

Fire Dream

Firefighter Crime Series

by E.R. Yatscoff

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Dedication

To the memory of the late, great Captain Ralph ‘Scoop’ Hansch of the Edmonton Fire Rescue Service.
A wonderful mentor and Olympic gold medalist.

Special thanks to my writer's group — Edna Gerrie, Tim Padleki, Savanna Harvey, and Ray Suchow.
Robert Bull; Sam Markham loves you.

“The tale has lots of twists and a reveal, that I didn’t see coming. This novel offers a fresh perspective into firefighting, arson and revenge.” - Caffeinated Reviewer

A fresh angle in the crime/mystery genre. Not another police, lawyer, or PI story.

“You inherit the sins; you inherit the flames.”

—Bruce Springsteen, ‘Adam Raised A Cain.’

Chapter 1

Saturday

Early morning light leaked through the bathroom window as Gerry Ormond wiped shaving foam from his face and ear lobes. He glanced at yesterday’s newspaper item that Joni, his seventeen-year-old daughter, taped beside the bathroom mirror.

LOCAL HERO KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT FUNDRAISER GALA

Gerry still wasn’t sure how it felt to be called a hero. It was the first question everyone asked. Firefighting was his job. Immediately following the sensational rescue of a small child, before the adrenaline dump trickled out of him, he’d felt like Superman. These days his celebrity status was merely a means to an end, which was raising money for the Burn Fund. Gerry towed off his face and put on his dark blue uniform shirt with the double stripe of captain’s bars on the epaulets. He thought it odd how, since all the interviews and appearances, his fire district inexplicably became number one on the hit parade in arson fires. No such thing as an accidental fire in his district these days. Odds on, sometime today he’d probably be responding to a set fire.

He just hoped no one would die this time.

*

Smoke, the color of dirt, leaked from the eaves of the house and curled low across the Vancouver neighborhood, spoiling a perfect blue sky. The kitchen window was already baked black and brown with blotchy yellow patches. Extremely hot inside.

Not a happy day for someone.

Neighbors crowded the sidewalk across the street, staring, speaking quietly to each other. A few women occasionally moved their hands over their mouths. They likely knew the homeowners and were

horrified to see the devastation. Men tightly folded their arms across their chests. A dozen kids rode their bikes in circles in the middle of the street, thrilled to see a fire truck on their block.

At the curb, the red fire truck marked its territory with blinking white strobes and red rotators. Its centrifugal pump whined at high revs as the operator stood at the panel, a steady hand on the controls, keeping his eyes on the fire attack crew, the pressure gauges, and ears attuned to the radio. A 44mm Combat Hose snaked up the driveway from the fire truck to three firefighters beside the house.

The firefighters shifted from one foot to the other in an attempt to contain the adrenaline rippling through them. Their bulky yellow duty gear shone in the reflected light of the nearby unit.

Captain Gerry Ormond, in his red helmet, stood out from the other men wearing yellow helmets. Ormond was a veteran with years of hard-won knowledge under his belt. His was the responsibility to strategize the attack on the fire, but given the clever firebug loose in the district, strategy might not be worth a pinch of salt.

The moment his rig pulled up to the curb, Captain Ormond sized up the bungalow, analyzed the situation, and formed a basic attack plan. The front and basement windows hadn't yet blackened, and smoke only emanated from the rear half of the home where the kitchen was normally located. He suspected the occupant might have left something on the stove or in the oven. That would be a real change. Lately, he'd had no such luck.

Ormond cursed under his breath; odds on, sensing this was the work of the firebug again.

Rolling halfway to the residence, dispatch reported no occupants home. When they'd pulled up, the neighbor woman who'd called 911 confirmed she'd seen both occupants leave an hour ago. Every firefighter took that information with a grain of salt. Start believing second-hand information and you'd be sure to have more fire deaths. A search was always carried out.

The captain gestured to the door, where smoke leaked from around its frame. The portable radio in his chest pocket chirped with chatter from dispatch and incoming units. Sirens wailed urgently in the distance as incoming support units neared. He gestured with his gloved hand, giving a quick-fire attack plan, speaking to his men through the opening in his clear facemask. The men performed a rapid visual check on their colleagues' equipment and duty coats from top to bottom. One of the men reached across to another and tucked his flash hood in further down his collar. Each man nodded to the captain; ready to roll.

Captain Ormond angled his head down to his shoulder and spoke into the portable radio mike attached to his shoulder strap. "Dispatch, Pump 13 Captain Ormond and two going on rapid fire attack. Next arriving unit take command. We will need immediate ventilation." He'd heard on the radio as they were halfway to the scene that Capt. Fred Hurley would be commanding that support unit.

The crew secured their helmets, twisted regulators onto the opening of their facemasks, clicked on the voice amps, and reached behind to crank open the valve on their thirty-pound tanks. Air pushed into their facemasks, the regulators shrieking against the pressure regulators.

One of the men quickly went around the corner of the house and smashed a window with an axe. Smoke rolled out through the opening curling around the corner, allowing some heat to escape. In a moment, he returned.

The captain pointed to the door and made a fist. It was a signal for Firefighter Bruno Martella. The big man took three steps back from the door, then surged forward, lifting his leg waist-high at the last second for a mighty kick. His steel-shanked boot landed squarely beside the doorknob. The wood gave with a

resounding crack, punching in the door, its top hinge ripped from the frame. The door leaned inside at a broken angle. It was Bruno's patented 'Karate King' maneuver.

The men dropped to one knee and bent their heads as if genuflecting. Hot smoke, dirty from melting plastics and burning wood, shot from the opening like a cannon, rolling over them.

Sammy, at the pump panel, cranked up the engine and gave more pressure to the hose. Firefighter Eric Mathers picked up the nozzle.

In the corner of his eye, Captain Ormond spotted the boxy rescue unit as it stopped with a hiss of air brakes near their rig.

Squatting low, Captain Ormond positioned behind his men while they stomped the door flat and cautiously entered the burning home, staying low. They disappeared into the doorway, immediately swallowed by an alien atmosphere of smoke and hot, toxic gases.

Breaths pushed through their facemasks, a sound Gerry thought of like a chorus of air through gritted teeth. A dragon's tongue of flame licked at the ceiling above them, halting their progress for a moment on the short set of stairs. As a group, they ducked involuntarily, fighting the primordial 'fight or flee' instinct. For a rookie, this response was based on fear; for an experienced firefighter, it was respect.

To Captain Ormond, the sight lent an extra jolt. His heart spiked as an image of terror, a silhouette, flashed against his brain. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, ridding his mind of the old deadly image. Could one image of terror be classed as PTSD? In the afterlife, he feared being cast into flames with no attack crew, no water, no protective gear; naked and alone, burning in hell with guilt and remorse for a brief lapse many years ago. That fear burned like acid in his core. Eric, the nozzle man tugged the hose line, pushing that memory away.

Flames crackled as sharp as snapping sticks as the men cautiously moved up the stairs. Heat and fire and gases audibly expanded with tortured destructive breaths like a living beast behind the pall of dense smoke.

At the top of the stairs, Eric pushed the nozzle lever, blasting the room with finely diffused water, called fog, transforming the kitchen into a boiling explosion of steam. The men kept low, knowing too well how steam could burn. Advancing into the kitchen, Eric swept the room with water, forcing steam through the window they'd broken.

Another window smashed nearby. Steam and smoke shifted suddenly toward the opening as if a giant hand shifted a dirty gray picture to one side. A faint glow of gray daylight cut the smoke. A yellow blur of a duty coat at the window cleared glass from the window frame with an axe. The support crew was doing their job. Often the roles were reversed with Gerry's crew arriving late and having to perform various other ops.

Captain Ormond pushed on the hose line, forcing his men in further as the nozzle man doused the room a few more times with a cooling spray killing the last of the flames. The fire hadn't had time to become deep seated. Captain Ormond tapped Eric's shoulder indicating the man should shut down the line. The crew stood and paused for a brief before checking the immediate area for fire extension as support units set up smoke fans at the doorway ventilating the house.

With the smoke nearly gone, Captain Ormond took off his helmet, closed his tank valve, and stripped off his facemask. His men followed suit. He set his helmet on the charred kitchen counter enjoying the cool rush of air. He stepped to the broken window and turned to his crew. "Good job guys." He liked working

with this group. They seldom needed to be told what to do, operating as though it was instinctive. He leaned his head to the radio mike at his shoulder. "Thirteen to Dispatch. Fire is under control. Checking for fire extension." He flashed a thumbs-up to the two firefighters outside for their timely ventilation on the other kitchen window, giving the scalding steam an escape route.

Command responded in the familiar deep voice of Captain Fred Hurley, who had assumed incoming command on Captain Ormond's orders, running the operation from his own rig that arrived along with a rescue truck.

Captain Ormond carefully scanned the charred room. Water ran down walls in black veined streaks. He grabbed Bruno's shoulder. "Wait," he said. "You didn't open that sliding window, did you?"

Bruno shook his head. "No. It was already open."

"Keep away from this area," said Captain Ormond, and leaned toward it. A screen lay outside on the lawn. He stood guard in the kitchen, ensuring incoming crews didn't trample the immediate area by the slider.

Incident Commander Captain Hurley issued orders to his crews. In short order, a crew entered the kitchen with a TIC, thermal-imaging camera, and disappeared down a hallway. Two more firefighters came in and slowly scanned the room with their own TIC looking for hot spots behind walls or in the ceiling.

Captain Ormond dropped to one knee and carefully examined the immediate area around the slider. He noticed an uneven trail of black charring, an area more heavily burned—alligatored. The marking zigzagged up from the linoleum in a haphazard pattern, looping several times across the countertop and onto the cupboards. No pots were on the stove. He opened and closed the oven. Nothing there either.

Looked like the snaking patterns were the point of origin.

The arsonist had left his mark.