

FIRE BRANDED LEATHER

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



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NeGger
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Chapter 3: Putting Out Fires

The next thing Will knew he was fighting back a cloying darkness.

Somewhere, not so far away, came the sound of a great battle. A shiver running down him from nose to tail, Will rolled over.

And entered freefall.

With a heavy thunk his shoulder hit the floor, his legs still on the sofa.

“Gah? Huh, what?”

Morning light filtered through the blinds. He could still hear the sounds of battle. Only now it had reduced down to nothing more than someone banging on the door.

Rising slowly to his feet, one hand rubbing the back of his head where a bump threatened to form, Will staggered towards the door.

He hadn't felt like this since his days at college, but he'd have sworn he hadn't drank any alcohol last night...

Still fighting to clear the cobwebs from his mind, Will finally made it to the door. The knocking had stopped.

It took him a moment to get the lock open. By the time light finally flooded in there was no one there. Not that Will could tell. He had to shade his eyes from the sun.

Tacked to the front of the door was an envelope.

He sighed as he pulled it free. It was obvious it wasn't from Anne. Even a quick glance showed it to be from the fire department.

Why in the gods' names would they be contacting him on his *one* day off?

Letter in hand, Will tried to catch the scent of whoever it was that had been here. Likely a courier.

He took a deep breath, but stopped short, gasping and coughing. His nose was clogged. The most he managed to do was half fill his lungs with mucous.

Slightly more awake now, Will shut the door and headed back into his apartment.

Tossing the letter on the table, he decided he'd look at it later. Nothing they'd send via courier could be *that* important.

A quick shower and Will was already starting to feel better. The warm steam helped clear up

whatever it was that clogged up his sinuses.

And gave him time to think of Anne.

He couldn't keep his tail from wagging as the memories of last night came back to him. They were slightly foggy, but he could still see her face. Could still see her smile as he told her about himself.

It didn't take long for Will to get clean. He almost regretted washing the lingering scent of her from his fur.

Back out in the main room, Will picked up the envelope again. Yep, it was an official message. Likely just his pay stub or something like that. He tucked it into a pocket as he made his way out the door.

This was his one day off a week. And he was going to frigging make sure he managed to refill his fridge. It was time to cut back on takeout, he had a woman to impress.

He got all of about twenty feet down the street before he saw someone running towards him.

Will raised a hand to his forehead. It was one of the men from the station.

And he did *not* look happy.

"Captain!" It was one of the cheetahs. "Where have you been?"

Will sighed. "It's my day off, man. I'm not working."

The cat blinked. "Didn't you get the letter?"

Will had a sinking sensation. Pulling out the envelope, he sliced it open. The letter within was from Masterson, short and simple.

Will was working today. The bull had decided to take it off and there was no one else to run the station.

A string of curses escaped Will's lips, he didn't even bother to try and hold them back.

The cheetah continued to bounce on the balls of his feet, riding on pure nervous energy.

"What else?" Will asked, resigned to his fate.

"We have a two alarm blaze," the cat said. "And no one to take command."

This time Will didn't bother to swear. He was already off and running, the letter fluttering to the ground behind him.

The station never felt so far away. It was an easy half hour walk most days, but at a flat out sprint Will was sweating and panting by the time he got there.

And he wasn't even wearing his equipment yet.

The large front doors of the station were open, both the wagons gone.

"What's the situation?" he yelled as he crossed the threshold.

One of the few men remaining looked up. "There's a call from one of the city's office buildings. A big one. The alarm already rang back."

"Who's in command?"

"Davies."

The only thing Will could do was move faster, all but leaping into his gear. Davies was a talented firefighter, a great friend, and his favorite person in the world to spend time with. But Davies was no leader, Davies was a cat.

Not sixty seconds later Will was back on the street again. He didn't need directions to the fire. He could see the smoke rising and twisting on the horizon.

It looked so close, but it still took him ten minutes to get there. By the time Will reached the fire wagon he was panting, tongue lolling out and breath short.

“What... what's the situation?”

Will leaned up against the wagon, fighting to slow his heart. Davies was nowhere in sight.

A moment later Oscar was by his side. The goat looked harried, more stressed than even Will felt.

“Tits up!” was all the engineer said before dashing over to his equipment. “Whoever put that cat in charge should have his head examined. Nobody's seen him since we got here. The only bloody order we got from him was 'put it out'. Useless feline...”

Grabbing each firefighter as they passed by, Will slowly built a picture of what was happening. If not much of one.

Thankfully it was the weekend and most of the staff were gone. but the spotters reported that there were still folks trapped inside.

Will swore.

It was only then he noticed that even with two wagons here there was fewer than half the normal firefighters for this call.

“Where is everyone?” he asked, sketching out a map of the office building on a sheet of paper before him.

Oscar growled. “Ask Masterson. He sent most of us home this morning. Said it was the weekend and he didn't want to pay our wages.”

Will blinked.

Taking a long breath, he fought to keep calm.

“Alright. Keep pumper one here, but send number two around to the west side. We need more coverage there. The gods know what's inside that building.”

For just a moment Oscar opened his mouth to protest. The goat was an old hand at running his wagons. He didn't take kindly to people telling him what to do, even at the best of times.

In the end “Got it” was all he said.

It took five long minutes for the wagon to be maneuvered to the far side of the building, five long minutes it wasn't pumping water.

The narrow, choked streets were no help.

“Get it moving,” Will heard Oscar yelling, “We've got a job to do!”

There was a rumble deep under the dog's feet as wagon two opened fire again. The hiss of water hitting the fire was enough to at least bring the ghost of a smile to Will's lips.

A few moments later the spotters he'd sent running the perimeter returned with their reports. Will's smile was short lived.

The office building was a three story structure, wood framing, post-Cataclysm construction. And looked to be filled with paper.

Will hadn't had to deal with many office fires. He didn't want the opportunity to see how well the paper would burn in its filing cabinets.

Beyond that, none of them had seen hide nor hair of Davies, but they had confirmed the presence of at least three people trapped on the top level.

And if Will knew the cat, that's where he'd be headed.

“Good morning, Sir.”

Will just about jumped out of his pelt.

Turning, he was greeted by the sight of three police dogs standing at attention behind him.

“Don't... do that!”

The police dog cocked his head but didn't say a word.

Taking a deep breath, Will looked at the officers. All three of them looked identical to the man he'd worked with last time.

"We've got people trapped," Will said, pointing to his hastily sketched map. "What equipment do you have?"

There was a long pause. When at last the lead dog spoke his voice was heavy.

"We're not authorized to aid in rescue..." Even Will could hear the pain in his voice. "City directive three-forty-seven-twenty-eight, enacted last week, prevents any police officer from interfering with the actions of the fire department during a call."

Will's jaw dropped open.

"I'm not asking you to go in yourselves..."

The dog shook his head slowly, pain obvious. "The directive prevents us from becoming involved in any way."

Will narrowed his eyes. He'd learned long ago not to argue with a V-town cop when it came to regulation.

Will's heart sank as he looked over his current personnel. He didn't even have enough to properly man the pumps likely so much as send a full team in.

Glancing up at the building, Will saw something...

Up on the third floor, a plume of red smoke was rising among the bellows of black.

It was from a flare.

Will's ears pulled back. All the firefighters carried distress flares. Only one was in the building.

"Oscar!" he yelled, "Take over! I need to get in to rescue Davies. Clear me a path!"

"Got it," the goat called. A moment later he was yelling orders to his men. The pumper's stream of water stretched out before Will, opening a gap in the flames.

Grabbing a fire can and rope from the wagon as he passed, Will cursed himself for once again racing into danger. He was stupid. He was breaking as many regulations as Davies.

But he wasn't going to let that fool cat die on him.

The first floor was almost untouched. The fire had started above, and neither the flames nor smoke had penetrated far down.

Will made his way through reception, searching for the fire stairs. He moved slower here than he had at the restaurant, yet the office was far larger. The last thing he wanted was to get himself lost.

Room clear, he found the stairs. Touching a palm to the metal door, it was cool. The handle slid easily.

He rolled his eyes. The stairwell was pitch dark.

Flicking on his flashlight, Will began the long climb upwards. He wasn't surprised to find the stairs covered with all manner of garbage and filth. The government had laws on keeping the fire escapes clean.

The government also seemed to be the last to follow those very rules.

Up to the second floor, Will set a hand on the exit door before passing.

It was hot.

He made a point of not opening it. That was one beast he'd rather keep contained.

The smoke grew thicker as he trudged up the stairs to the third floor. Will had to trust his mask would keep him from passing out. Even with it on he could smell the smoke.

Pausing for a moment to catch his breath, he lay a hand on the third floor door. It was hot.

Will cursed.

Pulling it open a crack, it was clear this floor was a write-off. Flames snaked up the walls and heavy smoke rolled down the hall.

There were fire sprinklers in the ceiling. They'd all popped, but no water came.

Making sure to close the door behind him, Will began into the hallway, looking left and right into each office. Half the doors here were little more than matchsticks. It was clear Davies had been through.

"Where in the gods' names are you?" he muttered as he continued forward. He'd already gathered the civilians. By all rights the cat should have led them to the fire stairs...

Will closed his eyes for a moment.

But Davies was a cat. He'd be too proud to leave until he'd double checked *every* room.

The end of the hallway was bathed in flames.

"Davies!"

Standing just the other side of the flames, Will could make out a silhouette. He'd swear it waved at him.

Bracing himself, Will unslung the fire can, aiming the knob at the base of the flames.

There was an angry hiss as he let loose the fire retardant.

It took three-quarters of the can to clear a path.

"Fancy seeing you here," Davies called. Will could hear a note of pain in the cat's voice.

Stepping forward, Will counted five people, all standing out next to a broken window, fighting for fresh air.

"Frigging... why are they still here?"

Will couldn't make out Davies' face under his mask, but he knew the cat was grimacing.

Holding up a hand, Will could see his friend's left hand was sprained and swollen.

"This is what you get for running in without backup," Will said.

The cat just smiled. "*You're* my backup." Turning to the people, he waved his good hand.

"Come on folks, this is our ticket out. Get moving!"

One by one they began walking towards the stairs at the far end of the hallway. They had to move slowly, keeping well clear of the flames on either side.

Halfway there, Will stopped dead. His ears twitched.

"Wait!"

Somewhere, not so far away, he could hear something creak.

"Oh sh--"

A quarter second later Davies was diving through the air, carrying as many of the people back as he could.

Will shook his head as the roof caved in not a dozen meters away.

"Just... just wonderful."

"What're our options?" Will asked, fighting to keep his voice calm as they clustered around the broken window in one of the offices. Their only way out wasn't an option anymore.

Davies scowled.

"Normally I'd just climb down." He held up his swollen hand. "But that's not going to happen today."

Unspooling the rope he'd carried up, Will started looking for a good tie off point.

"Can you rappel?"

"No." Will could hear how much that admission took out of the cat.

"Fine," he said. "Then *I'll* get us down."

Stepping up to the window, Will looked down to the crowd below. He could just make out Oscar manning the pumper.

Reaching into his belt, he pulled out a blue flare. It went off with a snap-hiss.

Blue. Water here. Now.

Thirty seconds later the room was drenched.

Will smiled. Well, at least that would keep the fire at bay for a few moments.

He took a look at the civilians that clustered about. Two canines, an oni, a cat, and a bear.

Well, at least he could assume one of them could climb.

"Okay, folks," Will said, doing his best to sound confident, "We're going to get you out of here. We're going down the outside of the building."

They just blinked and looked at him. It was clear the shock had already set in.

Will poked his head out the window, looking down.

Frig.

Only three stories up, it wasn't far to the ground, but the walls were sheer. A descent like this would be nothing to a trained professional. It wasn't the professionals Will was worried about.

Leaning out the window, Will was able to catch Oscar's eye.

"You got some decent harnesses down there?"

It took them a half dozen tries, but one of the horses had a good throwing arm. They now had five descent harnesses, and the civilians were kitted up in them.

"Nice and snug," Davies said with a smile as he cinched up the final strap on the bear. "This'll get you down safe and sound."

"Ready?" Will heard someone call from the ground.

Will glanced over to the flames. Despite Oscar's best efforts they were edging closer.

"Ready," he called.

A moment later he had the first of the civilians hooked up to the rope. The harness would take it from there, giving them a nice, smooth descent.

Will managed to work up a small grin.

The worst they'd have to worry about was knocking their head on the side of the building.

"Enjoy your ride," Will said, helping the first through the broken window.

There was a slight *wurring* sound as the harness slowly descended.

Next came the second civilian, then the third.

Davies managed to get a hug out of the forth before she disappeared over the edge.

That left just one more, the bear.

Much to Will's surprise, he found the man huddled as far from the window as he could get.

"Come on, Sir," Will said, reaching out a hand. "Time to go."

If anything the bear looked more frightened of the window than he did the flames.

"No."

Will blinked.

"I'm not going..." the bear whispered. "I... no heights."

Will strangled back a growl.

"We're not leaving you."

Reaching out a hand, Will grabbed the bear by his harness, doing his best to pull the man to his feet.

The bear out massed him by the better part of a hundred pounds. And he wasn't budging.

"Davies, a hand here?" Will's voice was an octave higher than he would have liked. He could

hear another creak in the background.

The cat was there a moment later. Between the two of them they were able to drag the resisting ursine to the window.

"No! I'm not going! No!"

Will scowled.

This wasn't something they covered in training.

He clipped the bear's harness onto the line and double checked it.

"A pleasure working with you, Sir."

With a mighty shove he forced the bear out the window.

He felt sorry for the guy as he screamed all the way down. This was *not* going to look good.

Out of the corner of his eye Will saw the glint of the camera lenses.

He let out a soft groan.

This was going to look very, *very* bad.

He hardly had time to think before the flames were nipping at his tail. They had a hot one here.

He glanced over to Davies.

"You can't climb?" Will asked.

The cat shook his head and held up a swollen hand. "Not in the slightest." His eyes glinted as he stepped forward. "Want to be my knight in shining armor?"

A moment later the cat was pressed up against Will's chest, batting his eyes.

Will snorted.

"Fine. But keep your hands to yourself," he said, a mock growl to his voice.

Before he could even finish Davies slung his arms over Will's shoulders. The dog was about to demand the cat be in a proper carry, but never bothered. It wasn't worth the effort with him.

Stepping up to the window, Will looked down. A meager three stories looked *way* higher from here.

With slow and deliberate motions that seemed at odds with the flames so close, Will began his descent.

"Yeeha!"

Will's ears pulled back in embarrassment. Davies.

It wasn't far down, but Will took his time. He moved slow enough to make sure all the civilians had made it out of their way, disentangled from their harnesses.

Davies waved all the way down, treating it like a publicity stunt.

He was a cat. Preening for an audience came naturally to him.

At last Will touched down. He wasted no time in hurrying away from the burning structure. He didn't want to take the chance of any falling debris braining him.

It was only after he'd made it ten steps he realized he still held Davies in his arms.

And the cat's hands were most definitely *not* in the proper places.

"I've always wanted to get my hands on this..." Davies whispered before Will unceremoniously dropped him on the concrete.

The cat just smiled. "Totally worth it!"

Seconds later a half dozen news reporters clustered around them.

"Hey! A word for the press? Anything?"

Davies smiled, but Will clamped a hand over his friend's mouth before he could say a word.

"We have no comment for the press," Will said, fighting to keep his voice neutral. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a fire to put out."

A moment later they were back with Oscar. The goat looked like he'd been tearing his fur out.

"Where in the gods' names were you?" he hissed. "You're supposed to be giving the orders, not running in!"

Will leaned up against the side of the pumper, catching his breath.

"They're out," he said at last. A small smile to his face. "Davies and I got them out. Now let's deal with the fire."

Even with two pumpers the building proved a challenge. They had to ring back a third time, it took yet another trailer to finally get things under control.

Will pulled his hat off and ran the back of an arm across his sweat soaked forehead.

It did nothing more than streak him with soot, obscuring his spots.

"We got it?" he asked no one in particular.

Fittingly, no one answered.

Stepping forward, Will trudged into the burnt out husk of the building.

Well, at least they'd managed to save some of the first floor.

Behind him, Will could hear the cameras still clicking. The reporters were interviewing the people he and Davies had saved.

"It's all yours, boys," Will called to the police dogs as he did one more check for hot spots.

The officers nodded as they set off silently to work.

"...saved me!"

Will's ears perked.

"We thought we were trapped," one of the women said. "You should have seen that dog come through the flames! It was like a theater production!"

Will began walking towards the group. Of all the tasks he disliked, dealing with the media was close to the top.

He didn't even have time to say a word before the woman turned.

"Him! That's the guy who saved us! Him and the cat."

Will blushed.

"Just doing my job ma'am..."

A heavy hand fell on Will's shoulder.

"Under *my* direction, of course."

Masterson stepped forward. The bull's long, sharp horns glinted in the light.

"Are you in charge here?" the reporter asked.

Masterson smiled. "Of course."

For just a moment Will felt a wave of relief as Masterson took over. The bull was in his element. Will was happy to let him talk.

"It's by my strategy, of course," Will heard him say a moment later. "Attacking the fire from multiple angles helped the... uh, impression of water. Without that we never would have been able to mount the two pronged attack to rescue those trapped by the flames."

Will took a step back. He couldn't help but notice how perfectly pressed the bull's black suit was, how manicured and shined his horns. It looked like he'd just stepped from a beautician's booth.

Will glared.

The bull went on for a good hour. The sun was setting, its fiery red glow replacing that of the blaze.

Will stayed on site, directing the cleanup. That was all part of the job. There was far more to

look after now than just a singed restaurant.

The fact *three* police dogs had arrived to investigate the situation proved the government took this seriously. The government didn't like losing its property.

Sighing, Will kept in mind what Masterson had drilled into him before. He refused to sign off on the cause of fire report.

The police dog looked at him oddly.

"Is there something amiss?" the dog asked, a note of nerves showing through his near perfect professional mask.

Will gave him a tight lipped smile, making sure not to show his teeth.

"No... uh, everything's fine. I just need to let my boss see first."

The shepherd's expression said everything in a single glance.

He'd heard of Masterson.

"As you say, Sir," he said at last, handing Will the clipboard. "I await your speedy response."

It took another fifteen minutes for Will to extract Masterson from the reporters. That man loved to hear the sound of his own voice.

Will frowned. With the way the bull posed for the cameras folks were lucky no one got their eyes poked out by his horns. Will had never liked the look of grown out horns. All the other bovine members of the force filed their horns back, keeping them short and safe.

Will couldn't imagine Masterson ever doing something so logical.

"Sir," Will cut in, grabbing his attention before another reporter could steal him away. "There's paperwork needing your approval."

Masterson frowned.

"No, there isn't. That's what I have you for, dog."

Will gritted his teeth.

"You specifically asked me to bring the fire cause report to you before signing off on it... Sir."

Any other day Will would have let the man's million insults roll off his back. Today, hot, sweaty, and with the press watching, he fought to keep his lips down.

Masterson snatched the clipboard from Will's fingers with a roll of his eyes. "Fine." A moment later he was flipping through the pages the police dog had scratched down.

Will had gone over them line by line. Everything had been in order. A faulty power line.

Masterson frowned and ripped the pages out.

"Don't you listen, mutt?" the bull's voice was just low enough the press couldn't make it out. "I told you. The mayor decided it was terrorists."

Will took a deep breath. "This isn't the mayor's favorite restaurant, Sir. It's an old office block. The wiring wasn't installed correctly. There were two smaller fires from the same cause last year."

Masterson balled up the papers. They bounced off Will's chest.

"Write it again," the bull ordered. "And get it right this time!"

Will narrowed his eyes. "We don't write the cause reports," he said slowly, forcing himself to breathe deeply. "That's done by the police. We can only sign off on them or escalate them to city hall."

"*Then make the mongrels write them properly,*" Masterson hissed.

A moment later the bull was gone. The press followed him like a pack of lost puppies.

"Sorry, that won't do," Will said, letting out a long sigh.

The police dog sat beside him on the road. He gave Will a glare that could kill.

"What's wrong *this time*?" The dog – Will had learned his name was Elm – had long ago given up on the perfect mask of the force. Now they were just two dogs.

Will closed his eyes and shook his head. "The station chief will kill me if we don't blame it on terrorists."

A growl escaped Elm's lips. "Get it through your spotted skull, *there were no terrorists!*"

"I know," Will replied. "But that's what the boss wants to hear. The Mayor, too. Don't you have the same people pushing you?"

The shepherd looked away nervously. "We have our own problems."

Will let the subject drop.

"How about this," he said at last, "You can blame it on an electrical fault, cause unknown. Who knows, it *could* have been deliberate."

The police dog grimaced. "It's a hundred to one..."

Will patted him on the shoulder. "Let's just say what we know, and what we don't. They can fill in the blanks with terrorists hiding in every shadow if they want."

Without thinking, Will lifted a stick of charred wood he'd found somewhere to gnaw at. He didn't even realize he was doing it until the taste of ash filled his mouth.

"Gah!" Spitting, he looked down at the wood and shook his head. He thought he'd kicked *that* habit.

Another hour and, at last, the two of them had a report they could live with. The last of the fire fighters were long gone by then. Even Davies had left to get his hand looked at. But not before giving Will a completely unnecessary hug. "My knight in shining armor!" the cat had said with a grin.

Will had blushed.

At last dusting himself off, Will signed off on the report and shook Elm's hand.

The police dog's mask slipped back into place, but Will got one last grin out of him.

"Get out of here," Elm said, laughing. "You smell like a bonfire."

Heading back to the fire house, Will made sure to time his arrival well after Masterson was likely to be gone.

He'd had enough of that bull for one day.

Putting his equipment neatly away in his locker, Will waved at the night crew as he dressed again in his sweats.

Reaching up, he scratched at his nose. It had been itchy all day. He thought of Anne and her perfume.

Despite it all he smiled.

Closing the locker, he walked back out to the street. He hardly even noticed his feet taking him back to where he'd dropped her off.

And when he did, he didn't bother trying to stop them.

The neighborhoods slowly moved more upscale as Will walked. The workmen's high rise apartments being replaced by gated lawns and wide boulevards.

Will took a deep breath. The air was clearer out here, fewer people, more greenery and fresh air. The carefully manicured trees were a far cry from a proper forest, but it was better than nothing.

He nodded his head to a half-dozen police dogs as he made his way. There seemed to be far more of them out here in the ritzier parts of town.

Will sighed. He had no doubt they were being pushed to look after their masters much the way the fire department was.

He stopped when Anne's condo came into sight.

What was he doing here?

He'd only met her once. For all he knew she might never want to see him again. For all he knew she might call for the police the moment she opened the door.

Will thought back to last night. To her smile, to the scent of her perfume.

He rubbed his nose.

He started walking again.

There was only one way to find out.

Up her front path, Will took a deep breath before knocking on the door.