I’ll check in with you later.”

“Yes, sir.” Terry was shocked when he saw Duane’s eyes water.

“Don’t do this again,” he said quietly. “I need you to stay around.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Terry was trying to get into a position that didn’t make him want to scream when a couple of the men stuck their heads past the curtain. “Hey guys, come on in.”

“Hey, Captain. How are you feeling?” asked Jaws.

“I’m good.” He looked behind him and saw Mike. “How are you two?”

“Banged up. Nothing more than a day off playing video games and back to work,” said Mike. He approached the side of Terry’s bed. “Thank you, sir. Thank you for saving us both. My wife is due in two weeks. Our first kid. I wouldn’t wanted to have missed that.”

“No,” Terry smiled. “You wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“Thanks, Captain,” said Jaws. “We wouldn’t have gotten out of there without you.”

“How’s Taylor?” he asked, desperate to change the subject.

“I’m fine, sir.” He looked toward the curtain and saw Jane standing there. Some of her hair had escaped from it’s tight bun. Her uniform was a mess and her hands were bandaged.

“Can you give us a minute?” He waited until they were alone before he spoke.
“How are your hands?”

“They’ll be fine in a few days.”

“I’m grateful for what you did but I gave you a direct order and you disobeyed it.”
He had seen angry women in his day. His ex-wife had raised it to an art form. But he’d never seen a woman this angry.

“Disobeyed your order? That’s your take away? Did you honestly think I would leave you there to burn?”

“I appreciate your loyalty but that doesn’t...”

She got next to his bed, close enough so no one should hear. “Loyalty? Is that why you think I went after you?” Her eyes teared and he didn’t think it was from smoke. “You really don’t know, do you?” She shook her head and whispered, “Plain Jane does it again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They told us you’ll been in here at least a couple of days. I know you’re friends with the chief but is there anyone else I should call? A girlfriend,” she paused and smiled
“Or a...not that your personal life is any of my business.”

Terry smiled despite his annoyance. “No. There’s no one. Now come here and tell me what you were talking about.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“How are you going to drive?”

She held up her bandaged hands. “These will be fine in a day or two. They’re going to move you to a room soon...”

“Jane, answer the question. Why did you disobey orders? Why did you come after me and what the hell has Plain Jane got to do with it?”

“You really don’t know.”

“No.”

“Terry, I would never leave you behind.” She leaned over his bed and put a bandaged hand to his cheek. “I would never leave you.” Then she gave him a soft kiss. The ceiling that fell on him had less impact.

Terry pulled on the sweatpants Duane and Denise had brought him last night. They said they'd given their key to his cabin to Jane so she could get it ready for him.

"You did what? She was just going to give me a lift to my house. That's all."

Duane smiled. "Yeah well, that's not what's happening."

"Duane, you know that's inappropriate. I'm her superior officer. Her boss."

"Not anymore. Or at least not in a few days. Terry, even if you do take the teaching position at the academy, you won't have any effect on her career. There is nothing inappropriate about her helping you out."

"That's not what people will think."

"To hell with people," said Denise. "I know what you're really worried about. I saw the way she looks when she talks about you. There's more there than respect for her captain."

"Excuse me?" asked Duane.

"Duane you know me. You know I would never take advantage."

"I know that but is Denise right?"

"Excuse me?" Denise asked as if it was the dumbest thing he'd ever said.

Terry sighed. "Yeah. I asked her why she disobeyed orders to come after me. She didn't want to answer but I forced her."

Denise took his hand. "What she say?"

"She said she would never leave me. Then she kissed me."

Denise smiled and looked at Duane. "You were saying?"

"I get it, you were right. Terry how do you feel about her?"

"She's a kid."

"She's thirty and that's not what I asked."

“I’ve been a firefighter longer than she’s been on the planet!”

“Still not what I asked.”

“She’s an amazing woman but Duane, I’ve been there and done that. I don’t do relationships.”

“Damn Evelyn. She really fucked you up.”

“Duane Harrison! Language!” said Denise.

Duane looked at his wife and smiled. “Sorry, dear. Look, Terry, as your boss I’m telling you that to start a relationship with her is no breach of protocol. As your friend I’m saying it’s about damn time. Evelyn was fifteen years ago. It’s time you let someone else in.” He looked at his wife. “Someone who can kick your ass when you need it.”

“Damn straight,” Denise smiled.

Terry had barely slept last night even with his pain med. He was trying to figure out how to get on the sweatshirt without killing himself when Jane walked in his room.

“Let me,” she said as she took it from his hand.

“I’ve got it.”

“No, you don’t. Now sit on the bed. I’m not as tall as you.” He didn’t know why but he followed her order, sitting on the bed. She untied the hospital gown and slid it down his good arm. He heard a slight gasp when she saw his bruises.

“If a wall fell on you, you’d be pretty banged up too.”

“Huh? Yeah,” she muttered. She carefully slid the gown down over his cast. She picked up the sweatshirt and slid one arm over his cast before getting it over his other arm and head. “It’s a good thing this is too big. It would have never worked otherwise.”

“The Harrisons brought it to me yesterday. My uniform is in shreds.”

“The chief mentioned he was going to see you.” Jane walked around the room, picking up what few things he had and putting them in a large plastic hospital bag.

“You contacted the chief.”

“Yes. I’m the one with a few days off because of my hands. It made sense for me to be the one to pick you up. He said you’d do better at your cabin so I went to his house and got the key. His wife is very nice.”

“So he told me. How are your hands?”

“Fine.”

“Don’t lie to me, Jane.”

She sighed and stopped moving. “They’re sore, but they’ll heal. Let’s get you out of here.”

“Show me.”

“Captain, I...”

“I’m not your captain anymore. Show me.” Jane stood in front of him and turned her hands face up. He could see a large bandage on one palm and the skin on her other hand was red and bubbled from the burns. It had to hurt like hell. “My God, Jane.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you will,” he said with a small smile.

Jane tried to focus on the road and not on the pain in her hands or the hot man asleep in the passenger seat. They'd been driving for an hour and according to the GPS they were nearly there. Her trip up yesterday was the first time she'd been to this area of the Poconos. She was relieved when Terry fell asleep. The last thing she wanted to do was talk. She couldn't believe what she'd done. Kissing her captain. She could destroy her career. But all she was thinking about then was how she'd been so close to losing him. She would have died before she let that happen.

"What? Where are we?"

"We're nearly there."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Over an hour. You dropped off when we hit route eighty."

"Wow. I guess I needed it. I didn't sleep much in the hospital."

"No one does. They're noisy places. Not like your cabin. It's really peaceful."

"You've been there? I thought Duane just gave you the key."

"I went up yesterday with groceries and to make sure you had what you needed." She looked at him and smiled. "I reconnected your cable."

"Thanks, Jane. I appreciate what you're doing."

"You're welcome, Captain."

He shook his head. "I'm not your captain anymore. At least not after Friday. I am on leave for the duration."

"Are you taking the academy post?"

"I haven't decided. Are we going to talk about what happened?"

Jane pulled up his gravel driveway and parked. "No. Now let's get you inside. I'll get lunch started. She pulled his bag out of the back seat and headed for the front door. She needed to get him settled and get the hell out of there. She hung up what was left of his uniform in his bedroom closet. She'd stopped for his med while he was asleep and

set it on the night stand. She tried to dash back to the kitchen but Terry was in the doorway. "I got your script filled. You probably need one. I'll get you some water." She tried to get by him but he stopped her.

"Talk to me, Jane."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I crossed the line. I had no right. I apologize."

He put his hand under her chin and forced her to look at him. "For kissing me, or for wanting to kiss me."

"Both," she whispered. "Let me go. I'll get your water."

She ran to the kitchen and searched for the glasses. She was desperate to hold in her tears. She'd humiliated herself enough already, she would not cry. She felt Terry's hand on her shoulder. "Where the hell are your glasses?"

"Jane, stop. Talk to me."

"Can't you let it go?"

"No. Why, Jane?"

She whipped around and faced him. "Why?! Why did I kiss you?! Why did I go in after you? Maybe I couldn't hide my trying catching a glimpse of you. Maybe I couldn't hide my blush every time you smiled. Maybe because I'd kept this to myself for two years and I couldn't do it anymore. Maybe I didn't want to imagine a world without you."

"Janie, I'm just an old guy, a hell of a lot older than you."

"Just an old guy? What are you, nuts?"

Terry chuckled, "Excuse me?"

"You're one of the good guys, Terry. You do what's right, not because someone's watching. You do it because it's who you are. You're a brave, honorable man."

“Thank you, Janie,” he whispered.

She managed a small smile. “The fact you look like you do, well, call it a delightful bonus.”

“Excuse me? How do I look?”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Please spare me. You saw me when I took off your hospital gown. I couldn’t breathe.”

“I am pretty banged up.”

“That’s what you thought? Terry, I’ve been an EMT for ten years. I’ve seen things that would keep you awake for weeks. Do you think a few bruises could take my breath away?” She pulled away from him and opened another cabinet. “Finally.” She pulled out a glass and filled it. “Here. Now go take your damn medicine.” He pulled the glass from her hand, set it down and smiled. Damn that lopsided smile. He wasn’t going to let her get away.

“I took your breath away?”

“Why are you doing this? Haven’t I humiliated myself enough for you?” She could feel the tears running down her cheeks. Damn it. He brushed the tears from her face.

“Janie, that’s the last thing I want. I’m trying to understand. I’m a stodgy old man and you’re a beautiful young woman. The idea that you would be interested in me, well that never occurred to me.”

“You think I’m beautiful?”

“Of course.” It was Terry’s turn to blush. “That’s why I was so angry when I heard that ridiculous nickname.”

“Wow,” she whispered. “Now what?”

“I don’t know. Janie, I’ve been doing this work since before you were born.”

“I’m no child.”

“No, you’re a beautiful young woman and you deserve someone better, younger.”

She looked at his beautiful blue eyes and sighed. “There are younger men, but better men? Nope. They don’t exist.” She pulled away from him. “Now go take your damn pill.” She pick up the glass with too much force and dropped it on the counter. “Ow, damn it.” She reached for a paper towel to wipe up the water but he took her by the wrist. He pulled her to him and looked at her palms. She’d torn open one of the blisters.

“Janie, let me.” He grabbed a towel and ran it under cool water. He placed it on the fiery red wound. “These burns are my fault.”

She tried to smile. “You didn’t set the building on fire.”

“You’re hurt because of me.”

“You’re worth it. Now go sit down while I make us some lunch.”

Janie flipped channels until she found something vaguely interesting. She'd seen this Godzilla movie a few times. It had very little plot to get in the way of the action. She leaned her head back against the couch.

Terry had finally laid down after lunch. Between the pill and his injuries he was exhausted. So was she, for that matter. They'd been doing a verbal back and forth all day and she was beat. Between that and the ache in her hands, she just wanted to close her eyes. The elastic holding in her ponytail was pressing between her head and the couch, so she pulled it out. She'd promised Terry she'd be here when he woke up. She'd make him some dinner and get on her way. Jane needed to keep her distance if she wasn't going to make a further fool of herself. She closed her eyes and drifted to that moment in the ER when emotion overwhelmed her common sense.

"No! No! Janie!"

Jane bolted upright.

"No!"

She ran to Terry's room and found him thrashing back and forth. She reached for his arm and held him down. "Terry, wake up. You're okay." She felt him push against her. He was dreaming he was still under the wall. "Terry, you're out. You're home. You're safe now." His eyes fluttered open.

"Janie?"

"You were having a bad dream. You're safe now."

He rubbed his hand through his hair. "Damn."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I was trapped in the warehouse. You were there but the wall was going to cave in on you. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't save you."

She threaded her fingers through his. "I don't need saving, Terry. I'm fine."

He looked at her with a slight smile. "I can see that."

“I do have one question. You keep calling me Janie. Did you know a Janie?”

“No. It just seems to suit you.” He ran strands of her hair through his fingers. “You let your hair down.”

“I do once in a while,” she smiled.

“Janie.” He leaned in. She edged closer, wondering for a moment whether this was a good idea. Once he kissed her, she no longer cared.

He was kissing her. He started it. He wanted it, wanted her. He couldn't blame the drugs. He'd always wanted her, from the first time she walked into his station. He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. He slid his good hand down her side and felt the softness. He tried to get closer and moved too fast.

“Ow, ow, damn,” he cursed.

Janie snickered and held up her burned and bandaged hands. “I don't think either one of us is in a condition for this.”

“Sadly, I agree.”

“It's past five. Why don't you freshen up and I'll make you some dinner. I brought what I need to make my killer ziti.” She got up and headed toward the door.

“You're cooking?”

She turned and smiled. “I have all sorts of skills.”

Terry grinned. “I bet you do.”

Terry smiled as Jane moved around his kitchen like she'd always been there. She set out a loaf of Italian bread and carved a few slices. Then she set down a large plate of pasta. “This looks great.”

“Thanks. Ice tea?”

“I’d rather have a beer.”

“I’m sure you would but with the meds your on that’s a bad idea.”

“Ice tea would be great, thanks.” She served him his drink and sat down across from him. He took a bite of the pasta and rolled his eyes. “This is delicious.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

“Do you cook a lot?”

“No. You know how it is. When you’re not working you don’t feel like cooking for one.”

“I understand that.”

“Tell me about her,” she said.

“Who?”

“You’re ex-wife. What happened?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“You haven’t remarried.”

“No. I wasn’t anxious to go through that again. It was good when we started out but Evelyn couldn’t get used to the job. It takes up your time when you’re at work and occupies your mind when you’re not. I tried but nothing was ever good enough. I bought this place to relax and fish, hoping she’d enjoy it too.”

“I take it she didn’t.”

“Hated it. Said it was too quiet and too remote. It was the only thing she didn’t want in the divorce.”

Jane looked around at the cabin and smiled. “How could anyone not like this? It’s beautiful.”

“I think so. So tell me about you and Costas.”

“Not much to tell. We met at a scene. I thought he understood about my work, how important it was to me.”

“Didn’t he?”

“No. He wanted to get married and have kids.”

“You didn’t?”

“It’s not that I have anything against marriage and kids, but he expected me to walk away from my career when we did get married.”

“I was going to say, ‘in this day and age?’ but knowing Costas I’m not surprised.”

“It was fun but it wasn’t, I don’t know, real. It wasn’t what I wanted. When he started talking about when I would quit my job I ended it.”

“What do you want?”

“I want a partner. Someone who has my back.” She looked at him as smiled.
“Smoking hot wouldn’t hurt either. What do you want?”

“Honestly, I haven’t given it any thought in fifteen years.”

“Surely you’ve dated.”

“Occasionally, but nothing serious.”

“Oh,” she said as she took a sip of her tea.

“Janie, I don’t know what will happen with us. I didn’t think this was anything I wanted again. But now...”

“Now?”

“I wouldn’t want anything between us if it wasn’t serious.”

They finished their dinner and Terry helped as best he could with the dishes. He hung up his dish towel and smiled. "Thank you for a wonderful dinner."

"You're very welcome. I stocked up on what I thought you might need. Take a look and see if I missed anything. I'll bring it up for you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Janie, it's past seven. That's a long drive to turn around and do again tomorrow. Your hands are burned. They need a break. Stay here."

"Stay?"

"How much time off did Duane give you?"

"A week."

"Spend it here. I have two other bedrooms. I promise no pressure."

"I don't have any clothes."

"I have some t shirts and shorts you could sleep in. We could drive into Belclaire tomorrow. It's only ten minutes from here."

She stared at him for a moment before smiling. "Okay, that sounds nice. Maybe if you feel up to it tomorrow we could walk by the lake. It looks beautiful."

"I'd like that." He put his arm around her shoulder. "What do you say we watch a movie?"

"Sounds good." They sat down on sofa and he picked up the remote.

Terry sat quietly while Janie slept against him. He'd put his good arm around her shoulder while they watched a movie. Turned out she likes disaster movies. She'd dozed off right around the time Dwayne Johnson was pulling his ex-wife off a crumbling sky scraper. He thought about what it would be like after this week. Jane back on the job and him, what? Teaching, fishing? He still hadn't made up his mind.

Jane stirred against him. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked surprised, then she smiled. "Hello."

"Hello."

"I fell asleep."

"Yes. I'm surprised at how loud you snore."

"I do not snore."

He chuckled and pulled her closer. "I'm just messing with you."

She touched his chest and pulled back. "Oh, God, your ribs."

"Don't worry. The damage is on the other side. No harm done."

She smiled. "That's good. I like sleeping on you. You're surprisingly comfortable."

"Oh yeah? Are you saying I'm soft?"

She rubbed her hand over his chest. "Definitely not."

He leaned in and kissed her. Her passion was quick to overwhelm him. He wanted to lose himself in her, but he'd promised. No pressure. It took everything in him to pull back.

"Umm, you're a very good kisser," she smiled.

Terry grinned. "Why, thank you. Now that I'm unemployed maybe I should put that on my resume."

"Don't you dare," she smiled. "I don't need any other women knowing that about you. I don't need the competition."

He brushed his hand across her cheek. "In all my life, I've never met a woman who could compete with you."

"Terry," she whispered and gave him a soft kiss.

"Janie, I promised you no pressure. If I'm going to keep my promise I should set you up in the guest room."

"You're right. I only have so much self control and you're testing mine."

Terry grinned. "Oh really?"

She laughed and stood. "Come on. It's been a busy day."

He showed her the guest room that was closest to the hall bath. "Give me a minute and I'll get you something to sleep in." He returned with an old department shirt and a pair of workout shorts. "How are these?"

"They're great, thanks."

He gave her a quick kiss. "Good night, Janie."

"Good night, Terry."

He walked into his bedroom and wondered how he was going to keep his word about no pressure. Just kissing her was driving him mad. He pulled off his sweatpants and reached for his shorts. He slipped them on and debated whether he should pull off his sweatshirt. He'd been in it all day and already slept in it once. He slipped his arm out of one sleeve and tried to push it over his head. "Ow, ow, damn it!"

"Can I help?"

He looked in his doorway and Janie was standing swimming in his t shirt and shorts. Her long hair was loose around her shoulders. "Ah, yes please." She pulled the shirt over his head and carefully slid it over his cast.

"Do you want another shirt?"

“No, I’m fine without it.”

She looked him up and down. She touched him lightly. “Yeah, you are,” she whispered. Her blue eyes had gone dark. “I’m leaving now while I still can.”

“Good plan,” he nodded. He watched as she went back to the guest room and wondered how the hell he was going sleep tonight.

Terry woke up to the smell of fresh coffee. He'd managed to get some sleep, thanks to his med. He walked to the kitchen and saw Janie making breakfast. She looked adorable in his clothes with her hair tied up in a messy ponytail. "Good morning."

"Good morning." She walked toward him and gave him a quick kiss, sliding a hand down his bare arm. "Do you want me to help you with a shirt?"

"I'm not cold."

She tapped his chest. "Yeah, well I'm getting hot so you're getting a shirt." She led him back to his bedroom where he pulled out an oversized t shirt. "That'll work." She quickly slid it over his cast and down over his chest. "Good. Let's go. The bacon is almost ready." They walked back into the kitchen and Janie started placing bacon on the plates.

"Want some help?"

"Pour some coffee? He set the coffee on the table and grabbed the toast when it popped. Janie looked at him and smiled. "You're pretty handy for a one armed guy."

He slid his arm around her waist and kissed her neck. "I'm all kinds of handy."

She chuckled and pushed him away. "Okay, getting hot again. Sit. Your omelet is ready."

"Omelet? Wow."

"I'm pretty handy, too." She held up her bandaged hands and it suddenly stopped being funny to him.

"How are you? Do they hurt?"

"Terry, stop worrying. They ache a little but I've felt worse. I'm being careful."

"You'll tell me if you're hurting."

"I promise. Now eat your omelet. It's pretty hard to impress you with my culinary skills with cold eggs."

"I'm already impressed."

They'd decided to take a walk by the lake before they went into town. Jane had been wanting to get a good look at it since she'd come up with the groceries. Terry had gotten changed, thankfully without her help. She could only take so much. The man had thighs like tree trunks.

Terry led her up a path until they got to the lake. "There's a dock just ahead where I tie my boat."

"You have a boat?"

"It's a small one. I have it on a trailer in the back shed. It looks like it will be a while before I'll be able to use it."

"Well, maybe when we're both healed you can take us out." They walked up the dock and Terry helped her sit on down on the edge without hurting her hands. "Thank you." She looked out at the lake and smiled. "This is so beautiful."

"I think so too."

Jane took a deep breath. "It's so peaceful."

Terry rubbed his hand down her back. "I'm glad you like it here."

She turned to him and smiled. "Will I be invited back?"

He gave her a kiss. "Count on it."

Jane drove down the mountain to Belclaire, a small town that served the needs of the weekend residents. There was a Walmart that should have everything she would need if she was going to spend the rest of the week. Terry grabbed a cart and followed her. For the first time in a long time she got the feeling of being a couple, doing normal things together, like shopping. She gave herself a mental shake. They weren't technically a couple. She wasn't sure what they were.

She headed for the lingerie department and picked out a few sets. She picked out a black set and was rewarded with Terry's bright red blush. She decided not to torture him too much and moved on to t shirts and jeans. She picked up a couple of shirts and a hoodie. They moved on to the men's department and Terry looked at a some t shirts.

"Oh, this is perfect," she smiled. She held up a bright blue Tommy Bahama knockoff.

Terry smiled and shook his head. "Oh, I don't think so."

"It's short sleeve and it buttons. It will be a lot easier to get on." She held it up to his chest. "Besides, it looks great with your eyes."

"You're just saying that to get me to wear it."

"Well, maybe," she leaned in and whispered, "But you do have gorgeous eyes."

"Fine. I'll get the shirt."

"Get a couple."

Terry was enjoying spending time with Janie. She was smart and funny and quick to put him in his place. It seemed perfectly natural to be with her, that is, when he forgot about their ages. He was old enough to be her father. He'd always made fun of those guys who tried to recapture their youth with some sweet young thing. He never wanted to be that guy. Janie pulled into the parking lot for Ed's. It was an old fashioned silver trailer diner that still had jukeboxes on each table. They walked in and grabbed a booth. He

recognized the waitress. Dorothy was usually on when he came in. She was a pretty redhead in her late forties and always gave him extra fries. "Hi, Dorothy."

"Terry, what happened to you?" she asked.

"Hurt on the job."

"Oh that's too bad," she said looking overly concerned. Janie, however, just looked pissed. "Are you okay?" asked Dorothy.

"I'm fine, thank you," he said wanting to get out of this awkward conversation. "I'll have my usual."

"Burger, medium well, fries and an ice tea." She looked at Janie. "And for your daughter?"

Terry blushed but Janie's eye's narrowed. "Dorothy, is it? I'm not his daughter and I'll have the same." Dorothy nodded and quickly returned to the kitchen. Janie shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"You seemed a bit...aggressive?"

"She didn't like me being with you and I didn't like that. I'm sorry I know I don't have the right to be jealous."

"What?"

Janie rolled her eyes. "Seriously?" She pointed toward the kitchen. "Dorothy is hot for you and I had an unattractive fit of jealousy. Clear now?" Terry nodded. "I'm going to the ladies room." She stood but he grabbed her hand.

"You were jealous?"

"Unattractive of me, I know, but Terry, I've waited two years for this." She leaned down and gave him a kiss just as Dorothy came back with their drinks.

Terry stared out the window as Janie drove back up the mountain. He couldn't get past Dorothy mistaking Janie for his daughter. This was going to happen, a lot.

"Why so quiet?" she asked.

"Just thinking. You know, you and I, it could be awkward for you at the department, even if I'm not there."

"Maybe, but I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"Are you concerned it could affect your career?"

"No." She pulled into his driveway and parked the car. She grabbed a shopping bag and handed Terry the other one.

"Janie, I wouldn't want to be the reason your career suffered."

"You wouldn't be. And besides, I don't do it to rise in the ranks. I do it for the work. It's who we both are. If I couldn't do it in Boyertown I could sign on with someone else. Maybe Belclaire. I wouldn't let anyone stop me from doing what I love."

"You don't have to worry about Boyertown. Duane said you and I weren't a breach of protocol."

Janie dropped her bag on the floor and looked at him. "You talked to the chief of the department about us?"

"It was Denise. When they came to see me they told me they'd given you the key to the cabin. I was worried it was a breach of protocol and he said no. That's when Denise said she could tell how you felt about me. She asked me how I felt."

"What did you say?"

"I told her you're a remarkable woman. Duane said it had been too long since I'd been in a relationship and that if this is what I wanted I should pursue it."

"So the chief gave you his blessing and you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't know what was happening between us, if anything would. I'm old enough to be your father. You heard Dorothy. People are going to make that mistake."

“Is that what this is about?! Are you going to miss out on what we could be because of what people might think? Terry, when you look at me, do you feel paternal?”

“Janie, I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s a simple question, yes or no. Let me make it easier for you.” She ripped the t shirt over her head.

“What are you doing?”

“Simplifying.” She kicked off her sneakers and socks and pulled off her jeans. She stood before him wearing nothing but a lacy white bra and panty.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. He couldn’t breath. She was beautifully curved with a toned body. Strong and beautiful. She got closer. “Do you feel the slightest bit paternal now?”

“Hell no,” he said as he slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. Everything that they’d been holding in broke loose. There was a point in a fire when heat and source materials reach the point of no return. They’d reached their flashover.

“Let me,” she whispered as she got the t shirt over his head. Her eyes glazed over as she ran her hands over his chest. He heard her make a sound that he thought was a growl. He pulled her close and claimed her mouth. He couldn’t stop now, even if he wanted to. He picked her up with his good arm and set her on the kitchen table. “What are you doing?” she gasped.

“We’re going to see just how strong this table is.” He kicked off his shoes as Janie unzipped his jeans and pushed them and his boxer over his hips. This time he definitely heard her growl. He unhooked her bra and pulled off her panty he did some growling himself. He rubbed his hand over her skin as she arched her back. He stroked and tasted as she moved under him.

“Please, Terry,” she whispered. He looked her in the eyes. “Please don’t make me wait any longer.”

He’d never felt a heat like this.

They curled up in his bed, Janie carefully tucked in under his good arm. She rubbed her hand down his chest and he heard her low growl. "You're growling."

"Hmmm?" she asked as her fingertips traced down his bicep.

"You're growling."

She raised herself up on her elbow and smiled. "Do you know how many times I looked at you and fantasized about doing this?"

"Oh yeah?" he chuckled.

"Oh yeah." She replaced her fingertips with her tongue. "I could tell you were in great shape under your uniform. When you wore short sleeve I saw your biceps." She ran her hands down his arm and squeezed. "Very nice." She smiled. "I could also tell you had a killer ass."

He laughed out loud. "Oh really?"

"Yes and I haven't had a enough time to properly assess the reality, but I think we'll have time for me to be thorough." She gave him a deep kiss.

"I have to admit, sweetheart, I couldn't have imagined. I had no clue. Your body is amazing."

She smiled and kissed him. "Thank you. Do you mean to tell me you never snuck a peek?"

"Honestly, I didn't allow myself the luxury. I did think you have a girl next door quality, but you purposely dress neutral."

She sat back and smiled. "I try to blend in. Most of the women I went through the academy cut their hair short. I couldn't bring myself to do it."

He ran his fingers through some loose strands. "I'm very glad you didn't." He gave her a soft kiss. "You're so beautiful." He saw a curious look on her face. "Janie, what is it? When I say you're beautiful, you look surprised."

"It's not something I'm used to hearing."

“Get used to it,” he said before he kissed her.

Janie smiled as she watched Terry make them lunch. She'd tried to do it but he insisted. He said he was feeling better. She giggled to herself. He sure was feeling better. They'd had a wonderful few days while they got used to the idea of being a couple.

"What's so funny?" he asked as he set the sandwich in front of her.

She reached for his hand. "I was thinking about that thing you did with your whiskers."

"I had no idea you were so ticklish," he grinned. "Would you like me to do it again?"

"Yes, please!"

He leaned over and gave her a kiss. "I'll make a note." He reached into the cabinet and pulled out a bag of Fritos.

"I love Fritos," she smiled as she opened the bag. They'd just started to eat when there was a knock on the door. "Are you expecting someone?"

Terry shook his head. "No." He got up and answered the door. "Duane? Denise?"

Jane's heart raced as she stood. Terry told her the captain was okay with them. Looked like now she'd find out.

"Well, are you going to let us in?" said Denise.

"Of course." Terry stepped aside and looked at Jane. It was obvious he had no idea they were coming. They both stopped when they saw Jane. The chief looked uncomfortable but Denise was smiling. The chief set down the two bags he was carrying.

"Hello, Jane. It's good to see you again."

"Hello, Mrs. Harrison, Chief."

"Please, it's Duane and Denise," said Denise.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

The chief finally smiled. "I think in this situation, it's fine."

"Okay, Duane."

Denise gave Terry a kiss on the cheek. "I see you two finally figured this out."

"Ah, yeah."

"Good," she smiled. She indicated the shopping bags. "I made my ribs. I brought slaw."

Terry picked up one of bags. "Janie, wait till you taste these ribs. They're amazing." He looked in the other bag. "Hot damn!" He reached down and pulled out a pie. He kissed Denise's cheek. "You are an angel."

"I know how much you love my pecan pie. Heroes get pie."

"I don't know about that," he said as he set the pie on the kitchen counter.

"Well I do," said Duane. "You're being awarded the medal of valor."

Jane slipped her arms around his waist. "Sweetheart, that's wonderful. You deserve it." He gave her a quick kiss. She pulled away when it dawned on her they had an audience.

"Duane, I think that may be a bit much."

"Tell that to Terry Kramer."

"Who?"

"Mike Kramer's new son. He was born this week. If you hadn't pulled him and Rimmer out of the fire, he'd have never met him. The Kramers named their baby after you."

"Wow. I'm, well, I don't know what I am."

Jane ignored that her boss was in the room. "Hey, you listen to me. You are a brave and honorable man. You put the lives of your people first. You deserve to be recognized. And remember what I told you, it's not all about you. It's about your men too."

Terry smiled. "Thank you, sweetheart." He pulled her into a hug and gave her another kiss.

They glanced over at Duane and Denise who looked shocked. "What?" Terry asked.

Denise giggled. "I'm so glad to see you like this."

"Yeah," Duane chuckled. "It's about damn time. And you couldn't have chosen better."

Terry pulled Jane close. "I agree."

Duane walked toward them. "Jane, you're being awarded the medal of valor too. It's going to be a double ceremony."

She gasped and looked at Terry. "I don't know what to say."

He smiled. "I do. You're a brave and honorable woman. You deserve to be recognized."

"Thank you," she smiled.

"One more thing, your retirement party is right after the ceremony. It's next Friday night, dress uniform," said Duane. "Don't even try to argue."

Terry looked at Jane and smiled. "I wouldn't think of it."

Terry tossed a manual on his desk. It had been an interesting two weeks. Jane had gone back to work and Terry had accepted the teaching post with the Academy. He was brushing up on regs but somethings you couldn't learn from books. A lot of things you couldn't learn from books. They spent a lot of time at his place in Boyertown since it was closer to the station. There was less traffic for her to fight in the morning. He heard a door open.

"Hey, babe," Janie said as she gave him a kiss.

"How was your day?"

"Oh you know, O.D's, heart attacks, asthma attack. Same old, same old."

"You save everyone?"

"Yeah," she smiled.

He pulled her into his lap. "That's my girl."

She touched his cheek. "That's me. All yours."

"I have a thought."

"Oh yeah," she grinned as she rubbed his rough cheek.

"Not that, well not just that. What do you think about moving in here? It's closer and you'll have more room."

"Not to mention a hot man in my bed every night."

"Not to mention."

"I like this idea. I'm in."

"That's it? No debate?"

"Do you expect me to argue?"

"Well, a little."

"About what?"

“I don’t know, closet space, who cooks, the house isn’t big enough.”

“Okay, I wear uniforms to work and I prefer t shirts and jeans off duty, so closet space, not a big deal. We’ve been taking turns cooking and that works for me. Your house is plenty big enough and you have two of them, this and the cabin. I’m not seeing a problem here, captain.”

“Yeah, neither do I.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“No, of course not. More like confused.”

“Terry, listen to me. I’m not Evelyn. Having you in my life, being this happy, it’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’m in love with you.”

“I’m in love with you too.”

“Excellent!” She got out of his lap and pulled him to his feet. She rubbed his hand over his cheek. “You purposely didn’t shave.”

“Yup.”

“Hot damn!” she yelled as she pulled him toward his bedroom. Their bedroom. Life with Janie would never be dull.

“Are you ready?” Janie asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” They got out of his car and walked toward the hotel. His arm was still in it’s cast but he’d managed to get his uniform on over it. Janie looked squared away in her dress uniform. She caught him staring and smiled. “Are you checking me out, Captain?”

He could feel his blush. “Yeah.”

“Terry, if you don’t want to go public, it’s okay. I’ll understand.”

He took her gloved hand in his. “You really would, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. I know you love me. I don’t need the world to know it for us to be real.”

“Wow. You are something else. I love you, Janie Taylor.”

“I love you, Terry Russell. Now let’s go pick up our jewelry. There’s are people in there waiting to party.”

Terry and Janie entered the ballroom together and greeted the squad. Several of the men gave them looks. Coming into the ballroom together telegraphed they were a couple. Duane spotted them and came to greet them. He shook both their hands and pointed out where they were sitting. Terry knew that by greeting them like he did he was telling the men he and Janie had his blessing. Duane was a great chief, but he was an even better best friend.

Mike and Jaws cut through the crowd to greet them. “Captain, Jane, it’s a great turnout. Everyone is here.”

“I can see that,” said Jane.

Mike approached him. “Captain, ah, thank you for the baby gift.”

“How’s your wife and son doing?”

“Great.” He pulled out his phone and opened a picture of his wife holding the small boy wearing the fire department gear he’d sent, but Janie picked out. “My wife wanted to

be here but so soon after the baby, well, she sent you a message.” Mike paged over to a video and hit play.

“Hello, Captain Russell. I’m Karen Kramer.” She held the baby up to the camera and smiled. “and this little bruiser is, Terry Michael Kramer. I can’t thank you enough for what you did for Mike.” She looked past the lens to where Mike must have been. “He’s everything to me.”

Terry smiled when he heard Mike in the background say, “Ah, Karen.” The baby yawned and his parents laughed.

“Captain, I don’t know what either one of us would have done without Mike.” Her eyes welled. “I hope I can thank you in person soon.” Mike turned off the phone and put it back in his pocket.

Terry struggled to control himself. “That was really nice, Mike. Tell your wife I said thank you.”

“I will sir.”

Janie touched his arm. “Hey, how about a beer?”

“Sounds good. Excuse us.” They walked toward the bar in the back of the ballroom. “Thanks, babe.”

“I thought you could use break. You looked uncomfortable.”

“I’m not used to this.”

“I know.” She leaned in closer. “I tell you what. If you get uncomfortable think about what creative celebration I have in store for you when we get home.”

Terry stopped in his tracks and whispered, “You can be very wicked, woman.” She smiled and winked. He saw Janie’s partner, Charlie moving towards them. “I think it may be time to bring him up to speed.”

“More like fill in the details he hasn’t already figured out.”

“Hello, Captain, Jane.”

“Hello, Charlie,” said Jane.

“I’ll give you two a minute. White wine?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

Terry headed to the bar and hoped Jane’s most important relationship in the department wasn’t about to be ruined.

“So I take it this is your coming out party,” said Charlie.

“Yeah. Are you mad I didn’t tell you?”

“No, I kind of figured you two were together.”

“How? I never said a word.”

“Because, you’re my partner and I know you. You’ve been nauseatingly happy the last few weeks.”

“I have not.”

“You have so.”

Jane grinned. “Yeah, I guess I have.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“We’re moving in together.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. I’m really happy, Charlie. So is Terry.”

“He looks it. I’ve never seen the captain smile so much. I’m happy for you, Jane.”

“If you’re so happy, why do you look like you like you did when the Eagles lost the playoffs.”

“Are you going to leave the department? It’s not like I’d miss you or anything, but I’d hate to have to break in a new partner.”

“Yeah, right. No, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Are you afraid of the repercussions?”

“No. Chief Harrison said since Terry is no longer my boss and he will have no affect on my career from the academy, that is was not a breach of protocol.”

“The academy?”

“Don’t say anything. Terry has agreed to be an instructor next semester.”

“Wow. And he doesn’t mind that you’ll still be on the front lines?”

“He understands. This isn’t just a job. It’s who I am.”

Terry returned and handed her a glass of wine. He looked at Charlie. “Are we good, Reynolds?”

“Yes, sir. We’re good.” Charlie leaned in. “I’d tell you to take care of her but she takes care of herself just fine.”

“Yes, she does.”

Duane called them up to the small stage and Duane and Terry took up places behind him. He took a breath to calm himself and realized Janie's hand was shaking. He leaned over and whispered. "It's okay. These are all our friends."

"I know but I'm not used to being the center of attention."

Duane stepped up to the podium and spoke to the crowd. "Ladies and Gentlemen, if I could have your attention." He gave everyone a moment to settle down and face the stage. "We are here tonight to honor two of our own. We all face danger every day. We rely on our training and skill to get the job done. But then there are those who go above and beyond. Those who face what should be insurmountable odds and succeed. We have two such colleagues here tonight. "Our first honoree has been with department ten years. Jane Taylor is a superior firefighter and EMT. On May twenty first, a four alarm fire called every available truck in the city. Firefighter Taylor saw that her captain was trapped in the warehouse which was about to collapse. With her colleagues were incapacitated from the fire, she grabbed a tank and went in for her captain. She moved the wall that had him pinned before moving him clear of the building. Only moments later the building was fully engulfed. Firefighter Taylor has exhibited the highest standards to which we all aspire." He turned toward Janie and nodded. "Firefighter Taylor, please come forward." She approached and Duane put the medal around her neck. He extended his hand. "Congratulations, Jane," he said quietly as everyone applauded.

"Thank you, Chief." He indicated the mic for her to say a few words. "I'm not sure what to say. This is a great honor, but this is not why any of us do this. This isn't just a job, it's who we are. The most important thing about what we do is we have each other's back. Knowing you have a team of people, like I have at the fourteenth, makes everything possible. Thank you." She left the podium to great applause. Terry leaned over and whispered,

"Well done."

"The next honoree is someone who's been with the department over thirty years. I have known him a lot longer." Duane stopped and smiled at the crowd. "The stories I

could tell. Terry Russell has been my best friend for forty years. He was a good man at fifteen and he's still that good man. He has risen through the ranks to Captain and tonight we not only celebrate his bravery, but also his retirement." He paused for a moment for applause then laughed. "You're not getting rid of him yet. Captain Russell has accepted a position of instructor at the academy." Duane smiled when he had to pause for cheering. "The May twenty first fire had called all of Captain Russell's station to the scene. As per protocol, he met with the other captains to coordinate the rescue of trapped civilians. All the civilians were out but the last two firefighters were unaccounted for. Firefighters Rimmer and Kramer had been trapped in a collapsed portion of the warehouse. Captain Russell went in after his men, definitely not per protocol. He freed his men and got them to safety before being trapped himself. For thirty years he put the welfare of his team first. May twenty first was no different. At least that's what he would say. I wouldn't." Duane shot Terry a grin. "To quote a friend of ours, you are a brave and honorable man and you deserved to be recognized." Terry smiled as Janie tried to cover her blush. "Captain Russell, please come forward." Terry approached and Duane put the ribbon around his neck. He extended his hand. "Congratulations, Captain."

"Thank you, Chief." His reply was drowned out by the cheers. Duane pulled him into a hug.

"Don't do that to me again, okay," he said.

"I promise." He approached the podium and waited for the applause to die down. "Thank you, Chief and thank you everyone. Most of all, thank you Firefighter Taylor for dragging my sorry ass out of that warehouse." He glanced at Janie who was now a fiery red blush. "I look out at all of you and see people I've worked along side for the large part of my life. You make me proud, everyday, of who we are and what we do. Thank you, Chief, for this honor." He turned and looked at Janie. She had a look of such pride. "Ah, Chief, I think I'm going to break protocol one last time." He walked to Janie and gave her a soft kiss. Over the hoots and hollers he whispered, "I love you."

Terry opened the door and tossed his keys on the sideboard. “Well, that was quite a night. They walked into their bedroom and set down their caps.

“It sure was,” she smiled as she tossed down her gloves. She looked down at the medal. “We have matching jewelry.”

“Yeah, we do. Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure babe, what’s up?”

He led to the bed and they sat down on the edge. “Were you okay that I kissed you in front of everyone?”

“Of course. I’m glad that the one or two people in that room who didn’t know about us do now.”

“And you’re happy with what we are, here, living together. Do you ever think you want more?”

“I’m very happy with how we are. I know you had a lousy go round with your marriage and I didn’t do so well in the relationship department either. I love you and I know you love me. That’s all I’ll ever need.”

“It really is, isn’t it?” he smiled.

“Yes it is. Terry what’s going on?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and I realize I need more.”

“What?” she asked as she grew pale.

“Oh, no, sweetheart, more of us. You’re right that my first marriage soured me. But I’ve realized that I can’t let the past affect us. I’m in this forever. I know you are too.”

She gave him a soft kiss. “I am. Wait...first marriage?”

He smiled and reached in his nightstand drawer. “I was wondering if we could get some more matching jewelry. Something that would go with this.” He opened the ring box and revealed a diamond solitaire. “Janie, will you marry me?”

Janie's eyes welled. "Oh my God," she gasped.

"Is that a yes?"

She looked at him and grinned. "Put it on my finger and find out." He tried to control the shake in his hand as he slipped it on her finger.

"Well?" he asked. She pulled him into a deeply passionate kiss. "Can I take that as a yes?"

"Oh baby, that's a Hell Yes!"

They laid back on the bed and he started kissing her, then stopped. "Ah, babe, I love you more than I can say but the dress blues aren't working for me." She laughed and sat up.

"I know what you mean."

"I do believe someone mentioned a 'creative celebration'."

Janie smiled and grabbed a small bag from the local lingerie shop out of her dresser drawer. "You weren't the only one who was shopping. Now get naked and I'll be back."

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned as he started pulling off his jacket. Janie headed toward the bathroom but turned and looked at him. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking life with you is never going to be dull." She grinned and closed the bathroom door.

He looked in the mirror and smiled. "Funny. I was just thinking the same thing."