

## FLAMES RISING

by

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What do you pack when you have four minutes to leave?

My heart thudded double time as I stared at the man standing on my front porch. A man in firefighting paraphernalia, complete with oxygen tank and protective mask, now raised so he could speak.

"You haven't got much time, ma'am," he said. He stared at me. "Are you all right?"

I mentally shook myself, tried to speak through my dry mouth. "I...I'm fine." I pressed my hand to my forehead. "It's...it's just such a shock."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure." Sympathy played across his face. "But you need to pack your necessities, ma'am. We're evacuating the area in four minutes. There'll be a van by to pick you up."

He peered behind me as though searching for something hidden inside my home. "Are you by yourself?"

Icy cold reality struck. Billy! How could I have forgotten, even for a moment, my ten-year-old son?

"No," I clutched the door frame, tried to still the trembling in my limbs. "My son. Billy. I've got to find Billy."

I half-turned away from the fireman.

"Fine, ma'am. Get your boy and be ready to leave in....' he glanced at his watch "....now, three minutes." He pivoted and headed for the street where a bright red fire truck dominated the two-lane rural road.

I sucked in a sobering breath. Billy. First I had to find my son, then figure what to pack for both of us. And I had almost no time to do it in.

Whirling, I slammed the door and ran toward the back of the house. "Billy. Where are you? Billy?"

No response sent a wave of nausea followed by one of dizziness through me. Where had my son disappeared to? A few minutes ago, he'd been watching out the den window as black smoke rose above the treetops in the distance with an occasional flicker of a yellow-orange flame accenting the oncoming terror.

"Billy!" My yell was more one of terror than inquiry. No. I mustn't let panic stop me from doing what had to be done. My son was likely in his room, bored with staying indoors since the smoky air was barely breathable.

I'd suspected we might have to evacuate. With the wildfires in the area, from the news on television, there was an excellent chance we were right in the path of the worst of the inferno. Now it appeared I was right. I suppressed a sob. Being a widow was bad enough, but at a time like this, it could be deadly if I didn't pull myself together and get my son and our belongings ready to leave.

Rushing into my bedroom, I jerked open the closet door and pulled out a battered suitcase. One I hadn't used in several years since we'd moved into this little house in the country. The house my husband and I bought just before he was called back to active duty in the Army.

The house where I'd brought home our child from the hospital and four years later, mourned the death of my husband, claimed too early by a roadside bomb in another country. Now, another structure to become tinder for the raging flames that rose higher and higher as the fire continued its deadly advance.

I threw clothing into the case, a few cosmetic items, then slammed it shut. I'd save the rest of the room for Billy's things.

Hurrying from my room, I raced down the hall toward his domain. The bedroom so lovingly decorated to suit a young boy's tastes. How he would hate the thought of it all being destroyed.

"Billy." I threw open the door and looked toward the bed, expecting to find him with his nose buried in a handheld video game or a comic book.

No sign of him. Surely he hadn't gone outside.

With a sickening certainty, I realized it was likely that was exactly where he was. Either in the back yard, sitting on his tire swing, watching the oncoming fire, or in the front poking into the bright red truck sitting in outside our house.

I couldn't help the Mama Bear growl in my throat. But no time to think of anything but getting Billy some clothes and a toy or two and making it to the front of the house where we would be picked up...any minute.

Throwing items into the suitcase, I snapped the locks shut and headed for the front door. Exiting onto the porch, purse in hand, I started to extract my keys to lock it.

Idiot. There wouldn't be anything left of our home. Why bother to lock it?

Suppressing a sob, I stumbled forward, down the sidewalk, and headed toward the fire truck. Several firefighters clustered together near the front end of the vehicle with an occasional glance at the opposite side. The side I couldn't see.

It didn't take a genius to figure out where I'd find my son.

Racing around the back of the truck, I stopped and stared. Billy, with a fireman's hat on his head, stood erect, clasping a wide-mouthed fire hose in his hand, part of it draped over his shoulder.

"Billy Henderson, what do you think you're doing?" If the shrillness of my voice didn't get his attention, my threatening advance toward him certainly should.

He focused on me, guilt written large on his freckled face. "Oh, hi, Mom. I...I was just gonna help the firefighters keep the fire from burning our house."

A combined wave of tenderness, mingled with anger at his disobedience for leaving the house, plus the oppressiveness of the oncoming disaster washed over me. I dropped the suitcase, ran forward, and clasped him in my arms.

"Oh, Billy, I didn't know where you were. I was so worried." I hugged him, then held him away at arm's length. "What are you doing with that hat on?"

"Don't worry, Mom. The Chief said it was okay. All firefighters gotta have a helmet. If I'm gonna fight this fire, I need one, too."

I wavered between amusement and anger. "You aren't going to fight any fire, young man. We have to leave." I took a look over my shoulder. Sure enough a van pulled up behind the fire truck. The driver gestured a 'come on' toward me.

Grabbing the suitcase with one hand, I snatched the hat from Billy's head, the fire hose from his hand, and grasped him by the shoulder to head toward our waiting ride.

"Let's go. Now."

He tugged against my grip. "But Mom. I can't leave. If I leave, who's gonna save our house? All our stuff? We can't just walk away." His blue eyes begged for understanding.

Sadness at the reality of the situation hit me. I bit my lip. "We have to go, Billy. There'll be another house for us somewhere. We'll find something."

I steered him toward the van, waited until he climbed inside. Handing the driver my suitcase, I settled myself in one of the vacant seats, not even acknowledging the other occupants, most of whom sat silent with stunned expressions on their faces.

The van backed up and pulled around the fire truck.

Billy, nose pressed to the window, watched as one of the firemen picked up the hat from where it landed on the ground while another recoiled the hose my son had held.

"I'm gonna be a firefighter when I grow up, Mom. Then I can save people's houses. Maybe these will be able to save ours." He turned to look at me, hope bright in his eyes, his desire for a miracle obvious.

Trying to swallow, I patted his shoulder. "Maybe, Billy. But even if they don't succeed I know they'll try their very best. It'll be okay. We'll be okay. Don't worry about the firefighting until you're older."

He pulled away a little, mutiny clear on his face. "I could have fought that fire. I had the hose and everything."

I tried to smile. "I know, son. I know. But we have to let this go. God will provide for us. We'll find another place."

Billy slumped against me, turned his face into my arm. "I know I'm too little to fight a fire now, Mom. But one day I won't be." He glanced out the window, regret obvious. "Guess I can't really help now. But boy, there's a big part of me that wants to give it a shot."

THE END