

# FIRE BRANDED LEATHER

BOOK ONE OF THE FIRE DOG TRILOGY  
A V-TOWN STORY



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NeGger  
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## Chapter 1: Just a Hint

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The restaurant was right on the edge of the beach, a popular place. The warm waves lapped not five paces from the patio. Perfect white sand as far as the eye could see, the V-town coastline was beautiful.

A dozen people clustered nearby, watching. This was the trendiest spot around.

Flames licking at the roof let out billows of black smoke. Everyone stood around, watching, drinks in hand. Nothing more.

“Out of the way!” Will yelled, running up the road with the fire company, a dozen other officers in tow. “Move it! Get back!”

“Bloody morons,” Davies muttered from beside him. “They’ll all just stand there and watch while the place burns to the ground.”

Will glanced over to his friend and rolled his eyes. The mountain lion could find something to complain about no matter what the call.

Another twenty paces and Will was in the crowd, pressing them aside. The dalmatian was well used to this part of the task.

“Move aside people, move aside, fire department coming through!”

With a grumble they slowly parted.

Behind him the rest of the force moved forward. A team of horses pulled a pumper trailer. It hadn't even come to a stop before the other fire fighters were hooking it up to the mains.

Will scanned the crowd for the owner, they were usually easy to find. Everyone else was standing around sipping their drinks, the owner was the one staring at the flames, realizing everything he owned was going up in smoke.

This time it was an otter.

Will stepped forward, grabbing the man by the shoulder.

“Is everyone out?”

It took the man a long moment to reply, as if his mind was far away.

“No... the kitchen...”

Will didn't wait for him to finish.

“Davies!”

That was all it took. A moment later the cat was off sprinting towards the flaming building, axe in hand. He scaled the one uncharred wall in seconds. Soon his bright yellow fire vest was lost amongst the smoke.

Will took a deep breath, trying to clear his mind.

Down in the pit of his stomach, he envied the otter. The man could stand there, a step from catatonic. Will had no such luxury, he had a job to do.

He only wished it was someone else's.

A moment later one of the first responders was by his side, pressing a situation report in his hand. The cheetah was panting, having taken account of the fire in scant seconds.

"Where's the water?" Will yelled, turning from the feline to the pumper crew.

The engineer, Oscar, rolled his eyes.

"Moving as fast as we can, Boss," he said. A moment later there was the familiar deep rumble of water flooding in from the local hydrant.

Oscar grabbed the hose from the side of the pumper trailer and began hauling it forward.

"Get the lead out, fellas!" the goat called.

Will stood, paralyzed for a moment as his crew swarmed around him. He'd been on the force for years, but this was the first time he'd ever been in command.

*Where in all the gods' names was the station chief?*

A scream came up from the structure and Will was pulled back to the present.

A string of curses came from the dog's lips, but no one heard them as he sprinted towards the fire.

"Chocks away!" Oscar called as the pumper let loose a stream of water, clearing a path for Will.

The dog took one look at where Davies had scaled the wall and immediately put *that* thought from his mind. The cat might be a good friend, but Will had never learned to climb as he had.

But Will did have a mass the smaller feline couldn't match.

Pausing just long enough to ensure he wasn't letting loose an inferno, Will struck the side door. The lock crumbled before him. He had to scramble for his mask as thick black smoke slammed him flat in the face.

Eyes stinging, Will pushed into the restaurant. He was only glad this was a one level building. At least he didn't need to worry about the floor giving way.

"Fancy seeing you here."

Will couldn't hold back a smile as Davies' thin silhouette hove from the smoke carrying a limp form under his arm.

"I couldn't let you have all the fun," Will replied, his voice muffled by the mask. "What do we got?"

The cat never slowed as they passed.

"Two more that I could see. Other than that we might be clear. Looks like an oven malfunction. Someone's meal is extra crispy tonight."

Will nodded as he continued deeper.

Davies may be the fast one, but it was Will who had to make sure the place was clear. By the look of it the structure was a complete write-off. They'd be lucky if they could keep the roof from caving in.

Two twists and turns and Will was in the kitchen. If anything the smoke was even worse here. He could hardly see more than two feet in front of him. If not for his protective gear he'd be passed out on the ground.

Taking a deep breath through his filter, Will began a slow, methodical search of the kitchen. He

wasn't about to take the chance of missing anyone.

Will scowled.

Davies had been wrong. There were three.

Two cooks and a waitress.

One man under each arm and the woman haphazardly thrown over his shoulders, Will staggered forward.

The sound of the roof creaking urged him on.

"Just hold on," he whispered to himself.

Through the smoke he could see the wavering outline of the exit just paces away. All around dining tables were alight, their once extravagant meals now nothing but char.

A flaming timber fell to Will's left. The dog kept moving.

Taking as deep a breath as he dared, Will's filter began to give out. He could taste the smoke that swirled around him.

Only three more steps to the door. It wasn't safety, but it was close...

Two more steps...

There was an ominous creak behind him.

Rocketing through the door like a bullet from a gun, Will sprinted to safety, dragging the three limp bodies with him.

He made it out onto the street before collapsing.

In no more than a heartbeat the medical service was there, Firefighters and doctors both scrambling forward, hauling off the cook staff.

Will wrenched the mask from his face and took a deep breath of comparatively clean air.

"Nice one," Davies muttered from beside him.

Will hadn't seen the cat approach, but his best friend sat beside him on the street, pressing a thermos of cold water his way.

"You do realize," the cat said, looking out at the dozen firefighters still working, "That you're supposed to be *commanding* the team, right? It's kinda hard to do that when you're getting your tail roasted."

Will took a long pull of water, some of it sputtering back up as he spat out the aftertaste of smoke.

"I don't order my men to do anything I won't."

Davies raised an eyebrow.

"Frankly, I don't see you *ordering* men to do anything at all."

Will looked away, dropping the point.

Ten minutes later Oscar and his team had the flames under control. Or at least as best they could hope for. The building was a write-off.

Will swore. This was not going to look good.

"Is the scene clear?"

Will almost leapt out of his gear. Not two feet away stood a police dog. Where everyone else was rumpled and smoke stained from the fire, the german shepherd looked like he'd just stepped fresh from a laundromat.

"Yeah," Will said, his voice still strained from the smoke. "It's cold."

The officer nodded.

"We shall begin the investigation."

With that the cop walked off.

"Those badges always give me the creeps," Davies whispered from beside him. "Do you think they're even alive? The way the cops work you'd almost think they're robots."

Will shrugged. "I'd rather be a robot than deal with some of what we have to day-to-day..."

As if on cue, Will's ears perked.

"Man alive," he muttered. He knew *those* footsteps.

"Hamish! What in the gods' names happened here? I let you command a simple fire and what do you do?"

Will took a deep breath and turned, rising to stand at attention.

"Sir." His voice was tight as he addressed his superior.

Station Chief Irwin Masterson stood before him. The bull was a good two feet taller, towering over Will's canine form.

"How could you mess this up?" Masterson screamed. He didn't even bother to worry about the dozens of people who crowded about, listening in. "You had a full team and you lost the Wikinish Inn? I knew you were incompetent, but this is the mayor's favorite restaurant! How is it going to look when I tell him *you* let his favorite restaurant burn to the ground?"

Will cleared his throat. His voice was weak when he spoke, soft and hesitant.

"Sir... we did, uh, we did manage to save those within."

Masterson spat, a heavy drop of phlegm splattering on the sidewalk.

"You likely saved the very arsonists who set the place alight."

The dog's eyes narrowed.

"I don't believe that's our place to say, *Sir*."

Beside him, Will could hear a growl growing in Davies's.

Will set a hand on his friend's chest, pushing him gently back.

"Sir..." Will cleared his throat, unable to keep eye contact with his superior. "We did all we could. By the time we arrived the building was already ablaze."

Will gritted his teeth. He'd learned long ago to avoid using the proper technical terms when speaking with Masterson. The bull always felt he was being talked down to when Will and the crew used words he didn't understand.

"We did all we could," he continued. "We can only do so much. There were no permanent injuries. That's what matters."

The bull raised an eyebrow, looking over Will's shoulder at the rubble behind him.

"Wrong, mongrel. That's what matters to *you*. I've got more important things to worry about."

Turning on heel Masterson began walking away.

"Get this all cleared up," he ordered. "I want your team back at the station house immediately. We might get another call. It does us no good to have you out here tanning yourselves at the beach."

From somewhere in the direction of the pumper unit Will could hear a catcall at Masterson's retreating back. The dog couldn't help but smile.

"I wish I had his connections," Davies muttered as he collected his gear. "Then I could get set up as station chief without a clue what I'm doing."

The fire had been put out an hour ago, but Will still stood by the smoldering ruins. Someone had to stay behind to fill out the paperwork and answer the police dogs' questions.

And besides, it gave Will time to think.

Looking out over the waves, Will shifted about in his firefighting gear. He hadn't taken it off. It just didn't feel right to be on scene without it.

Not so far away he could hear the otter that owned the restaurant screaming. The man had started off calm enough, likely in shock. That was long worn off.

Will didn't bother to make out what the man said, mostly because he'd heard it all before. People tended not to be in the greatest of moods when they saw their lives go up in flames. Will sighed.

It wasn't his fault, but he still blamed himself.

"I believe we are done here, Sir."

Will jumped as a police officer stepped up behind him.

"Huh? Oh, sure." Reaching up, he signed off on the paperwork after giving it a quick once over. Everything seemed simple enough. Just an accident in the kitchen, no sign of foul play.

"Aren't you folks a little fast today?" Will asked. "I thought investigations like this were supposed to take days at least."

The german shepherd looked away uncomfortably.

"There are new rules in place," the officer said. "City Hall has decided upon a new protocol to handle fires such as this. It's a more... streamlined process."

Will cocked his head, but didn't say a word.

Taking what remained of his equipment, he began the long walk back to the fire house. A quick glance over his shoulder and he waved at the police dog, but the other man was long gone.

The fire station was one of the few buildings remaining from before the Cataclysm. Three stories, built of red brick, it had once housed two fire engines.

Those gas burning contraptions had long ago been replaced with proper pulled wagons, but the structure's purpose had remained the same.

Taking the side entrance, Will crept in.

He felt foolish, spineless, for sneaking into his own fire station as he did, but anything was worth avoiding Masterson.

It was late in the evening, but the station was still busy. Will got all of five paces before a head poked up over the nearby wagon.

"Hey, what kept you?" A moment later Oscar was scrambling over the metal hood of his pumper, hooves scraping the cherry red paint.

Will grimaced, but even then a smile couldn't help but sneak through.

"Three guesses."

Oscar perched on the side of the wagon, feet dangling over as he played with his white beard.

"Heh. I'm going to guess... Big, fat, and ugly?"

Will sighed.

"It's not right to talk about a superior officer that way."

Oscar coughed out a word Will made a choice to miss.

"Higher ranking," the goat said, "Not superior."

Will stifled a grin and walked over to his locker, stowing his gear.

It wasn't until the dog had peeled away his sweat soaked gear that he realized how rancid he'd become under it. Not only had he scraped by in the heat of the fire, but he likely sweat just as much waiting for the police to finish their investigation.

The gear was good at keeping the heat of a fire out, but it was just as good at keeping the warmth of a body in.

Will lowered his head to sniff under an arm.

“Murph.”

His tongue lolled out to try and get the scent from his nose. He smelled somewhere between two week old cabbage and that unidentifiable box of takeout at the back of the fridge.

Next stop, the showers.

As with any good fire station, they had proper facilities for the men and women who worked there. They, thankfully, included a renovated set of showers.

The old set the humans had put in long ago were of little use in an age where skin was less common than fur and scales.

Leaving his uniform behind, Will grabbed a thick, fluffy white nearby towel and began the walk to the men's showers, nothing but fur out.

He got a few cat calls as he walked, towel over his shoulder. A smile crept to his lips – none of those hassling him were in fact cats.

“You only wish you could look this good!” he called over his shoulder as he pulled open the door to the Men's.

Hanging the towel on the wall, Will had to feel his way forward, the heavy steam making anything past the tip of his black nose nothing more than indistinct shapes.

A half dozen steps and he found himself in one of the double wide, reinforced stalls. Each shower was enough to fit a draft horse twice most people's size, they were just right for Will.

A quick jab at the tap and a steady stream of warm water hit him hard in the face.

He had to hold back the instinct to shake. Will had always had a place in his heart for water, the dalmatian had yet to meet a dog that didn't.

Closing his eyes, he raised his face to the stream, letting it wash over him, loosening his weary muscles and running down his pelt. The warmth slowly began to work its way through him, carrying away all the stress of the day.

“Boo!”

If Davies had been expecting to get a startle out of the dog, he was disappointed.

“Hey, buddy,” Will said, never so much as opening an eye. “Long time no see.”

The dalmatian heard a grumbling behind him as the cougar stepped into the stall.

“What in the gods' names were you doing back there? The Chief didn't stick you with cop detail again, did he?”

“It's an important job,” Will shot back. “And besides, someone has to do it.”

Turning, Will just caught Davies rolling his eyes.

“Do you know what that moron had us doing when we got back?” the cat asked. “He had us *shining* our uniforms. You know, the things we use to keep ourselves freaking safe, he had us *shining* them.”

Will cocked his head.

“So?”

Davies let out a strangled growl.

“You don't shine protective leather!”

Will laughed. “Let me guess. He has us lined up for another photo op?”

The cat's growl deepened. “Ya think?”

Turning from him, Will filled one hand with soap and began washing himself down, doing his best to rinse the smell of smoke from his pelt.

“Whatever you say man... *hey!*” Davies's initial attempt had failed, but when the cat set his hands on Will's back the dalmatian nearly jumped a foot in the air. “Personal space, man!”

The cougar just chuckled.

"Relax," Davies said, working his fingers into Will's pelt. "You deserve a massage after today."

Brushing the soap out of his face, Will eyed him warily.

Davies just grinned, showing a shade too much fang.

"How long have you known me, Will?" The cougar laughed. "I tried that trick back in high school. All it got me was a sore nose."

Will grinned. "Well you deserved it. You knew I was going out with what's-her-name back then."

The cougar grunted. "Yeah, she was a real..."

"Don't say it," Will growled.

Davies rolled his eyes.

Not long after, Will was as clean as he was ever going to get. Any more scrubbing and the spots would just likely as not wash from his pelt.

Dressed in firehouse fatigues, he sat in the small cubical that he generously termed an *office*. It wasn't much, but it was what the acting assistant station chief got around here.

Piled before him was what seemed to be half his body weight in paperwork. Much of it should have been completed by Masterson, but it never was.

Will sighed and began working through it. Validations of insurance claims, health and safety checklists, team efficiency reports – the endless stream of what had to be filled out in the aftermath of a blaze.

"Uh... Sir?"

Will turned to see a young horse standing behind him, straight and tight at attention.

The kid had joined the force not a month ago. Despite his best efforts, Will couldn't think of his name.

"What can I do for you, son?"

The horse was so nervous Will could see him shake. "Sir... could I get you to help me? I... I need help putting away my gear."

Will smiled. "Sure, son. That's what us old hands are here for, eh?"

Following him back down to the main floor, Will sighed. The horse's gear was spread out on the floor as if his locker had just exploded.

"Didn't they teach you this back at the academy?" he asked.

The horse blushed.

"No... no, Sir. I was in the expedited program. My training was only three weeks."

Will blinked.

"Seriously? And they're sending you out to fires now?"

The horse nodded.

Will sighed.

"Come on, son, let's get you figured out."

The paperwork could wait. There were more important things to do.

The young horse watched wide eyed as Will took each part of his uniform and carefully put it away, softly explaining all the while the purpose and value of each piece.

A lightweight bright yellow jacket that had survived from before the Cataclysm, there were few of them left and they were worth more than their weight in gold.

Along with it went the horse's gloves, custom made fire hat, and his harness.

The harness got special attention. That was the kid's whole job.

Pulling the pumper trailers was something that precious few people could do. Despite their name, they were more than just pumps for Oscar and his men to hook up to. The pumper trailers were the entire mobile presence of the V-town fire department.

Everything from signaling flags to medical equipment and fire axes were stored in the trailers. It took a special breed of horse to get over a ton of equipment moving. And someone even more special to haul it across town in less time than it takes for a building to burn to the ground.

When they'd started the horse had been skittish and flighty. Will could just imagine why. The dog would bet his last dollar that Masterson had been down here and given the poor kid the chewing out of his life over some trivial thing.

But the longer Will spoke, the calmer the horse became. Will's soft, reassuring voice was enough to all but lull the horse to sleep.

Will smiled. By the time they were done properly repacking the locker the kid had as likely as not forgotten what had set him off to begin with.

Returning to his so called office, Will once again set about finishing his paperwork.

He frowned. There shouldn't be this much.

Had there really been this many fires the past week? He, like all the other men and women, had been worked off his feet, unable to keep track.

He shuffled back and forth through the papers. There had been at least one fire every day.

What in the frigging gods' names?

That wasn't right.

There shouldn't be even half that many calls in a week.

Looking through them again Will noticed almost all of the fires had been in commercial buildings. A human restaurant, a hostel, a clothing store, then today's restaurant.

The only one not human owned was today's fire.

Will cocked his head.

Well, it wasn't *his* problem. That was for the police department to deal with. He just put the fires out. That was his job.

Though he did make a note at the bottom of the official paperwork, pointing out the unusually large number of calls.

It wasn't until ten o'clock that night that Will finally left the firehouse. He waved a goodbye to the night-shift as he stepped out onto the street.

The ocean breeze was cool around him, but the scents of the city kept him from relaxing.

Even at this time of night the byway was busy, dozens of people of all species jockeyed for position. Will was shoved and jostled as he made his way home.

Within sight of his second floor walkup, he made a turn into the food district. The stalls here offered everything from a grass burger to fresh liver.

Will walked to the Club-Caf stall. Just as he stepped up a young brown furred wolf walked away, his arms full of cartons.

A quick glance at the menu, Will didn't even have to think.

"Give me a number three," he said.

The cat across the counter from him grimaced, clear he'd eat anything but.

"One *eat your heart out* special," he called into the back.

A moment later a small brown bag was tossed forward. Still warm, the paper was already starting to go translucent from the grease.

Ten minutes later Will slipped his key into the door. It opened with not even a squeak.

The room inside was dark and empty. He flicked on a light.

The only sound was the hum of the bulb.

Tossing his meal down onto a sofa, Will stripped from his firehouse sweatshirt and pants, hanging them up carefully. He let out a sigh.

A quick peek in the mail slot, there was nothing other than the day's paper.

Sitting back on the sofa, he dug into his burger as he began to read.

News? No, that was too depressing.

Fashion? Too superficial.

Sports? No, not today.

That left nothing more than the classifieds.

Biting down, he scanned the page.

A flat to let... someone selling the Lion's Gate Bridge (again)... Storm Front hiring...

A small ad at the bottom caught his eye.

'Looking for someone to spend time with.'

Will cocked his head as he read.

'Canine, female, mid-thirties, looking for a willing partner. Must be open to new things, adventurous.'

Will grinned.

A PO box number was listed below.

Pulling out a piece of paper, the dog gnawed on the end of his pencil, at a loss for what to write. He looked back to the paper. The ad was a xenocopy of a handwritten original. The script was smooth and elegantly written, but the strokes were strong. She'd known every word she'd wanted. There had been no hesitation.

He looked down to his own blank page.

'Canine, male,' he wrote, 'Late thirties. Strong and willing.' He paused for a long moment before adding 'Looking for a strong woman to teach him.'

His hand hovered over the final words. For a long moment he felt the urge to grab the sheet and crumple it into a ball, toss it away.

Everything he'd learned. Everything they'd taught him in the V-town public schools... everything he'd seen in successful men like Masterson told him it was weakness to even suggest to submit to another.

Will smiled.

Taking the letter, he hunted about the apartment until he found an envelope. The glue tasted sweet on his sensitive tongue as he sealed it away.

Only then did he look at the address on the ad.

His heart fell. Whatever flight of fancy may have gotten him this far crashed and burned.

The address was in the exclusive Point Grey part of the city. There was no way a real woman living there would ever need to take out an ad in the paper to find attention. Someone with that level of cash must have men throwing themselves at her.

He squared his shoulders.

He'd send it anyway.

## Author's Note

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Wow, my first major commission. And it's 60,000 words long. I don't do things in half measures!

So first off a big thanks for Fyrdawg, without who this story wouldn't exist in the first place. Fyr, you've been a pleasure to work with, and here's hoping you enjoy the story!

Next, for those of you who have read this far and wondered '*what?*' when the story came to a close, don't worry, you'll be seeing Will again soon. Very soon if I have my way.

When I finished writing the *Hunters* series I never expected to return to V-town. I created the world to focus around the story of Tommy. English, Rebecca, and Jon each got their spin off, but Tommy was very much the center of *The Hunters*.

Looks like he'll need to share the spotlight now!

I was overjoyed when Fyr approached me to write a companion series to *The Hunters*. I gave his character Will a cameo in *The Diplomats* as a thank-you for helping me proof an unrelated story. I had no idea at the time that he'd want to follow it up with a full series!

So here we are, and the end of *Fire Branded Leather*, book one of the *Fire Dog Trilogy*. With little bit of luck you'll be seeing the next book soon!

This was also my first book that had some serious firepower in the proof-reading department. I'd like to thank all the awesome people who helped whip the book into shape. Any remaining typos are totally my own fault. I hope I didn't forget anyone! (In alphabetical order)

- Fallacy / GamingWolgBeta
- FenrirWolf
- ParadigmLion
- RedDogDingo

And thanks to Negger for the great cover art!