FIREPROOF

Novelization by Eric Wilson

Screenplay by Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick

Thomas Nelson

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Eric dedicates this book to:

My one and only, Carolyn Rose . . . Thanks for daring to love me these past eighteen years. WE H_VE A L_V_ W_RTH F_GH_ING FOR.

Alex and Stephen dedicate this book to:

Our mother, Rhonwyn Kendrick . . . Thank you for loving us and Dad these forty-three years.

You are a blessing.

We love you!

Sherwood Baptist Church . . . May your faith and ministry always remain fireproof. We thank God for you!

Part One

Sparks

May 1998

chapter 1

Dense smoke stretched between aisles of canned goods and wrapped its fingers around Captain Campbell's upright body. He tried to remain calm. He could see no farther than his leather gloves as he aimed the fire hose into blackness that pulsed with an eerie glow.

Snaking through aisles and licking along the ceiling, the grocery store's inferno seemed infused with a personal evil. It wasn't the first time Campbell had thought such a thing. Other firefighters had been known to say the same.

He told himself to take steady breaths. To stay focused.

No easy task.

The call had come into the station at 9:49 p.m. The locally owned store was getting ready to close its doors, and most of the shoppers had left. The main concern, as expressed by a cashier, was the safety of an assistant manager last seen heading to the back office.

The conflagration was spreading quickly now, seeming to rise from separate sections of the store and demanding the attention of all emergency personnel. Crews from three different stations had been sent to the scene. Campbell and his partner had entered the fray a half hour ago, with the rescue of human lives priority number one.

Stores could be rebuilt and inventory replaced, but nothing could bring back the dead.

"Tynes," Campbell called out. "Tynes, you there?"

His partner was nowhere to be seen. It was possible the man had followed the hose line back outside, in danger of depleting his composite tank. Or he might've tried skirting the inferno, in search of the missing manager.

Either way, he should have said something, but Tynes was only in his second year and even the best made mistakes.

A fact the captain knew well.

Though Capt. Eddie Campbell had been part of the firefighting brotherhood since the late 1960s, with numerous awards and honors to his name, he had already managed to lose his two-way radio this evening, somewhere between the market's front doors and his present location. Maybe caught it on a shelf. Or dropped it while coupling two hoses.

He was on his own, that's all he knew—cut off from all communication.

The fire, meanwhile, seemed nowhere close to giving up the fight, and the captain stayed firmly planted. Although the quivering hose at his fingertips gave him some reassurance, impenetrable billows continued to close in around him. He felt like a rat in the coils of a boa constrictor.

Steady breaths. Steady.

But he couldn't maintain this position forever.

He called his partner's name a few more times, to no avail. His voice was muted by the mask, and if he called out much more, he would risk losing the precious air in his thirty-five-pound canister.

From his back, several high-pitched beeps sounded in rapid succession.

Could that be right? He peered through the sweat-streaked face guard, squinting to read the dial on his Type 2 SCBA self-contained breathing apparatus.

Was he really that low? The alarm meant he had five minutes max, and then he'd be sucking fumes. The majority of fire fatalities were due to smoke inhalation, and if he didn't find his way out shortly, he would be in deep trouble.

Time to get going. He'd just follow the line back.

He felt his heart rate settle as he eased off the nozzle's water pressure, turned carefully in his gear, and slipped to his knees.

This was routine. He had a plan to follow, a goal in mind.

Campbell started crawling. At fifty-five years of age, he took pride in his physical condition. He moved hand over hand along the hose, knowing that it would guide him back to safety and fresh air. He wasn't done fighting this fire. He'd come back. But he'd be no good to anyone if he were passed out and unconscious on the floor.

His gloved knuckles knocked aside a can of Hormel chili and a box of taco shells. His right knee slipped on a water slick.

How far had he gone—twenty feet, thirty?

A single hose length was fifty feet long, and he and Tynes had been working with two in tandem. That meant it would take another minute or so to get out the door. In all this gear, progress was tedious, but he'd make it if he just kept moving.

Yes, just ahead was his proof. See there? Yellow and red bursts were prying at the smoke, and he realized he must be near the store's front windows. These had to be the fire engine's emergency lights rotating against the glass.

And was that clean air he tasted?

Just in time.

Something was wrong, though. Not only was his tank nearly empty, but the temperature was rising. Things were getting hotter with each knee forward.

"Oh no," Campbell said.

The words hung ominously in the mask. He saw now that he was looking at flames, not emergency lights, which meant he had veered off in the wrong direction. How could he have gotten this far off? He'd been following the line, switching from one hand to the other as he shifted along the floor.

The hose—

But no, this wasn't a hose he had gripped in his fingers. It was a pipe.

That couldn't be right. A pipe?

He must've switched over onto an irrigation system that ran along the floor to the produce section. How could he have been so foolish? Despite his tenure as a firefighter, he'd let circumstances blur his focus on the details.

Captain Campbell was breathing heavily as he turned back around. He had to keep his senses about him. The store was shrouded in darkness, and the only safe route was to backtrack to the point where he had erred.

He feared for his life. Would he make it out of here? Would he ever see his wife and daughter again? Joy and Catherine were his world.

Joy . . .

After twenty-six years, they were still together. She was a gentle soul, and she'd spent more than a few restless nights during the course of his career. No doubt about that.

Catherine . . .

She was eighteen, almost nineteen, a bright and vivacious daughter with a streak of independence—some would call it bullheadedness—a trait inherited from her father.

Spurred by these thoughts, Campbell pulled himself onward through the store's suffocating environs. His pulse throbbed in his fingers, but he tried to stay attentive to each change in shape or texture along the pipe.

The hose had to be here somewhere. His only way out.

He kept crawling, even as a memory of three-year-old Catherine played through his mind

. . .

Captain Campbell stands just outside her bedroom door and sees shelves of toys and stuffed animals along the wall. A teddy bear has its head and arm wrapped in gauze. A tea set and a wooden fire truck crouch beneath a sign that reads "Daddy's little girl."

He hears giggling as Joy says good night to young Catherine.

- "All right, sweet pea," she says at last, "it's time for you to go to bed."
- "Mommy, would you ask Daddy to come tuck me in?"
- "No, he's at work tonight at the fire station. But he'll be home tomorrow."

Campbell smiles, knowing how surprised his wife will be when she sees that he's come home early—with permission, of course—to celebrate their eleventh anniversary.

- "Mommy, I want to marry Daddy."
- "You do?" Joy laughs. "Catherine, you can't marry Daddy. He's my husband."
- "Well, when you're done being married, can I have him?"

Campbell's heart swells. In the moonlight, he catches glimpses of his daughter's drawings tacked up beside her dollhouse. In one picture, blue crayon hearts surround the words "Daddy," "Me," and "Mommy."

"I'm sorry, sweet pea." Joy is chuckling. "We'll never be done. You'll have to marry somebody else."

- "Who?"
- "We don't know yet. But someday."
- "Can I wear a white dress and white gloves?"
- "Sure, if you want to."

Campbell edges closer to the doorway. He spots the framed photo of himself, outfitted in his turnout gear and fire helmet, holding his darling, dark-haired girl and kissing her on the cheek while she flashes a grin wider than the pink bow in her hair.

From the bed, Catherine's voice cracks with the hope of every little girl. "Will we live happily after ever?" She mixes the words, but her desire is heartfelt.

"Mm-hmm," Joy says. "If you marry someone who really, really loves you."

"Like Daddy?" Catherine asks.

"Yes. Like Daddy . . ."

In the claustrophobic space of his heavy gear and face mask, Captain Campbell held on to that memory. He was a husband, a father. He did not want to die, not like this. Not here in this store, without the chance to see his family again. Without the chance to walk his daughter down the aisle. And what about being a grandfather? Was that too much to ask for?

He pushed on through the heavy smoke, his knees grinding into the floor. He imagined Joy at home on her knees. He'd never been much of a praying man himself, but he didn't discount the value of a wife who talked to God.

"You're not losing me yet," he whispered. "Not if I can help it."

He couldn't help it, though. Barely able to breathe, he felt disoriented by the blackness.

What was that?

His hand brushed against something slightly larger than the pipe. It was charged with water—the hose!

He was back where he'd started, in the middle of the store, but a long trek stretched before him in the opposite direction.

Air. He needed fresh air. He was gulping at nothing, now that the canister on his back had run dry. He knew that to take off his mask would put him at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. On the other hand, he had only a few breaths left.

How long could he crawl without oxygen?

Forty seconds, sixty? Maybe ninety, if he could force down panic and keep his respiratory system regulated?

He thought again of his wife and his daughter.

One knee forward. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand.

Another knee. *Three-one-thousand, four.*

Five, six, seven . . .

Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four . . .

His eyes were losing focus. His head was swimming. Blood pounded in his ears.

Forty-eight, forty-nine . . .

Movements slowing. Feeling sluggish.

Sixty-one . . .

He peeled off the mask, gasping, finding only toxic fumes that dried out his tongue and seared his throat.

Sixty-two . . .

Three . . .

"I love you, Joy," he muttered. "I—"

"Captain!"

Strong hands scooped beneath his arms and jarred him back to the moment. He felt himself dragged along the path of the winding hose, his boots scrambling at the floor. He heard grunts and groans, and then he and his rescuer were exploding through the front doors into the blessed, oxygen-rich atmosphere outside, into swirling lights and cries of relief.

"Caleb found him. Look! The rookie found the captain from Station One!"

"Nice job, kid."

"Captain, are you with me? We thought you were a goner."

EMS personnel swarmed around, their voices smudged by the effects of carbon monoxide and exhaustion. He tried to sit up. He had to get back inside. He was held down, while someone pointed out the store's assistant manager seated on the nearby curb, with minor burns, but safe and sound.

"Tynes pulled him out," another firefighter explained.

"My partner." Campbell looked around. "Is he okay?"

"Man, I'm sorry." Tynes stepped into view. "I thought you were right behind me, Captain. I tried calling over the radio, but you didn't respond."

Captain Campbell nodded his forgiveness and closed his eyes.

A firm hand removed his brush jacket and his boots, letting the cool air work as a balm on his sweat-drenched frame.

Later, as the fire was brought under control and the ruckus quieted, he pulled himself up. Still weak, he felt guilty for not standing by his crew. And where was the man who had pulled him to safety?

On cue, the rookie clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You can relax, sir. We got it under control. We're just glad you're still with us."

"Me, too," Campbell admitted.

"We weren't gonna lose you. Not tonight."

"Your name's Caleb? Which station you from?"

"Six. This was only my second real fire."

"You did good, kid. I appreciate you coming after me. I truly do."

"Well, I couldn't let anything happen to you, Captain. If I'm gonna take over your job someday, I need you to stick around to teach me everything you know."

"Is that so?" Campbell raised an eyebrow and looked up into the rookie's soot-stained face. "Tell you right now, Caleb, that might take some time."

"I've got time, sir. And I'm a quick learner."

Chapter 2

Caleb Holt, rookie and recent hero, had been given orders to find the hose stretcher. What was a hose stretcher, though? He searched the fire engine high and low for the seemingly nonexistent object, ducking his head into compartments and running his hand along every inch of the truck.

That's when Catherine Campbell strolled into the bay, the captain's daughter, his pride and joy.

Eighteen. Brunette, with natural highlights.

Catherine wore a summer dress, with a red mini-sweater tied off above her thin hips. The slight curve of her brown eyes was simultaneously alluring and friendly. "You must be Caleb."

Her voice caused sparks to dance, somewhere deep inside him.

"Uh, well . . . "

"Unless you're going under a different name now," she goaded.

"Caleb. Yeah, that's me."

"Thank you for what you did. Saving my dad like that."

He shrugged that off. "You're Catherine, right?"

"Word spreads fast."

"Your father's proud of you. He has a picture of you in his office, but I never realized that you . . . Well, now I guess you're just more . . ."

"More what?"

"Uh, you're older."

She grinned. "Yeah, I wish he'd put up my new picture instead. I was, like, what, fourteen in that one?"

"You looked like you were just a girl."

"Just a girl?"

"Well, you know, not all grown up."

"And now look at me." A smile played over her lips. "All grown up."

Caleb tried not to stare and shout a rousing *Amen!*

This was the captain's daughter, and he knew he'd be better off not dwelling on the romantic possibilities. Plus, he was twenty-four years old. He'd been through his share of relationships, and the next time around he wanted something more substantial.

An eighteen-year-old? That was just asking for trouble.

Sure, physically speaking, she was grown up, but she probably still lived at home and had never paid so much as an electric bill in her life.

She was feisty, though, and he liked that. He'd always wanted a wife who had a mind of her own, not just some doormat for his own ambitions.

Easy there, big guy, he told himself. Give it another two or three years.

"You know where my dad is?" Catherine said.

"He left awhile ago to meet the investigator at the burn site."

"Okay. Guess I'll check back later."

"Okay, then. Well, uh, good meeting you, Catherine."

"You, too, Caleb."

With that, Catherine Campbell pivoted toward the waning sun, leaving the rookie with her silhouette burned into his mind.

Part Two

Smoke

April 2008

Chapter 3

Along the bay wall of the Albany Fire Department, Station One, grimy gear and smudged boots stood beneath yellow helmets that hung from hooks. Caleb Holt had just added his own to the collection, the word *Captain* stenciled upon it.

Ten years he had served this city. Now, at age thirty-four, he had earned the second trumpet on his white officer's shirt—one of the youngest ever to do so. He'd dreamed of this since age eight, and even though he dreaded some of the grisly scenarios he came upon in the line of duty, he loved his job, this city, and the group of guys he worked with.

Lieutenant Michael Simmons: a tall, rangy black man with an angled chin.

Driver Wayne Floyd: a loose-limbed jokester, with gelled hair above expressive blue eyes.

Firefighter Terrell Sanders: a stocky, bald black man, always ready for a debate.

Rookie Eric Harmon: a young, sturdy fellow, still trying to find his place.

In the manner of firefighters everywhere, they were a dependable bunch, fun-loving, and ready to go to any lengths to protect the citizens in their care.

Why, then, did Caleb have this gnawing unease in his gut?

Still smelling of soot and smoke from this morning's warehouse blaze, the young captain panned the bay area, where a red ladder truck sparkled and its bugle gleamed, ready to sound the alarm. A wide orange stripe, bordered with blue, ran along the cinder-block walls, broken only by the city's Fire and Rescue emblem, which boasted outlines of an ax, a helmet, a ladder, and a pike pole.

Everything looked good.

And still, that sense that something was wrong.

He brushed it aside and stared off at the water tower across the street. That tower had been here for years, ready to serve this historic firefighting community. On the firehouse lawn, a flagpole waved the American and state flags in the clear day's breeze.

"Wisdom, Justice, Moderation . . . In God We Trust."

So read the words beneath Georgia's thirteen stars on a field of blue. The Peach State, one of the original colonies, was a great place to live.

Good job. Good location. Good crew.

But none of that solved the problems at home.

Caleb wandered outside, while Terrell Sanders used hand motions to guide Engine One back between the fire poles into the middle bay. The backup signal sounded, then Wayne hit the brakes as Terrell banged on the side of the truck.

Eric, the rookie, jumped down from the cab and rounded the front end. Beneath suspenders, his blue shirt was tucked into firefighting

pants with reflective strips down the sides. He approached Terrell, his head hung low.

"Terrell, man," he said. "My bad."

"This ain't no game." The black man poked a finger into his chest. "What you did was wrong. You playin' with people's lives."

"C'mon, man."

Terrell shirked any further discussion and stomped off in his boots, with Wayne at his heels.

Caleb went to the dumbfounded rookie. "Eric?"

"Yes, sir?"

"He's got a right to be upset with you. You left him in a dangerous spot and tried to be a hero."

"But, Captain . . ." Eric took a breath and lifted his arms. "I thought I heard someone calling for help."

"It was coming from outside the building."

"But it . . . It was so dark. I couldn't see anything."

"That's why you have to stay with your partner. He had no choice but to assume something had happened to you, and that you needed his help. You *never* leave your partner. Especially in a fire."

Eric nodded and looked down.

"My rookie year," Caleb said, "we almost lost one of our captains."

"Captain Campbell?"

"That's right. His partner was running low on air and left him on his own in a burning store. The reason I'm even standing here today, as a captain, is because of the things that man taught me, but he could've been gone just like that. On your own, your chances of survival drop in a hurry."

"Sir, weren't you the one who—?"

"I got lucky, Eric. I found him with seconds to spare. Okay, listen. Terrell's worked with me the past three years and he's a good guy. Give him time to cool down, and then you give him an apology."

"Captain, I know that I was wrong, but did you hear the way he—"

"And make it sincere."

"Yes. sir."

Caleb slapped his station's newest member on the shoulder and left him on his own. To his credit, Eric kept his mouth shut and faced the lonely duty of washing down the truck and equipment.

In the firehouse dining area, Capt. Caleb Holt and his crew were gathered for lunch. They worked twenty-four-hour shifts, with forty-eight in between, clocking in at eight a.m. Alarms had kicked off this morning for them, and he knew they were all famished after skipping breakfast.

"Round two, gentlemen." Lieutenant Simmons appeared with a second plate of hot wings and set it on the table along with a bottle of hot sauce.

"Wrath of God," the label read. "Hotter Than the Lake of Fire."

"Bring it on," Wayne said. "How come you only make this once a month, Lieutenant? This stuff 's good."

"'Cause man can't live on chicken wings alone, Wayne."

Wayne rubbed his belly. "This man can."

"Nah, you need the four food groups."

Caleb grabbed a few wings and passed the plate down the table. "He eats the four food groups—steak, fish, chicken, and pork."

"Hey, that's all I need," Wayne said.

Simmons made a face. "What you need is a bath. I can smell you from over here."

Despite the banter, Caleb noticed Terrell shooting Eric a hard look. The rookie dropped his gaze to his plate and kept eating.

"What I smell like," Wayne explained, "is a hardworkin' man. You should never be ashamed to smell like a man. That's why I don't wear deodorant."

Eric looked up. "You don't wear deodorant?"

"Only if absolutely necessary. Now, if this Wrath of God sauce came in a roll-on, I'd be wearing it every day." Wayne tapped a few drops onto his wings.

"I don't see how you eat that. That's insane hot."

The alarm sounded and all five men froze, ready to burst into action. After four beeps, the dispatcher clarified that the call was going to Caleb's previous station: "Engine Six, Battalion One, respond to 1516 Brookfield Drive. Vehicle fire in back parking lot. Time out, 12:41."

Caleb relaxed and went back to eating as the voice droned on through the speakers. He knew matters would be safe in the hands of his Station Six counterpart, Captain Loudenbarger.

"Thank You, God," Wayne exclaimed. "I never mind putting out fires, but not while I'm eatin' chicken wings."

"Don't say that unless you mean it." Simmons pointed at him with a pair of barbecue tongs.

"What're you talkin' about?"

"Don't be thanking God if you don't mean it."

Terrell rolled his eyes. "Aww, c'mon, man.H ow could anybody really mean that?"

"Excuse me?" Simmons was all business.

Caleb said, "Better watch out, Terrell. You're about to get a sermon."

"All that God stuff? Man, you might as well believe in Spider-Man."

"Hey, I went to school with a kid named Peter Parker," Wayne cut in.

"You don't think God is real?" Simmons pressed.

"Oh, absolutely . . . "Terrell said. "Not."

"That was his real name, too," Wayne prattled on to no one in particular. "We used to call him Spidey."

Simmons kept his focus on Terrell. "Why do you think there is no God?"

"Why do you think there is a God?"

"Don't go there, Terrell." Caleb had been through this discussion before.

"He wasn't no Spider-Man," Wayne continued. "Kinda walked like a chicken."

Simmons refused to be derailed by the driver's nonsense. "Okay, Terrell," he said, gesturing with a half-eaten wing. "So outta all the knowledge there is to know out there, how much do you think you know?"

"Outta all the knowledge?"

"All of it. How much do you think you know?"

Wayne's monologue continued unimpeded. "We used to say, 'Hey, Peter—climb that wall for us, dude.' He hated that."

Simmons turned his gaze toward Terrell. "So, Terrell, outta the ninety-five percent you don't know, you're positive there is no way God exists?"

"How do you know He exists?"

"I talked to Him this morning."

"See, you can't even say that, man."

"I'm pretty sure," Wayne mumbled between bites of chicken, "that Peter wore Spider-Man underpants to school. Just to make himself feel special."

This was too much. The others turned toward him in unified disbelief.

"What?" Wayne said.

"What're you talking about?" Caleb demanded.

"I'm saying that Peter Parker is real."

"And so is God," Simmons added.

"No," Terrell said. "He ain't."

"I'm telling you, He is."

"Man, you done lost your mind."

"All right, all right." Caleb wiped his hands with a napkin. "Eric, you've got cleanup duty. Wayne, I need you to finish the fire report."

"I'm all over it."

Caleb stood to leave, with Wayne and Simmons right behind him. He noticed his rookie lingering at the table while Terrell finished a last chicken wing. He knew it was best to let Eric

and Terrell work out their differences, but he felt the need to listen in—just in case a referee became necessary.

"Hey, man." Eric's tone was almost bashful. "I, uh . . . I blew it today."

"Mm-hmm."

"I shouldn't have left you like that, Terrell. It won't happen again."

"Better not, rookie."

"It won't."

"I know it won't." Terrell pushed away from the table. "'Cause I might not come back for you next time."

Caleb turned away, letting the dining room door close behind him. Those words had triggered anew his sense of discontentment.

His wife of seven years, Catherine, his dream girl—she'd been giving every indication that their relationship was over. Which meant he was failing as a husband. It was a feeling that didn't set well with him, and he'd tried to shove it down beneath his officer duties. Last night, though, they'd argued and Catherine had issued a warning similar to Terrell's: "You spend all your time rescuing other people, but when are you here for me? Never, Caleb. We hardly even talk. Well, don't expect me to come running after you. I can't do it anymore."

With that memory rumbling through his head, Caleb headed up to his office. Seven years was a good run. They'd given it a shot. At this point, he just wasn't sure he had the energy to keep trying.

Or the heart.

He sat at his desk and pulled out the station logbook. Enough of that. He had work to get done, always more work.

Chapter 4

The crew at Station One went without another call for the afternoon. Caleb was following his friend Lieutenant Simmons into the living area to catch the latest election results on TV, when a hand grabbed hold of his arm.

"Hey, Captain?" Wayne said. "When're you gettin' your boat?"

Caleb shrugged free. "I'm still saving for the one I want."

"Well, you just let me know. I'm right here and waiting."

"And why's that?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's about time I showed you my skills on the water. Maybe you haven't heard yet, but this boy can ski barefooted on one leg."

"Well, uh . . . That gives me something to look forward to."

"Oh yeah."

Caleb blinked in amazement. Did Wayne have no limit of self-confidence? He turned away and joined Simmons in front of the muted TV, where images flashed of the day's news.

"Hey, look," Simmons said. "Isn't that your wife?"

Caleb nodded.

Simmons picked up the remote and ratcheted the volume.

Catherine's voice purred through the speakers as she responded to a Channel 10 reporter: "Yes, we're grateful for the cancer center housed in our new medical tower, and we believe it will greatly impact the lives of our patients."

Shots of hospital equipment rolled as the reporter spoke. "Catherine Holt, public relations manager of Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital, went on to say that they will continue to provide world-class medicine for southwest Georgia. For WALB News, I'm Rebecca Mills."

Simmons nodded. "Your wife, she's a good woman."

"Pretty, too," Wayne said. "You're a lucky man."

Yeah? Well, you don't live with her, Caleb thought.

"How long've you two been together?"

"It's been what, Caleb? Seven years?" Simmons said.

"Something like that."

"Betcha still remember the first day you met." Wayne toggled an eyebrow. "A man doesn't forget that kinda thing."

"That was a long time ago," Caleb said. "C'mon, guys, we got stuff to do."

"Like what?" Wayne tapped his watch. "Man, it's already dinnertime."

"Then stop jabbering and go throw in some pizzas for us."

"It's not my—"

"You want kitchen cleanup?"

"Pizzas," Wayne said. "Coming right up, sir."

At Phoebe Putney, Catherine Holt was feeling proud of her accomplishments. Dressed in a professional skirt that flattered her slim figure, her clicking heels echoed along the tiles as she strode down the hall. She was at the top of her game, overseeing public relations at a thriving medical center and gaining the notice of her peers.

She passed a tall, clean-cut doctor in the corridor. Dr. Keller, was it? He was the facility's newest man of mystery, unassuming, yet boyishly handsome.

She approached the nurses' station with a padded day planner in hand, purse dangling from the crook of her elbow. Her identity badge—with her new position in red print—clung to the lapel of her buttoned suit jacket.

"Hey, Tasha," Catherine said.

Tasha looked up from her desk. She had a stethoscope around her neck and wore a brightly colored smock. "Hey, Cat. Just saw you on TV. Lookin' good."

"Oh, I missed it. I was giving a tour of the new cancer wing." She set purse and planner on the counter, then glanced at her watch. "Hey, has Robin left yet?"

"No, she's here." Tasha called to the back room. "Robin? Cat's here."

Robin Cates, a young nurse with a long, blonde ponytail, walked out in a blue tunic. She removed her glasses. "Hey." She gave Catherine a hug.

"How are you?"

"I'm good. How're you?"

"Good." Catherine shook out her hair and leaned an arm on the counter. "Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Four o'clock. You still want those scented candles?"

"Absolutely, bring 'em on. I wanna try them all."

"Good."

"And I'm gonna see my parents later. I thought they might like some, too."

"Ohhh." Robin lowered her voice. "Tell me, how are they?"

"You know, it's been a year since Mom's stroke. I've been trying to get her a new hospital bed and wheelchair, but their insurance doesn't cover it, and . . . I don't know. It's just so frustrating for my dad. He wants to help her, but he can't afford it. His own health issues have already cut into their retirement."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's all right." Catherine closed her planner and gathered up her keys. "Anyway, I need to run. But I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Right. I'll see you."

"Okay, bye."

Catherine turned to leave and bumped into Dr. Gavin Keller, whose eyes were fixed on the clipboard in his hand.

"Whoa. Hey, Catherine."

She felt flustered. "I'm so sorry, Dr. Keller."

"Call me Gavin, please."

"Gavin." Catherine liked the sound of that. He was one of the staff's newest additions, and she'd heard that he sought the slower pace and better opportunities that had eluded him in Orlando. "I'm sorry for almost running you over."

"Anytime," he said. "It's good to see you."

Anytime? What was that supposed to mean?

"You too," she said. "Take care."

As she headed down the hall, she was keenly aware of Gavin's appreciative gaze, and even from the nurses' desk his smooth baritone reached her.

"Sweet girl," he was saying. Then: "Tasha, would you file this for me?"

"Sure, Doctor."

Catherine paused and glanced back over her shoulder.

Tasha's face marked Gavin's departure with skepticism, followed by a none-too-subtle whisper to her coworker: "If I didn't know better, Deidra, I'd say the doctor has a thing for Cat."

Short and wide Diedra pursed her lips in agreement.

The two nurses exchanged a look and said in unison: "Mmm-hmmm."

Catherine hurried on, her cheeks flushed and her heart racing.

Catherine eased her Toyota Camry into her parents' driveway. Though they'd scaled down, by necessity, this lower-income house was nice enough—a single-level dwelling, guarded by shade trees and a row of bushes.

She knocked, but her dad's hearing had suffered of late, and she suspected he couldn't hear her. The door was unlocked, so she let herself in. Poking her head into the sitting room, she found Mr. Campbell helping his wife from the couch into a stock wheelchair.

She tried not to well up with tears. Even now, in his midsixties, her father had the strong yet caring arms of a fireman. She was reminded of being a young girl, pretending to sleep so that he would carry her from the sofa to her bed.

"Hello?" She gave a soft knock.

"Ohh. Hi, sweetheart."

"Hey, Daddy. How are you?"

"Great." The retired Captain Campbell gave her a hug. "Good to see you."

"You, too,"

"How's my favorite son-in-law doing? We haven't talked in a while."

Catherine acted like she hadn't heard that and bent to embrace her mother, letting their cheeks gently touch. "Hey, Mama. How are you, huh?"

Joy Campbell nodded. Although her gray hair was brushed, her eyes wide and alert, there was something sorrowful behind those pupils. The stroke that had put her in this chair had also stolen her ability to communicate by any means other than the small chalkboard in her lap.

"She's doing great today," Mr. Campbell said. "She had a good lunch, she took a nap, and we were thinking about watchin' a little TV before heading off to bed tonight. She still loves to catch those game shows."

"Wheel of Fortune. I bet she still guesses 'em quick as ever."

"She certainly does."

Catherine slid fingers through her mother's hair, over her ears. "Any word yet on getting her that custom bed and wheelchair?" She took her mom's hand.

"No," Mr. Campbell said. "They think as long as her current chair is working that she doesn't need anything else. But she can't sit in this one very long without it hurting her back. I have to wash her sores twice a day."

"We'll get you one, Mama." Catherine squeezed her hand gently. "And a better bed, too." Mrs. Campbell gave a brave, close-lipped smile.

Mr. Campbell walked to the doorway. "Can I get you something to drink, dear?"

"Sure, Dad. Do you have any sweet tea?"

"With lemon?"

"You know me," she said, thinking how nice it was to be known and understood. These days, there wasn't much of that in her own home. Twice as big, with only two occupants, the Holt residence still felt claustrophobic.

She turned longingly to her mother. "Mama, I wish we could talk."

Mrs. Campbell's eyes reflected the same desire.

"It's been so long since I've heard your voice. I miss you."

Mrs. Campbell bent to her chalkboard and wrote: I M SS YO T ...

Catherine filled in the empty spaces and squeezed her mom's hand. They sat together, eyes locked, sharing love much louder than words.

Chapter 5

Caleb Holt was off duty, ready to get some sleep and time away from the guys. He knew Catherine would be heading to work in a few minutes. Through the tinted windows of his truck, he saw her car in the garage between his mountain bike and a stack of supplies that included a blue Igloo.

How many times had they used that ice chest? Once? At that lake party last summer? And the bike?

Catherine had bought it for his birthday last year, but he preferred jogging. It burned more calories and gave him some physical outlet after his twenty-four-hour shifts.

He parked his burnt-red GMC Sierra in the driveway. Purchased from Jay Austin Motors, the truck was his pride and joy. He left just enough room for his wife to back out, and headed into the kitchen through the garage.

She emerged from the hallway, hair brushed and shiny over her pin-striped suit. The flared pant legs gave a fluid look to her movements. She'd always had a presence about her, a catlike grace befitting her nickname.

Not that it did much of anything for him anymore.

She cut around the bar into the kitchen. Remained silent.

So that's how it would be, huh? All these amenities—stone flooring, marble countertops, frosted-glass chandeliers—and they had nothing to say to each other.

Caleb set his duffel bag on the dining table and removed his captain's jacket. He tugged at his shirt, loosening up for a day off, and turned to the refrigerator—so new and shiny, he could almost shave in front of the monstrosity. One day, Catherine had reasoned, they would need the refrigerated storage space when they had children. Well, their professional existences had kept that reality at arm's length. At this rate, he wouldn't be a father till age forty.

Across the kitchen, Catherine was fiddling with that coffee grinder she adored. The woman and her caffeine. What was wrong with Maxwell House from a tin?

"You have breakfast already?" he asked.

"Yes."

He grabbed the milk from the refrigerator, shook it, and set it on the bar. "What'd you eat?"

"I had the last bagel and a vogurt."

He passed her on his way to the cupboard, where he pulled out a nearly empty box of Coney Bombs cereal.

Great. When was she going to get around to buying another box? He turned to chastise her, even as she returned the half gallon of milk to the fridge. The one he'd just pulled out.

"I was going to use that," he said.

"Then get it back out when you're ready."

"I am ready. Would you just let me do things in the order I want?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Catherine said. "You leave stuff out, and it usually sits there till I come cleaning up after you. Like I have nothing better to do."

"What about the shopping? You planning to make a grocery trip soon?"

She poured creamer into her travel mug. "Caleb, with the way your schedule works, you've got more time to go than I do."

"Hey, I just asked you a simple question. You don't need to get smart with me. You could've at least saved me some breakfast."

"Well, I never know when you're eating at home or going out. You don't tell me these things."

"Catherine, what is your problem?" Caleb's scavenging turned up a granola bar. Better than nothing. He slammed the cupboard door and turned. "Did I offend you by walking in the door this morning?"

"No. You just can't expect me to work every day and still get the groceries, while you sit at home looking at trash on the Internet and dreaming about getting your boat." She dipped a spoon into a bowl of sweetener and stirred her coffee.

Couldn't she even extend the courtesy of looking at him?

He stabbed a finger at the air. "Hey, you chose to take this job, and no one said you had to work full-time."

"We need the income, Caleb—especially since you tuck away a third of your salary saving for a boat we don't need. You've got twenty-four thousand dollars in savings when we have things in our house that need fixing."

"Like what?"

"The back door needs to be painted, the yard needs better landscaping, and I keep telling you I want to put more shelves in the closet."

"Those are called preferences, Catherine. Those are not needs. There's a difference. If you wanna spend your money on that stuff, go ahead. Fine. But I've been saving up for my boat for years." He turned his back, disgusted by this whole conversation. "You're not taking that from me."

"This is so pointless. I don't have time for this."

"Yeah, go on." He watched her scoop up her belongings as he tore into the granola bar. "And shut the door on your way out."

She did. Forcefully.

In the hallway something clattered onto the carpet, and when Caleb went to investigate, he found one of their wedding photos dislodged from the wall. He jammed it back onto its hook, not even waiting to see if it settled evenly.

Later in the afternoon, Catherine hosted Robin Cates and her passel of scented candles. Robin was on the couch, the Holt wedding album in her lap. Catherine took a seat next to her, with a bag of cookies and two drinks. She was dressed casually, done with the headaches of her workday. From the unlit candles on the table, she selected a lavender one and drew in its floral sweetness.

"Oh," Robin said. "Just look how happy you are. Catherine, these pictures are gorgeous."

"Thanks."

"Someday . . . " her friend said wistfully.

"Robin, you're a hopeless romantic. That's not real life, you know?"

"But it's every little girl's dream, right?"

"Yeah. And then we grow up."

Sounds of a car in the drive were followed by a visitor's knock on the door.

"Caleb," Catherine called down the hall.

He emerged from the master bedroom, outfitted in a gray T-shirt and navy sweatpants. Catherine saw Robin give him a quick approving look, then drop her gaze back to the album.

Another knock.

"I got it," Caleb said. He passed through the dining room.

Catherine didn't need to see their visitor to know it was Lieutenant Simmons. Simmons had arrived in Albany five years ago, after serving in Iraq, and quickly become one of her husband's best friends.

"Hey, Michael," Caleb was saying.

"You ready?"

"Yeah, let me get the drinks."

Catherine saw him duck into the kitchen and heard the fridge open. "Caleb, are you leaving?"

"Told you already, I'm going out with Michael."

"You didn't tell me."

"I did too." He appeared in the archway, bottles of Gatorade in hand. "It was this morning. Or maybe last night."

"Well, when will you be back?"

"Later." He turned to leave.

"You think, on your way, you could go by the store and—"

The door slammed on her sentence and she clenched her jaw. Beside her, Robin was still looking through the album as though nothing had happened. "Oh, I love this one. You were such a beautiful bride."

Catherine dared not open her mouth. She nodded in feeble agreement, thinking how much easier it was for some people to hold on to the fairy tale. The reality was that this castle was no longer big enough for a fair maiden and her handsome prince.

Simmons leaned over the Sierra's truck bed, his dark eyes taking in the blanket of greenery that stretched toward the woods. "That your property all the way out there?"

"Last time I checked," Caleb said.

"And is that a pond I see back through those trees?"

"I've never taken you out there?"

"No. But, uh, I'm not into romantic walks with my guy friends, thank you. You ready to bounce?"

"Ready."

"You tell Catherine we're going to the gym?" Simmons asked.

"Nah, she's good." Caleb opened the driver's door. "Oh, hold on. I left my wallet inside, and I need to put some gas in this beast. Man, if I go back in there, she's gonna think up some errand to send me on."

"I can go in."

"Then she'll just ask you, and we'll both be in the doghouse. Hold tight. I'll be right back."

Caleb bounded back through the garage, turned the door handle slowly, and eased himself through the opening. He could hear Robin and Catherine still talking, could hear the flap of the wedding album's pages and the crinkling of candle wrapping.

"Mmm, that smells so good," Catherine said.

"Aren't those incredible?" *Flapp*. "Oh," Robin said, "I love this church. Does it still look like that?"

"That was many years ago. I have no idea."

Caleb glided into the kitchen on the soles of his tennis shoes.

Flapp.

"And your cake—oh my goodness, Cat."

Seven years ago, Caleb had been so enraptured with his new bride and thoughts of the honeymoon suite that he couldn't even remember what flavor that cake had been. Vanilla? Carrot? A Christmas fruitcake, for all he knew.

Flapp.

"Your dress was so pretty, I can hardly stand it," Robin gushed to Catherine. "Okay, so if you could go back to your wedding day and talk to yourself, what would you say?"

No reply.

Caleb palmed his wallet from the counter, then started to sneak back out, but his wife had still given no response and he found his curiosity getting the better of him. What did women talk about when the men weren't around? Would she exaggerate his attributes, as guys were known to do? Brag about his earning power and the silky nightwear he'd bought for her last Valentine's Day?

"Don't do it," Catherine answered at last.

Caleb froze.

"What?" Robin said. "Don't do it, as in . . . you wouldn't marry him again?"

"I mean, if you want me to be honest."

Caleb felt his head spin, knocked off balance by his wife's confession. She didn't mean that. Did she? Every couple had their ups and downs. It would pass. She was just being a woman, living in the emotions of the moment.

"But I thought you guys were doing pretty good, Cat. I mean, you've been married for seven years."

"Seven *bland* years," Catherine responded. "I don't know. We started off great. It was so romantic, but we just went downhill from there."

Caleb stood at the counter, trying to stay still.He heard Simmons come back inside, and even the lieutenant seemed to recognize the need to be quiet.

"I don't even feel like I know who he is anymore," Catherine said. "We fight more than we do anything else. Lately, I just catch myself thinking that . . . that this is not the man I wanna grow old with."

Turning, Caleb saw Simmons give a jerk of the head. It was time to leave. Yeah, that was the best plan right now—to leave before it got worse. But how much worse could it get?

"Catherine, I am so sorry. I had no idea it was that bad."

"It's all right," she said to Robin. "I... I'm just tired of playing this game, you know? We've been heading in different directions for a while."

"So, what're you gonna do?"

Caleb held his breath, straining to hear his wife's answer.

Silence.

Simmons was gesturing, trying to curtain Caleb's eavesdropping.

Still not a word.

Well, Caleb figured, that was about right. Catherine had been giving him nothing for weeks now—no affection, no understanding, and certainly nothing close to a civil conversation. Was it wrong of him to expect those things in his own home?

He eased outside with his wallet and carefully closed the door. He climbed behind the Sierra's steering wheel, turned the key, and cranked up the stereo. Simmons, to his credit, nodded his chin with the music and made no comment.

Chapter 6

In the station weight room, Simmons completed his final bench press and sat up for a breather. Sweat was glistening on his forehead and dripping down his jaw. His stereo was plugged in beside him, blaring music and keeping the adrenaline flowing.

On a nearby universal machine, Caleb churned out the rest of his reps, letting the weights smash against each other—up, down, *clang* . . . up, down, *clangg*—as he worked out his frustration.

At last he sat up, panting. "My triceps are burning."

"You're complaining?" Simmons said. "Man, I think those weights are ready to apologize for whatever they did wrong to you."

Caleb smirked, then reached for his Gatorade. Simmons turned down the music and wiped at his neck with a towel.

"It ain't working, Michael," Caleb said. "How is it that I get respect everywhere I go except in my own house?"

"I've been there. That's a hard place to be."

"What'd you do about it?"

"I realized that it wasn't my marriage that was broken. I just didn't know how to make it work."

"What does that mean?"

Simmons thought about it a moment, then pointed to a treadmill. "That treadmill's not broken, but if you don't know how to run it, it ain't gonna work for you."

"What? Are you saying I need counseling?"

"Well, I think everybody needs counseling."

"Hey." Caleb raised a finger. "Look, man. I am not about to go talk to somebody I don't even know, about something that's none of their business."

"All right. Well, Catherine does need to respect you. But just remember that a woman's like a rose. If you treat her right, she'll bloom. If you don't, she'll wilt."

"Where'd you get that?"

Simmons took a sip of his juice and grinned. "Counseling."

Caleb threw his empty bottle at Simmons, who only smiled as Caleb smirked and looked away.

Catherine was straightening up the house. She and Robin had shared Papa John's pizza after a relaxing, soul-sharing afternoon. On top of that, Catherine had bought some beautiful candles. She lit one now, trying to set a mood, to establish some atmosphere in this cold, immaculate dungeon. The house was like one of those model homes—presentable, even impressive on the surface, yet empty and lifeless within.

She heard Caleb's truck pull into the driveway. She held on to a slim hope that he would have something nice to say about the scent she had picked out, maybe show some interest in her day.

Something other than: "How much money did you give Robin for those things? What? You bought some for your mother, too? Like that's gonna do any good, when what she needs is a good wheelchair. I mean, a candle? C'mon."

That would be so predictable. So Caleb.

She slipped back to the bathroom and ran a brush through her hair, touched up her mascara. She waited as the door opened and closed, as his feet scuffed through the kitchen—no doubt streaking the floor she had polished this morning. Not that he would notice.

She heard the refrigerator open. Telling herself to give him the benefit of the doubt, she flicked her hair back, squared her shoulders, and walked into the kitchen.

Her first observation: He had snuffed out the candle, and only a thin wisp remained in the air above the counter.

One more of her hopes . . . up in smoke.

"What're you doing?" she said, despising the sound of her own voice, but unable to halt the flow of disappointment.

"I see you left me no pizza," Caleb shot back. He was in his workout clothes, a ring of sweat around the collar of his T-shirt. He closed the refrigerator, then moved toward the cupboard.

"Caleb, I just lit that candle. I like the way it smells."

"Well, I don't. Did you leave me any dinner at all?"

She brushed her hair over her ear and looked down. "I assumed you were eating with Michael."

"Does it not occur to you that there are two people living in this house and both of them need to eat?"

"You know what, Caleb—if you would communicate with me, maybe I could have something for you."

He slammed the cupboard door, still empty-handed. He approached the bar, setting both hands on the marble and facing her. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult?"

Catherine braced herself across from him. Well, at least they were looking each other in the eyes. That was a first this week.

"Oh," she said, "I'm making everything difficult? It seems to me like I'm the one carrying the weight around here, while you're off doing your own thing."

"Excuse me? I'm the one out there working to pay this mortgage, and I pay for both of the cars."

"Yeah, and that's all you do. I pay all of our bills with my salary—"

"Which you agreed to do." He jabbed a finger at her. "That's fair. Do you not like this house? Do you not like your car?"

"Ohhh." She felt things coming apart inside but couldn't hold herself back—not now that he had dragged this into the open. "Caleb, who takes care of this house? *Me*. Who washes all the clothes? *Me*." He turned away—typical—and fumbled with a basket of packaged goodies for something to munch on. She continued, refusing to be muffled by his lack of attention. "Who gets all the groceries? *Me*. Not to mention I'm helping my parents every weekend. You know, I've got all this pressure on me, and the only thing you ever do for anybody is for yourself."

It was bad enough to have his wife throwing out accusations and waving her hand at him, as though he were a defendant on the stand, but what really got under Caleb's skin, what really stuck in his craw, what turned up the heat so fast he thought he would explode, was her blatant disrespect for him as a husband and as a man.

She was staring at him now, her voice raised.

Would she be the one to deride his every maneuver while he crawled through a building in search of victims? Or as he applied pressure to a severed artery and watched the life go out of a college kid's eyes? He had a crew of men that backed him up without question, and here in his own home he couldn't butter bread without her questioning his technique.

Eye to eye. Nose to nose.

Okay, was that how she wanted to do this? Oh yeah—he knew how to fight on these terms.

"Let me tell *you* something," he said. "You don't know the first thing about pressure." He whipped around the counter, getting right up in her face, punctuating his words with his hand in the air. "You think I... I put out house fires for myself? Or rush to car wrecks at two a.m. for myself? Or pull a child's body out of a lake for myself? You have no idea what I go through!"

"Oh yeah," she said. "Well, what do you do around here other than watch TV and waste time on the Internet? You know what, if looking at that trash is how you get fulfilled, that's fine, but I will not compete with it." She turned to leave.

"Well, I sure don't get it from you."

"And you won't." She snapped around, speaking to his back now as he looked in yet another cupboard for food.

All Caleb had wanted was a bite to eat, a shower, and some peace of mind. Now he tried to avoid meeting her eyes for fear of letting the animal within roar to life for the kill. Her words were right there, though, buzzing through his head.

"You know why?" she ranted on. "Because you care more about saving for your stupid boat, and pleasing yourself, than you ever did for me!"

Caleb slammed the doors shut so hard he could feel the floor shake.

"Stop! I'm *sick* of you!" He turned and came at her, veins bulging in his neck and in the hand that jutted toward her. He edged her back, cornering her against the wall. Something in his male psyche had snapped, further provoked by the terror in her eyes. "You *disrespectful*, *un*grateful, *self*ish woman!"

Catherine teared up and shook her head. "I'm not selfish—"

"How dare you say that to me!" He was out of control, his voice gravelly and cracking in rage. "You constantly nag me, and you drain the life outta me. I'm tired of it!" Catherine was sobbing now, her chest heaving. She closed her eyes and turned her head down and away, flinching at his every word.

But he wasn't done.

"If you can't give me the respect I deserve—look at me!—then what's the point of this marriage?"

She shook her head back and forth, her chin quivering, her lips sealed shut. He paced, turned, looked back at her. He felt like a tiger measuring its prey, and he hated himself for it, hated the fury that seemed so volatile just beneath the surface of everything ordered and tidy about their lives, yet he meant everything he'd said.

He was done. Finished.

Catherine covered her mouth as she bleated: "I want out. I just want out."

"If you want out . . ." Caleb got back into her face and threw his whole body into his closing statement. "That's *fine* with me!"

Catherine collapsed over the counter, sobbing.

Caleb knew he should feel something for this woman he had sworn to honor and cherish—he'd been convinced he would die for her—but now all he felt was relief to be done with it. The torture could end for both of them.

He stormed out the back door, arms shaking with rage. His hands turned into iron fists, in need of a physical outlet. He stomped to the edge of the driveway, turned, stomped back again, searching for an object on which to take out the brunt of his anger.

The large green trash can caught his attention.

He walked up to the inanimate container and kicked it. Hard. It toppled onto its side, sending garbage bags tumbling onto the dirt. That only spurred him on. He hefted it with both arms and sent it crashing into the wall of the brick house, spilling refuse like entrails from a wounded beast.

He'd drawn first blood, so to speak. He had won.

Easing off now, he turned.

And realized he had an audience.

Mr. Rudolph, the elderly next-door neighbor, was standing ten yards away in a threadbare bathrobe and cinched pajama bottoms. His eyes were hooded and hard to read. Vulturelike, he stood hunched at the shoulders with one hand holding the lid of his own trash receptacle, the other dangling a kitchen garbage bag over the opening.

Oh, great. This was just wonderful.

Caleb dropped his hands to his sides, thought of shoving them into his pockets in a show of nonchalance, then simply offered a half wave. "Uh . . . Mr. Rudolph."

The man replied in a low monotone. "Caleb."

Caleb nodded, then went to work setting things back where they belonged and cleaning up his mess. Mr. Rudolph dumped his own trash. Caleb shot him one more look, hoping to have won back approval.

With a blank stare, Mr. Rudolph pulled tight the folds of his robe and trudged back to the safety of his own home.

In the master bedroom, Catherine cried until there were no tears left. Her cheeks burned with the salty trails of her grief and anger. She didn't deserve to be treated this way. After an hour curled alone on the bed—their bed—she felt herself begin to turn numb.

It started from somewhere deep within, a place that had held out a thin hope until tonight. Well, that hope had been snuffed out, and she closed the door on it now, once and for all.

She stood and shuffled toward the dresser. The numbness spread with icy resolve from her chest, through her arms and legs, and up into her face. She stared at herself in the mirror, noticing that her lips had turned bloodless and pale, pressed into a thin, hard line.

A candle burned on the dresser, beside a framed photo taken four years earlier while Caleb and Catherine spent a weekend at a bed-and-breakfast in Charleston.

Had that vacation ever happened?

Were those people in the picture just photo doubles, paid to smile and look good? No, that was them. It was real.

They'd loved each other in a previous lifetime, but things had changed.

Catherine Holt removed her wedding ring and stuffed it behind the garments in her top dresser drawer. Down the hall, the spare bedroom door closed loudly behind the harried movements of her husband. Smart man. He had no place in *her* bed, not tonight. Not ever again, for all she cared.

She slammed the drawer shut. Turned off the lamp. Blew out the candle. This flame had gone out for good.

The Making of *Fireproof*

By Stephen Kendrick

DECEMBER 2005

My brother, Alex, had just finished jogging and called me outside my house to share the news. "I think I've got the storyline for the next movie," he said enthusiastically. At that time, *Facing the Giants* was edited and ramping toward a theatrical release the following September. We didn't know what to expect from it, but had already begun a season of prayer asking God for direction about what should come next.

Lord, what do You want the next movie to be about? We've got multiple ideas, but Yours are always better. We need Your wisdom.

We began asking specifically for a story that would impact the culture. We had waited and prayed for several months. Now on my driveway, Alex looked at me and declared, "I just got an idea for a movie about marriage."

Marriage?

When you think of movie ideas believers long to see, you imagine a Christian time-travel flick or an end-times thriller about the mark of the beast, loaded with chase scenes and explosions. But when was the last time you saw a movie that honored and tried to rescue marriages? *The Parent Trap*?

That day, Alex began to lay out the initial idea of what he called *The Love Dare*. After listening to him, I said, "I believe this is of God. Married couples desperately need this right now. The body of Christ needs it!" We began to pray for the Lord to develop this very unlikely plot into a screenplay that would please Him. So a new season of focused prayer began . . . for marriages to be impacted through the next movie.

FALL 2006

While developing the storyline, God surprised us with the response to *Facing the Giants*. This \$100,000 football drama produced by untrained volunteers from our South Georgia church grossed \$10 million in theaters and would become the top-selling DVD in Christian bookstores in 2007. Thousands were reportedly coming to Christ through it, and churches were creating effective ways to utilize the movie for ministry. Our Sherwood church family was thrilled!

SPRING 2007

Over the next several months, the Lord graciously allowed *Giants* to be distributed in thirteen languages on DVD to fifty-six countries, resulting in an international ministry. E-mails started pouring in with unbelievable stories of how this little church-made movie (that openly honors Jesus and the Word of God) was spreading to unlikely places.

International retailers were showing clips in their training classes. A cruise ship was playing it continuously in their cabin rooms. A Turkish airline featured it as their in-flight movie. Teens in China were on YouTube, uploading their own versions of the Death Crawl, and NFL players were distributing it to their teams. The amazing stories of God's goodness were overwhelming. He was doing more than we could ask or imagine.

While movie critics scratched their heads and blogged about it, we shared a sense of awe at the Lord as He continued to glorify Himself through our weakness. No one could take the credit but Him!

Countless scripts and books started landing in our offices at Sherwood Baptist Church with notes that said, "God told me that my story needs to be your next movie." Sports dramas,

dark thrillers, and pro-life stories piled up along with my favorite—the kung fu pastor who beats up vampires in Jesus' name.

But our focus shifted to developing "The Love Dare" movie. We believed God was inspiring the idea. Our wives and pastors were supportive and agreed we should move forward. We studied the Scriptures to find that marriage is a huge priority to God. Hebrews 13:4 says that marriage should be honored by all. It was the first human institution established by God, and one that families, children, churches, and governments are built upon. If marriage crumbles, so does everything built on it.

Looking around us, we saw that the need was massive. Our culture has fallen so far from God's design for marriage. It is supposed to be the strongest and safest human relationship. A haven of unconditional love. And most importantly, a picture of Christ and His Bride. (Ephesians 5) We found that 90 percent of Americans get married at some point in their lives, but I'd argue that most of those marriages are not Christ-like.

Statistically, fewer people are valuing marriage. You often hear pop culture stars say statements like, "I don't need a piece of paper to solidify my relationship," revealing they have totally missed its meaning. In addition, young couples are foolishly getting married with no marriage preparation or counseling. Husbands and wives are not seeking or obeying God's Word concerning their roles and responsibilities. We see pornography and divorce destroying families. However, we're also watching God's Word bring liberty, health, and healing to marriages that obey and seek Him.

We began praying that this movie would throw a lifeline to couples considering divorce and that we would also inspire strong marriages toward greater love and intimacy. Ultimately, we hoped to directly affect the rate of divorce in our culture.

SUMMER 2007

After Alex and I developed the plot, my mother-in-law suggested we tell the story through the backdrop of a firefighter. When we thought about it, the parallels between the two worked. Firefighters constantly respond to fires that spark up around them— and so must husbands and wives. Firefighters must communicate well, learn to protect one another, and be willing to lay down their lives for each other—so must husbands for their wives. Firefighters never leave their partner—and neither should couples.

Alex suggested the title *Fireproof* since it carried multiple meanings, both spiritually and literally. I looked up the word in the dictionary to find a unique definition. When something is fireproof, it does not mean it prevents fire, but that it is able to withstand it when it comes. Since all marriages encounter "fires" of some sort, this seemed fitting.

FALL 2007

After our pastors agreed that *Fireproof* would be Sherwood's next production, our church's prayer ministry began praying for the needed resources. God confirmed the direction by delivering in amazing ways! More than twelve hundred people from our community volunteered to serve in some capacity. The Albany fire department offered their stations, equipment, and new trucks for our use. Multiple homes and businesses were opened to us, and a local hospital offered an entire wing for the shoot. Before we knew it, we had all sixteen needed locations available for free.

We prayed for the right people to play the lead roles of Caleb and Catherine Holt, and began the casting process at the church. After pouring through many auditions, a young lady named Erin Bethea was cast as Catherine after grasping the heart of the role and making us cry with her performance. For Caleb, our pastor, Michael Catt, suggested we call Kirk Cameron because of his acting experience and passion for the gospel. Kirk, who is a big *Facing the Giants*

fan, quickly caught the vision behind *Fireproof* and volunteered to invest in this ministry. And our friends at Provident Films agreed to distribute the movie before the first frame was shot.

Kirk was blessed to be on a set where daily prayer and encouragement were the norm, not to mention the Southern cheese grits and boiled peanuts he learned to love. We were blessed by his professionalism, and to have him help Alex and me craft the scene where the gospel is presented.

As the production picked up speed, we were amazed at how the church family rallied together in service and prayer. Ministry leaders from around the nation flew in to see part of the production and watched our church members cooking, sewing, building, acting, and praying together. The Lord was showing up daily to enable and provide. While filming a rescue scene, we needed to place a wrecked car onto train tracks but found it too heavy to move. While our crew stood around staring at it, the man who lives next to the tracks walked out into his front yard and said, "You need a forklift? I've got one in my backyard you can use." He then drove it around his house, picked up the car, and moved it in place. Our director of photography looked at me and said, "Unbelievable! What are the chances that anyone within a hundred-mile radius of where we are has a forklift in their backyard ready to be used?" God is good.

Although we were consistently amazed at answered prayer, the production was not all peaches and cream. Hundreds of people working sixteen-hour days in close quarters for months can be challenging. Equipment failure, personal injury, and family needs are all part of the equation. One Sunday, during church, we received word that one of our cameramen, Robert "Chip" Monk, had flipped his car on the way back to Albany and was tragically killed. The crew was shocked and chose to shut down production for a week to mourn and minister to his pregnant wife. This only drew us closer together and ignited a greater passion for investing in eternal things.

The other dynamic is spiritual warfare. We've found that the enemy knows where to attack based on where God is working and where believers are praying. Satan is always trying to discourage, divide, and distract the body of Christ. We sought to daily guard against this by having morning devotions together and prayer times on the set. Churches from across the nation also began e-mailing us of their corporate prayer support for the project.

We praise God for the way the body of Christ is working together to try to save and fireproof marriages. When the movie was completed, we were thrilled to have more than fifty marriage ministries extend their support for the ministry of the movie.

The more we looked at the dynamic of marriage, the more we saw the fires that could naturally ignite. When a man and woman tie the knot, they are joining their hurts, fears, baggage, and imperfections. They unpleasantly discover how selfish they are and how sinful their spouse is. At the same time, communication barriers, work pressures, health issues, and financial needs usually flare up at some point and add heat to the relationship.

God's Word declares that God is sovereign in the midst of all of this. He created marriage as a good thing. He uses it as a tool to eliminate loneliness, establish families, raise children, and bless us with relational intimacy. Marriage also forces us to grow up and deal with our own issues with the help of a permanent partner. It causes us to die to ourselves in order to love another person unconditionally. Marriage can really test us and purify us by fire! It is a picture of what Jesus does for us.

Through the story of *Fireproof*, we want movie fans and readers to see a marriage go through the fire and then see what happens when God's truth and love get involved. Our hope is to use the art form of movie making and novels to realistically show some of the fights and struggles that married couples experience daily and then hold up the truth of God's Word to deal with those struggles.

Our prayer at Sherwood has been that the Lord would help us take the gospel to the ends of the earth and to help prepare the Bride of Christ for His soon return! May God get the glory!