



TRIAL BY FIRE

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

The fire alarm blaring at four a.m. jerked Nick Foster from a sound sleep. He swam through his groggy stupor and sat up, slipping his feet into the turnout pants and boots scrunched together next to his bunk.

Mark Branning and Dan Nichols stumbled into their own gear and raced out of the room.

Adrenaline snapped Nick to attention, and his heart rate, which had gone from sleep to sprint in a matter of seconds, brought him fully awake. He grabbed the radio mike. "Midtown to Simone," he said to the dispatcher who sat in an upstairs room at the police station next door. "It's Nick."

"Nick, the church is on fire. Sounds bad."

"What church?"

"Your church, man! Calvary Bible Church."

Nick froze as the words filtered through his consciousness, then settled hard in the pit of his stomach. He forced himself to think clearly and grabbed his helmet from its hook. Pulling it on, he bolted out to the truck bay.

"Where to?" Mark yelled from the driver's seat of the pumper.

"The church." Nick grabbed his turnout coat and helmet and leaped onto the truck. "My church is on fire!"

Mark didn't comment that it was his church too, and Dan's as well. He turned on the siren, chasing away any remnants of sleep that might have dulled their senses, and drove into the warm

October night as fast as reason would allow. A faint yellow glow lit up the night sky in the distance, and Nick could see the smoke billowing through the air as the fire truck approached Calvary Bible Church.

“Faster!” Nick shouted, but he knew Mark was driving as fast as he could. Maybe it was just in the rec hall, he thought. Maybe they could save the sanctuary.

But as they reached the street, he saw that the building was fully engulfed. Every wall was in flames, and the roof was a stage on which the fire did its wicked dance. The truck stopped and Nick leaped out, pulled on his tanks, and snapped on his mask. As he unwound the hose from the truck, he broke into warrior mode.

He heard the other fire truck from across town coming up Jacquard Boulevard, and behind their truck, the rescue unit screeched to a halt. The hose opened, blasting the way in front of him. As he entered the building and saw how thoroughly the fire had taken hold, he forced himself to think like a firefighter and not a preacher.

The fire had already consumed the west side of the building where all the children’s Sunday school classes were held just yesterday, and the north side where they had fellowship and ate dinner together on Wednesday nights. He sprayed his way into the sanctuary, searching for the origin of the flames. The sanctuary was engulfed as well, and the air billowed with black smoke. It was tangible evil, blinding him to the source of the fire. But he would not give up. He was David facing down Goliath. His hose was like a few small stones, but if he aimed it well, he could knock Goliath to the ground. God would help him.

The gates of hell would not prevail against this church!

Stan Shepherd Newpointe’s only police detective arrived on the scene just as the firemen began fighting the flames. As if he were watching his own home being consumed, he sat paralyzed behind the wheel. How had this happened?

Not so long ago, he and Celia had made the decision to lower their lifestyle so they could donate money for the building now going up in flames. All that money wasted all those hours of work sanding and scraping and painting.

Stan tried to shake off his shock and got out of the car. A crowd of people was gathering in the street.

“Back up,” he told them. “All the way across the street.” Slowly, they did as he said.

“Stan, are they gonna save the building?” Mildred Buford asked.

He didn’t want to pronounce the building dead, but it didn’t look good. “I don’t know, Mildred. Now get back.”

“But I had some fish and a hamster in my Sunday school room. The kids’ll never get over it if they can’t save ’em! If I could just run in and get ’em.”

“You can’t go in there. Now, come on, Mildred. I need you to get across the street.”

“But could you tell the firefighters to look for them?”

“No! They’re trying to put the fire out, Mildred. They don’t have time to look for your pets.”

He could tell that she was offended, but he couldn’t worry about that now. As several more police cars came to the scene, he yelled for the uniformed officers to block off the street so that no other cars or curiosity seekers would be able to come this way. Then he headed into the crowd reassembling on the opposite side of the street. “Did anybody see what started the fire?” he yelled. “Who made the call?”

“I did,” Zeb Fox said. He was the old man who lived next door to the parsonage Nick’s home across the street from the church. Zeb worked the night shift, seven to three, at the Mason Dean steel factory. “I seen smoke comin’ up out the roof when I got home,” he said, “then it started comin’ out from under the doors and I knowed I’d better call somebody. I was just fixin’ to call the po-lice when I seen the flames comin’ from ’round the back.”

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