

FIRE BRANDED LEATHER

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



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NeGger
15

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Just a Hint.....1

Chapter 2: Ad in the Paper.....10

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The light slanted through the half closed blinds to fall upon Will's face. He hadn't even bothered to drag himself off the couch last night. Why go to bed? There was no one there waiting for him anyway.

Moving slowly, he sat up and yawned. As a dog his teeth may not be as impressive as some of the species roaming the streets of V-town, but they still glinted in the morning sun.

Will glanced at the nearby clock. It was eight in the morning. He still had time to get ready before his next shift.

He muttered a few soft curses about bosses who schedule people until the middle of the night then expect them to be at work the next morning, but began moving anyway.

Throwing the clothing he'd slept in across the room to land in the overflowing hamper, Will scratched and stretched, trying to limber up his muscles. The close escape yesterday had taken more out of him than he'd realized.

Nude save his pelt, Will walked over to the refrigerator. A gust of cold air welcomed him as he opened the door. He smiled. With the hot, groggy V-town summer any moment of cool was appreciated.

His smile didn't last long. The fridge held little more than some ice packs and week old takeout. Pushed way in the back was what some vendors around here charitably referred to as 'cola'. Will turned up his nose at it.

He'd acquired a taste for Pepsi long ago. The drink had been easy to find when he'd been young, but it was all but impossible to track down a can now. What the local entrepreneurs made in its place only classified as muddy brown, fizzy water.

Taking a deep breath, Will grabbed one of the cans and closed the fridge. It was better than nothing.

Choking down the sugar water, Will began to prepare for the day. A few quick reps on his weight set and a review of the day's paper.

It was in the middle of his morning workout that Will looked down. His belly poked out further than he liked.

Reaching down, he was able to grab it in both hands. The black spots on his white pelt jumped

and jiggled as he shook it.

He sighed.

"Too much takeout," he muttered. "That's got to be it..."

He returned to lifting his weights, but never stopped thinking about his gut.

He didn't, however, spare a thought for the muscles he'd built up under the fat.

Dressed once again in a clean pair of firehouse sweats – they were practically the only thing in his closet – Will stepped out into the morning air.

If he squinted hard enough he could almost fool himself into seeing the white capped surf of the Pacific in the distance.

He held the letter from last night in one hand. His fingers shook ever so slightly. Back in the dark it had seemed so obvious, so simple to reply to the ad. Now, with the morning sun above, Will felt silly. Who was he to respond to an ad like this? He'd never done anything like this in his life. And even if she did read his letter, no one living in that part of town would ever have the slightest interest in *him*.

Will gritted his teeth as he slid the paper of the envelope back and forth between his fingers.

"This is stupid."

Turning, he leaned back into his apartment, ready to throw the letter into the trash.

"Boo!"

This time Davies got the reaction he was looking for.

"Gah!"

Falling face first onto the floor, Will landed with a thud. Even then he could hear the cougar laughing behind him.

"Dude! You should have seen your face! That was priceless!"

Will let out a groan and rolled over, giving Davies a glare.

"Do you have to do that *every* time?"

The cat smiled and reached down to offer Will a hand.

"Hey, this time it was worth it." He spied the letter laying on the floor next to the dog. "What's this?"

Before Will could even get a word out Davies had grabbed the envelope.

"Ohh!" A sly smile slipped to the feline's lips. "What's this? A love letter to your invisible girlfriend?" One of his claws was poised to slice it open.

"Don't. You. Dare," Will growled out, hackles rising.

The cat just smiled and handed the letter back. "Aw, man. Come on, you know I wouldn't. But what is it?"

Will blushed, it was easy to make out under his short, white pelt.

"A... ahh, I'm answering a personal ad in the paper."

Davies raised an eyebrow, a grin slipping back to his lips. "Oh? I don't recall any..." He burst out laughing, almost doubling over. "You didn't! Dude! You answered the ad for a blind date?"

Will's blush spread, almost halfway down his chest by the time he began walking.

"None of your friggin business, tail-chaser."

Davies was beside him a moment later, the two of them walking in comfortable lockstep.

"It's your call, dude." He grinned. "Not everyone can have my animal magnetism."

Will snorted. "The only thing you attract is strays."

Will got a bodycheck for that.

There was, unsurprisingly, a lineup at the post office. Will vaguely recalled that a human used to run the place, but he was nowhere to be seen. The oni that manned the desk now was overworked, overtired, and seriously stressed.

It took half an hour for Will and Davies to make it to the head of the line.

"What?" the oni asked, never looking up from his paperwork.

Will sighed, feeling a flicker of kinship for the overworked man.

"Just posting a letter," he said. "I don't have any stamps."

Reaching out a hand, the oni took it, his other hand still scribbling at some form or another.

He muttered out a cost.

Will blinked.

"What? That's double what I paid last time!"

The oni finally bothered to look up. There was no anger in the man's eyes, only a deep, aching weariness.

"City Hall raised it. It wasn't our call."

Will grunted and reached into his wallet. His job may not pay all that well, but it was more than enough to cover posting a letter.

The oni sighed. "We'll get it out as soon as we can. No promises though."

Out on the street again, Will was glad he'd gotten to the post office as early as he had. The line now ran out onto the street.

"What in the gods' names is going on these days?" Davies muttered. "It's like the whole blasted city is falling apart."

Will thought back to some of the papers he'd gotten from City Hall over the last few months.

"You'd almost think..." Sighing, Will tried to change the subject. "So what did you do last night?"

Davies grinned and Will instantly regretted asking.

"Well, if you really must know," he said with a chuckle, "I found a wonderful new club out by the docks. The music is loud, the drinks cheap, and the lighting bad." The cougar's tail swished. "I never did get his name..."

"Stop!" Will said, rolling his eyes. "Stop right there. That's all I need to know. You bloody felines. Keep your dick in your pants."

Davies' grin softened, becoming less predatory. "Not my problem, dude. It's you canines that can't seem to deal with having more than one partner."

A half hour later they were back at fire station six. Despite the day before him, Will felt a rush of joy at being back.

They were just walking up the street when they heard the alarm sound. A heartbeat later the doors flew open and a crew took off down the road.

Will sniffed the air. He couldn't smell any smoke. The fire must be a ways off.

Stepping through the large front doors, he took a look around.

The dog smiled.

Say what you will about Masterson, at least the night staff, didn't have to deal with him. There were men about the station here and there, checking equipment and restocking supplies.

A couple of horses were even holed up in the back of the room with a map of V-town playing the 'shortest route' game.

Will was home.

He nodded at Davies who headed off his own way.

A few moments later Will was in his *office*.

A string of off-color words escaped his lips. The small mountain of paperwork that had been here when he'd left had swollen into something approximating the Matterhorn.

The dog didn't even *recognize* half the forms for gods' sake!

Sitting down with a resigned sigh, he began working his way through them.

Ye gods, most of these forms weren't even his! Masterson was supposed to be filling them out. Will was about to take them back to the people who'd dropped them on his desk before stopping. The reason they were here rather than where they should be was because everyone knew Will *would* do them.

The dog sighed.

It was hours later, almost noon, before Masterson arrived.

The bull was finely manicured, looking like he'd just walked off a runway. His black suit and polished hooves were immaculate.

He'd be a perfect picture if he hadn't been staggering back and forth, fighting off a hangover.

Will sighed as he bowed his head slightly to the bull.

"Good morning, Sir."

Masterson glared at him.

"Get back to work, mutt."

Will narrowed his eyes but didn't say a word.

It was the middle of the afternoon before the door to the station chief's office opened again.

"Hamish! Get your spotted tail in here!"

For just a moment Will was torn between a whine and a growl. In the end he just sighed.

Five paces to the chief's office, Will poked his head through the door frame.

"Yeah, Boss?"

Masterson was sitting behind his spotless desk. Fuming.

"What in the gods' names do you think you're trying to pull here?" he screamed, yelling hard enough that flecks of saliva flew from his lips.

Will blinked.

"What?"

"This!" Masterson pulled out a sheet of paper, slamming it down on the desk. "The investigation last night! What in the gods' names is this?"

Will walked up to the desk and looked down. It was a xenocopy of the paper he'd sighed off with the police dog. It confirmed the police department's assessment that the fire had appeared to be accidental.

Will shrugged.

"I just confirmed what I saw."

"I *told* you it was arson! Can't you get a single thing right?"

Will took a step back, meeting the bull's eyes.

"You weren't in the building, Sir. You left immediately after the flames were put out. You didn't work with the police service. I don't think *you* are in a position to determine the cause of the fire."

Masterson narrowed his eyes. "I don't need to know what's on the report. The mayor says they're having difficulty with human terrorists. Who else would burn down his favorite restaurant?"

Will's chin just about hit the floor.

"You can't be serious! There's no evidence that it was anything but a faulty oven! Even the city's own police force came to the conclusion! You can't claim it's terrorists just because the mayor thinks it is."

Masterson leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head.

"Son," the bull's tone was condescending, "You've got a lot to learn." He closed his eyes. "Just because you didn't *see* any evidence of arson doesn't mean it's not there. Anyone even halfway clever would make sure it was destroyed in the fire. You've met these humans. They're not like us. They... they *think*. They scheme. You know the humans brought on the Cataclysm in the first place. If anyone could hide the evidence of arson it would be one of them." The bull sneered. "Have you even *looked* at a jail these last few years? Or a list of people sent to the renderers? They're almost all human. You can't tell me they're anything but troublemakers."

Will edged back half a step, averting his eyes. He decided this was not the best time to mention that his mother had been human.

"Whatever you say, Sir..."

"Then it's agreed," the bull said with a smile. "It was arson. Pity the paperwork has already been sent in. Any chance we can get it back?"

"Uh... no, Sir," the dog stammered out. "It was signed off by both me and the officer on scene. They've changed their procedures."

Masterson scowled, looking like a child whose favorite toy had been taken away.

"Blast. Fine then." He raised a finger to wag at Will. "But you're not to hand in another cause report until I read it first. Understand?"

Will swallowed.

"Uh... Yes, Sir. But that means you'll have to stay--"

He never got the chance to finish.

"Very good. I knew I could make a proper officer out of you eventually, Hamish." The bull smiled. "Stick with me and you might amount to something." He snorted out a laugh. "Now get out of my office."

Back at his desk, Will fought to still his shaking hands.

I should have stood up to him, he repeated over and over to himself.

Will sighed.

The day he stood up to Masterson would be the same day V-town plunged into the Pacific.

He jumped as a cup was set on his desk.

"Rough day?" Oscar asked as he took a seat across from him.

Will grinned. "You have no idea. What are you doing up here?"

"Me?" The goat grinned. "Not much. Just making sure you don't die of a heart attack. Without you *we'd* have to deal with that dick." Oscar pulled a face. "You don't have a clue how thankful we are he never actually tries to do anything on the floor."

Will chuckled softly.

"Some days I think that bull could make water catch on fire."

Taking a sip from the offered cup, Will had to fight not to make a face. Whatever it was the goat had brought him, it *wasn't* Pepsi.

He gagged.

Oscar smiled.

"Nah? Well it was worth a shot. My buddy is trying to get into the food biz. How is it?"

Turning, Will spat the unholy mixture into the trash.

“Like week-old toe funk mixed with sewer sludge.”

Oscar shrugged. “Ah well, he'll get it one of these days.”

The rest of the day passed as best one could hope for. Masterson blew his top when he saw the price of replacement uniforms for the crew, but he paid... eventually.

It was seven that evening before Will finally clocked out. He'd only been on the schedule until five, but he'd learned about leaving paper on his desk. If you leave your desk spotless and empty folks have – at least a slight – aversion to loading it up with any more work. But a single sheet left to deal with in the morning would turn into twenty by the time you got back.

Trudging slowly home, Will was even more exhausted than he'd been the night before. A day spent fighting fires was one thing. It took all the energy you had, but you went home feeling good.

A day spent at the office left the dog jittery. He'd done no real exercise, but his nerves had been flaring all day. He felt like he'd run a marathon when he hadn't gone ten steps.

Will would take the fires any day.

Still huffing from climbing the stairs to his apartment Will began cursing the moment he unlocked the door. He'd forgotten to pick up dinner.

The words never escaped his lips. A single letter fluttered as he opened the door, dancing from where it had fallen through the mail slot.

It was plain, unadorned paper, but the handwritten address on it immediately caught his eye.

He recognized the handwriting in an instant.

Squatting down, Will looked at the letter, not daring to touch it.

“It's not possible,” he whispered. Even if the woman he'd written to had gotten his letter today, there was no way she could have responded to him this fast.

Hand shaking slightly, he picked up the envelope.

His nose twitched.

Lifting it closer, Will took a deep breath.

Perfume?

Slipping one of his thick, dull black claws into the seal, Will carefully opened the envelope. Within was a single sheet of folded parchment.

Hello Strong and Ready,

I received your letter this morning. You intrigue me.

Meet me this evening at Café Bristol.

I look forward to learning if you fit me well.

Below was an address and a time.

Will blinked.

He glanced over to the clock. It took just a moment for the realization to kick in.

He had thirty minutes.

“Frigging...”

Slamming the door closed behind him, Will bolted for the shower, leaving a trail of discarded clothing behind him.

“Faster... faster... must go faster...”

He nearly clocked himself senseless when he skidded to a stop in the tiny stall. Ten seconds later he was scrubbing away with whatever soap was in reach. He spent the day at his desk, but he had been sweating just as much as if he'd been in the field.

The water barely had time to soak into his pelt before he leapt back out. A violent shake and he deposited the suds across the bathroom walls.

He'd have to clean *that* up later.

As dry as he was going to get, Will searched headlong through his closet. Dress uniform, fire house sweats, fire house sweats, trainers...

At the very back was a dark blue button up shirt and a pair of basic black slacks.

They would have to do.

An eye to the clock, ten minutes had already passed. Will slowed down a touch as he slipped a foot into his trousers. It would be just his luck now if he managed to rip them.

With a grunt, he was dressed. He sucked in his gut as he did up the belt, forcing it a notch tighter than normal.

Pausing for just a moment, he ran a hand across his still damp fur and looked in the mirror.

Not bad... was the first thought through his mind.

The second sounded far more like Masterson's acidic tones.

Who would ever take even a second glance at a mutt like you?

He looked down to his gut that pressed up against the straining belt.

Gritting his teeth, Will looked again into the mirror.

"You just wish you could look this good," he said to no one in particular.

Out on the street, Will had to sprint to make it to the upscale restaurant their meeting had been scheduled at.

Café Bristol wasn't the trendiest place in the city, but it was well above anyplace the dog normally frequented. Rumor said that some of the best bounty hunters in the city came here.

Will had his doubts about that. The story was more likely spread by the owner, looking for some fresh clientele.

Slowing a half block from the café, Will fought to catch his breath. He didn't want to look like a pup on his first date.

Stealing a glance at a nearby clock tower, he had five minutes to spare.

A smile slipping to his lips, Will took a quick detour to a flower shop across the street.

A riot of colors erupted around him as he stepped in. A bat stood behind the counter reading a book.

"Can I find you something?" she asked.

Will shook his head.

A quick once up and down the aisle, he found what he was looking for.

Roses were far too much to bring to a first date with someone he'd never met, but the soft blue of some forget-me-nots seemed just right. He picked up a small bouquet.

"For a special someone?" the bat asked.

Will blushed.

"I hope so," he replied, voice soft. "Don't know yet."

She smiled.

"Well, there's no better place to meet than Café Bristol. Everyone seems to end up there eventually."

She rang him up.

Will blinked at the price.

"But..."

The shopkeeper smiled. "I think I know who you're there to meet. Call it a gift."

Will blinked again.

Reaching into his wallet, the dog pulled out twice what she'd charged him, setting it on the counter without a word before leaving.

With precise enough timing that you'd almost think he planned it that way, Will stepped into the café.

"Can I help you?" the hostess asked.

Will blushed.

"I'm here to meet someone..."

She shrugged. "Do you know their name?"

He stopped dead.

"I... uh... no."

She gave him a professional smile.

"Not a problem. Let me find you a seat. You can tell me if you see them."

A moment later he was seated next to the door, a glass of ice water and an appetizer of jerky before him.

Will sighed.

I'm a fool, he thought. I came all the way out here, and I don't even know who I'm looking for. She could be right next to me and I'd never know it.

A quick glance about, and at least *that* particular fear was put to bed. Everyone else here seemed to be in couples or more. There was even a scrawny wolf... and what seemed to be a lion seated way in the back.

"And now I wait," he muttered, biting into the jerky.

The sun went down and the staff hurried about, lighting gas lamps here and there. They even had candles on the tables, though they did little more than accentuate the darkness.

And all the while the seat across from Will remained empty.

Having long chewed his way through the provided jerky, Will ordered some seafood. Not because he particularly liked it – though it was well done – but mostly because it was cheap.

And the chewy meat kept him from eating too fast.

He looked up at the stars coming out overhead and sighed.

"Are you strong and willing?" a voice asked out of nowhere.

Will nearly leapt from his seat.

Fighting back a racing heart, he turned to look at the form that had slipped up behind him.

She was a dalmatian.

That alone left him blinking. There were enough species in V-town that dogs were a minority, and to find another *dalmatian* nearly send him for a loop.

"Ahh... yes," he stuttered, fighting to find his tongue. "Yes, I..." he blushed and looked down. "I'm strong and willing."

"Very good," she said, her tone brisk as she took a seat across from him at the wrought iron table. A moment later the waitress brought her a drink without saying a word.

She sat there for a long moment, her clear green eyes roving up and down Will's body. Despite the clean clothes the dog felt naked before her.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves.

"I'm Will. What's your--" He was cut off instantly by nothing more than a glance from her.

She was not yet ready to speak to him.

Will sat back and tried to calm his fluttering gut. He hadn't felt like this since his first date way back in high school.

The dog that sat across from him was wearing a simple, conservative black dress. It covered her from ankle to elbow to collarbone.

But yet at the same time it was very near sheerer than anything Will had ever encountered. It hugged her curves, leaving little to the imagination.

Will nervously licked his nose.

After a few moments she cocked her head.

"I believe you'll do." She said it matter-of-factly, without a hint of emotion, as if passing judgment upon him.

A long moment passed. She smiled.

Will would have sworn the restaurant brightened.

It wasn't a huge, silly grin. It was a small, private smile. Will was sure he was the only one who could see it. She showed just a hint of her teeth, but it was her eyes that glimmered, the light seeming to dance within them.

"Hello, Will," she said, her voice soft and deep. "My name is Anne."

Will took a deep breath. He'd swear he could just pick up her scent over the dozens of other bodies that moved about them. It was sweet, like the scent of fresh mowed hay.

"Good evening, ah, Anne."

She smoothly cut him off, never seeming to be rude.

"Tell me about yourself, Will. Where do you work? Where do you come from?"

Will felt a small glow of pride grow within his chest. This gorgeous dog wanted to know about him?

"Me?" he asked. His voice seemed surer as he answered her question. "I'm just a fire dawg. I work down at fire house six. My family has been here for generations. My great, great grandparents came from the east coast just after the Cataclysm."

He smiled, thinking back to his days as a pup.

"I've been with the V-town fire service since I got out of school. I almost thought of joining the police for a while but I'm the wrong... breed."

He frowned slightly, but she pushed the thought away, seemingly without effort.

"Really, Will?" her grin grew, turning into a perfect smile. "You spend your days saving people? That must be rewarding."

Will thought back to his empty apartment and ignorable bank account.

Despite it all, he smiled.

"Yeah, you're right. It is. I love the work. It's what I was born for. There's nothing quite like being out there, on the street, helping people. It's something the rest of the world only dreams of."

For just a moment Anne's smile froze on her face, seeming as though it were made of glass.

"You're right." She reached out, setting a hand atop his. He could feel her soft fingers. It sent a thrill down his arm. He had to fight to keep his tail from wagging. "People like me can only dream of helping like you do everyday."

A moment later their meals arrived. Will couldn't even remember ordering it.

He almost expected Anne to order a salad or something as stereotypical, but rather they each had a rib eye steak. Rare.

She cut off a small sliver. He couldn't take his eyes off it until it disappeared between her lips.

"Tell me more, Will," she said, watching him. "Tell me about *yourself*, not your job."

Will shifted uncomfortably. "There's not much to say. I live for my work. It's what I do. I don't have much family in the city, just a couple of good friends."

"No lovers?" she asked, playful tone defusing the question.

He laughed.

"If I did, I wouldn't be answering ads in the paper!" He stopped in a strangled cough, realizing what he'd said. If she noticed, she had the discretion not to bring it up.

Taking another sliver of her steak, she chewed thoughtfully.

"I've been placing ads for some time, Will." A frown crossed her face. "I've met quite a range of people." Taking a deep breath, she seemed to push the thought away. "But you are special."

He laughed. "Yeah. We dalmatians have to stick together."

The humor seemed to escape her.

"That's not what I meant..." There was a long pause before she smiled. "But I suppose it makes sense."

Will couldn't help it, his tail began to wag.

"What do you do?" he asked.

She brushed the question off. "Me? Oh, this and that. I have my interests..." she took a sip of her drink, letting it drop. "But the time for questions is past. Eat up, Will."

He looked down to his meal. Only then did he realize he'd yet to even pick up his knife and fork.

For just a moment he thought to take offense at being given an order... but why? It was silly to leave the meal on the table before him.

The two of them ate in silence, enjoying each other's company.

There was little conversation as they ate. People around them spoke, nattering on about their daily lives, rambling endlessly about unimportant things.

Will ate. He watched Anne sitting across from him. Unlike some of the so called *ladies* he'd encountered in the past, she did not peck away at a salad or leave her meal on the plate. She ate the same as he did, working her way properly through the meal.

Whatever it was Anne did during the day, it was clear it was more than lounging about some grand apartment, waiting for her next suitor to call.

The meal was good. And likely because of that it didn't last long.

Will almost wished it had. He enjoyed having an excuse to peek over his knife and fork at her. Anne smiled slightly whenever their eyes met.

He could lose himself in those dark green eyes without a second thought.

There were plenty of dogs in V-town, but relatively few dalmatians. The breed wasn't rare, just not as common as some. Will was surprised he'd never encountered her before.

He was sure he would have remembered her.

Their meal came to a close too soon. When the waitress came with the bill, Anne didn't so much as acknowledge it.

Will didn't skip a beat as he reached out to take it.

Only then did Anne nod, as if she'd told him to do so.

Flipping over the paper, Will raised an eyebrow.

It was a good thing he wasn't planning on coming here often. Dining here every night would quickly bankrupt him.

Pulling his wallet out, he began counting bills.

He kept an eye open for Anne's reaction as he paid. The dog had learned long ago that a woman who eyed his wallet too closely was more interested in it than she was him.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Anne didn't seem the slightest bit concerned with the contents of his pockets. She simply smiled easily and waited for him to do as she expected.

A generous tip left behind, Will stood up.

Only then did he look down to notice the forget-me-nots that still sat leaning up against the leg of his chair.

Will rolled his eyes and laughed.

Taking the flowers in one hand, he stepped about to help Anne from her seat. She didn't skip a beat, as if expecting him to do so all along.

Closer to her now, Will took in a breath through his nose.

And blinked.

The scent of her perfume tugged at his mind again. It was something he'd never encountered before. Light and fresh, it reminded him of his childhood, running about free in the forest.

He tried to catch a whiff of it again, but the open restaurant and the dozens of people around them made it all but impossible.

Pulling his mind back to the here and now, Will held the small bouquet of flowers up to Anne. He stood behind her, arm wrapped around to hold them before her.

"For you," he said, doing his best to sound gallant.

He couldn't see her face, but he did feel her stiffen slightly.

"What?"

Will blinked.

"For you," he repeated, voice softer now. "I thought you might like them."

Reaching out slowly, Anne took the soft blue flowers from him. She raised them slowly to her nose, taking a small, tentative sniff.

There was a long pause.

"Thank you, Will." She turned around to look him in the eye. "No one has ever brought me flowers before."

Now it was Will's turn to be taken aback.

"I thought flowers were... uh, normal." Will had been out of the dating game for a while, but he couldn't imagine the etiquette changing *that much*.

She just smiled.

"Thank you," she said, her voice hardly above a whisper. "They're beautiful."

Taking his hand in hers, Anne led Will from the restaurant. She waved at the wait staff as they passed, giving them all a friendly smile.

"It's a pretty night out," she said as they walked.

"Uh... yeah," was all Will could say in return. His mind was on anything but the conversation. He felt like an inexperienced pup again. His stomach fluttered, and his skin where they touched felt almost electric.

Making their way slowly down the street, they milled among the thousands of others. Not a single one gave them a second glance. They were just two dalmatians out on the town.

Will hardly noticed as they made their way west. The homes began to grow slowly more spacious. Lawns and paving stone streets, more and more lamp posts dotting the sidewalk as they pushed onward.

"You're an interesting person, Will," Anne said, her voice soft. "I've never met a fire fighter

before. All the other men who answered my ad were... different.”

Will chuckled slightly. “I’ve never answered an ad in the paper before.”

She smiled. “You only have to do it once. That’s what makes all the difference. I’ve met many a wise person. It’s not how often you do something, it’s that you did it when it mattered.” She tightened her hold on his hand. “And that you committed to it. That’s what makes all the difference.”

“It’s all being in the right place at the right time?” Will asked with a chuckle.

She looked away.

“You could say that. So much depends on making the right decision. Committing to it.”

She fell quiet after that as they continued to walk. Will didn’t feel the need to ask any more questions.

Some time later they came to an elegant three story marble apartment building.

Will blinked. A single month’s rent in such a place likely cost more than he made in a year.

Anne didn’t say a word as she led him up to the front door.

Reaching into her small handbag, she pulled out a key.

For just a moment Will’s heart skipped a beat. She turned to him.

“Goodnight, William.”

He blinked.

“Uh... goodnight, Anne...” There was just the slightest whine to his voice.

She smiled.

“You are a most... intriguing man,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

Will fought for words, not knowing what to say. “I could... uh, tell you more...”

“No,” she said, her voice firm, but not hard. “You can tell me more of yourself when we meet again.” There was a long pause. “And we will.”

Without another word or warning she leaned forward and left a soft, fleeting kiss on Will’s lips. Their muzzles touched for just a fraction of a second, but it was enough to leave Will spinning.

When he next opened his eyes he was standing alone on the street.