

FIRE BRANDED LEATHER

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



By: wwwolf
For: Fyrdawg

NeGger
15

Table of Contents

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

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

Chapter 3: Putting Out Fires..... 22

Chapter 4: Night Life..... 33

Chapter 5: Fire-breather..... 44

Chapter 6: Rescue and Recovery..... 55

Chapter 6: Rescue and Recovery

Will's alarm went off the next morning. The reinforced, steel clock *bounced* when Will hit it. It kept ringing even after it had rolled to a stop in the corner of the room.

Will opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, counting his heartbeat.

Ninety-nine... *one-hundred*...

He took a deep breath, he didn't want to get up.

The silence of the room was almost overpowering. There was no cheer or jeer of the mob just blocks away. There was... *nothing*.

Sitting up slowly, he nursed a sprained wrist. Taking the otter down last night had been an automatic reaction and he was paying for it today.

Nude, Will stumbled slowly to the front windows, eyes still blurry.

A savage yank to the cord and the blinds were whisked away. The morning sun was far, *far* too bright on his eyes.

The dalmatian's lips pulled up in a smile nonetheless. There wasn't a protester in sight, nor did an ugly plume of smoke stain the horizon.

An hour later Will stepped out into the fresh air. His fur was still disheveled and he'd skipped both his morning shower and exercises, but he was at least dressed. It wasn't the brief fight that had taken so much out of him, but the endless night and thoughts rolling over and over in his mind of where the city was headed.

He sniffed. Will's keen nose could pick up the scent of foul bodies, vomit, and the general funk of the city. He didn't smell any blood.

But he did smell the cat.

Davies stood at the foot of the stairway down from his condo. He looked, as always, pressed and perfect. He glanced over his shoulder as Will approached.

"Morning."

That alone stopped Will dead. He'd expected a quip, a soft jab at having slept in. Something. The fact Davies' barbed tongue came so mild told Will everything he needed to know.

"That bad?" The two of them began walking side by side in perfect time.

Davies' shrugged. "Define 'bad'. If by bad you mean fires and death, we didn't have much of that. If by bad you mean a half dozen human businesses torn open and the owners chased into the forest... yeah."

Will didn't respond for a long moment.

"Why humans?"

Davies' shrugged. "You're asking the wrong person. To me they're just hairless apes with a recessive gene. But if you need someone to blame, they're good as anyone else."

"Blame for *what*?" Will hissed, fighting to keep his voice down as they walked. "What's there to be rioting about? Nothing's gone wrong."

Davies' just looked over to him and raised an eyebrow.

"We need to get you away from the fire station more often." The cat refused to say anything more.

A moment later they came to a stop in front of a take-out place, Will's favorite.

"I'm paying today," Davies' said. "The usual?"

Will looked at one of the heart burgers, made up as a breakfast.

He sighed.

"No. I'll just take an apple."

Davies had looked surprised at the news of the riots. Now... now he looked shocked.

"Seriously? What's gotten you so..." His eyes widened. "Who is she? *Tell me!*" In a heartbeat the cat's hands were around Will's lapels. "Dude, tell me! Who is she?"

His hands fell a moment later when the gold chain Anne had given Will a night ago slipped into sight.

A curse escaped Davies' lips.

"Who in the gods' names is 'Anne'?"

Will snatched the chain from Davies' hands. "None of your frigging business. She's a... friend."

The cat's expression changed from shock to a mischievous grin.

"Woohoo, old William is back in the dating game. This will be awesome. When do I get to meet the oh so lucky lady?" he jibed. They were back off walking down the street, breakfast long forgotten.

"No time soon, if you keep acting like this," Will muttered. "And you wonder why I don't introduce you to people."

The cat put a hand over his heart and feigned horror. "You wound me! I'm *great* around people."

Will shot him a glare. "You're great around men you want to drag off to bed. Everyone else... not so much."

Will almost flinched when Davies' set a hand softly on his shoulder.

"Man, you know I'm here for you. If you really like her I won't mess it up for you. I mean, come on. You've always been there for me. How many times have I come to you, bawling my eyes out after a breakup? I'm here for you."

Will smiled. An honest smile.

"Thanks." He shook his head and chuckled softly. "But you're not meeting her. Not yet. She's... she's *special*."

Stepping into the fire house, any personal conversation came to a close. It was clear they'd had a busy night. The fact Jim was gone had only made it worse.

It took Will a good ten minutes to track down the interim shift head. The horse who'd been

saddled with the job looked like he'd just gone through the worst ten hours of his life.

The horse handed Will a stack of papers as he made a beeline for the door.

A long sigh and Will sat down at his desk, flipping through the reports.

He had to fight back the impulse to start smacking his head against the worn wood of the desk.

Last night *had not* been good.

At least there hadn't been any fires of note.

But there had been seven calls to rescue stranded people, three calls to assist paramedics, and a call to double check a ransacked human business to ensure there was no fire hazard.

One night had been busier than their average *week*.

Will looked up when he heard familiar hoof falls on the stairs.

A moment later Masterson walked in, a wide smile on his face and a spring in his step.

Will shuddered. Such was rarely a good sign.

"Morning, mutt," the bull said as he strolled past to his office. "A grand day, isn't it?"

Will blinked.

"If you say so... Sir."

Despite his better thoughts, Will stood up and poked his head around the corner into Masterson's office. The bull had a briefcase on his desk and was busy loading it up.

"You're in charge today," the bull said over his shoulder as he dropped another stack of papers into his briefcase. "I've got more important things to worry about." Will just cocked his head. "I'm off to City Hall. The *Mayor* wants to have a talk with me." The bull flashed a hundred watt smile. Will would have bet money he'd just had his teeth cleaned. "I see good things in my future... perhaps even a chance to get away from this dump."

There was a long pause. For perhaps the first time Will could remember Masterson seemed to realize he'd stepped over the line.

"I'm sure it's a good enough place for *you*," he said, fighting to bring back the easy smile to his lips. "You were born for this type of thing. Spitting on fires and running about. It's in your blood. Me? I'm meant for greater things. And the Mayor knows it."

Will coughed and glanced away, managing to hide his look of disgust. The only thing he could imagine the bull being suited for involved waste processing.

"As you say, sir. I'm sure it will be an... eventful meeting." A moment later he added, "Does it have anything to do with the new orders that came down last night?"

"What new orders?" Masterson looked genuinely confused.

Will gave him a quick recap of the anti-human initiative that had come down last night. Much to his surprise Masterson looked honestly shocked.

"They're prioritizing our workload now?" the bull asked. He'd stopped piling papers into his briefcase and leaned back against his desk.

Will shrugged. "It would seem so."

Masterson's brow pulled down. "We'll see about *that*." For just a moment Will felt a kinship with the man. "It's *my* decision what calls we respond to, and in what order. I don't care if it's humans or the gods know what else. It's *my* choice. I won't let a building burn to the ground just because it's human owned." His scowl deepened. "How would *that* look in the papers? The fire department can't let folks think we're incompetent. Humans or not, I'm not letting the papers claim I can't run this department."

Will sighed. For just a moment he'd thought Masterson cared about saving lives. All the bull cared about was what the headlines read the next morning.

"As you say, Sir," Will responded. The bull's heart may not be in the right place, but if anyone

could maneuver City Hall into rescinding the directive it was Masterson.

Thirty minutes later the bull was ready. Twenty minutes of that time had been spent polishing his horns and straightening his suit.

"You're in charge, Hamish," he said, stepping out onto the street. "Try not to burn the place down, eh?"

Will didn't say a word, but both Davies and Oscar had colorful things to mutter under their breath.

The next two hours were about as calm as one could hope for. A cat got himself stuck in a tree. They dispatched an officer to get him down. The kitten's parents showered the department with praise for rescuing their son.

Will smiled. Some days things aren't so bad.

The alarm box rang.

Will muttered out a curse.

Dragging the city map over his desk, the dog began tracing a finger down to the location of the fire... a shirt factory on the far west side of their territory.

"Suit up, fellas," he called. "It's showtime!"

They were ready to go in less than two minutes. Will's foot was out the door when a second alarm began to ring.

Now he began cursing at full volume.

"Hold up," he yelled between gritted teeth. "Team one, continue on. Oscar, take the call. Team two, Davies, stay here."

Sprinting back up to his office, Will once again began tracing a finger down the map. The ringing of two different alarms was near deafening.

"Ancle neighborhood, Ancle... where in the gods' names is..." This time the cursing was loud enough to hear down the street.

It was a human neighborhood. And on the east edge of their territory.

Running to the inter-station call box, Will smacked the 'Assistance required' button. That should start an alarm ringing in the station closest to Ancle.

He waited for the response.

One ring back and they could handle it. Two and they couldn't...

Ten seconds... twenty... sixty...

Will began to sweat.

There was yet another alarm going off from the first fire. Team One had reached it. They needed help....

The other station rang back.

One ring... two.

This time Will didn't even swear.

Back on the main floor, Will sprinted for the door.

"Team Two, let's go. East."

Just before he left he grabbed one of the support officers by the shirt.

"Send runners to the off-duty fighters. We have an emergency on our hands. Get them in here."

And he was gone.

The Ankle neighborhood was at the very edge of fire station six's territory. It took them a good fifteen minutes to get there, even at a dead run.

At least it didn't take long to sight the fire. The black clouds that bellowed up were easy to spot.

The fur on the back of Will's neck began to stand on edge the closer they got to the blaze. It felt like a ghost town around here.

There should be people in the streets, there should be civilians gawking, folks running the other way.

There was nothing. Not a soul to be seen.

The clap of their footsteps were loud on the pavement. Will's tongue was lolling out as he sweated under his equipment.

"Davies," he managed to yell. It took everything he had to keep his voice strong. "Get me a situation report."

Davies was more of a first responder than a scout, but he was the best they had. The cheetahs that normally filled the role were on team One.

"In like Flynn," the cat said with a grin. He sprinted forward, easily out pacing the rest of the team. In only moments he was around the corner and out of sight.

Less than a minute later Will heard a familiar yowl and swearing.

The dog gritted his teeth. That was *not* a good sign.

The rest of the team rounded the corner in good time. They made it all of ten steps before screeching to a halt.

The street was clogged with people. None of them human.

Will was familiar with pushing his way past crowds, it was almost second nature by now. And Davies hardly even noticed them.

This... this was not the normal crowd of onlookers. They didn't part as the team neared.

The smell of alcohol was strong in the air as they pulled together, blocking the entire street. One look at the mass of bodies and it was clear as day this was the same mob from last night.

Will narrowed his eyes.

"Move aside." His voice was strong, well practiced. He'd been clearing streets for years, never once had a problem.

The mob didn't move.

Will glanced over to Davies and jerked his head. The cat was off again, searching for a side street.

"Move aside," Will repeated. "We have a fire to put out."

A pig stepped forward from the crowd. He wore a white wife-beater of a shirt, stains under the arms.

"Ain't nothing worth saving, mutt," he said, voice slurred. "Just garbage down that way. Good riddance I say."

Will had to claw back the impulse to leap at the man.

"Do you have any idea what you're saying?" Will's voice was cold as ice. "There's a *fire*. People could be dying."

The pig smirked. "Nah, not *people*."

Davies was back a moment later. He gave Will a single tap on the shoulder.

One last glare at the mob and Will raised his arm. The team was off again, this time heading down a narrow side street. There were only inches of clearance for the wagons.

Will could smell the smoke.

He'd been counting the seconds the detour cost them. Then he stopped counting to keep his heart under control.

If the mob was still there when they were done they'd discover just what it meant to keep them from a fire...

Busting once more out onto the main street, Will got his first good look at the situation.

His ears pulled back.

"Good gods..."

The building had, at one point, been three stories. A nice place too, by the look of it. Now... now it was little more than a flaming wreck. The entire structure had been wood. And not even treated lumber unless he missed his guess.

The building had been three stories, the flames reached five.

"Get your tails moving, folks!"

Davies dashed out, finally able to do his job. He was out of sight in seconds.

With no engineer to lead the pumper team, Will had to fight his urge to follow the cat.

He was needed more desperately here.

"Fire plug. Half a block west. Go." He pointed at the horses who'd pulled the wagon. They were off in a flash with the hoses, reeling them out in their wake.

Less than a minute later Will heard the metal on metal shriek of them hooking up to the hydrant.

"Get the wagon ready. I want two teams ready. We've got two hoses, I want to see them spraying *now!*"

The team wasn't clockwork, but it was more than Will had any right to expect. He had less than half the men he should.

With a boom the first hose came online. The water was on the flames soon after.

"Will! Here!"

Davies' voice was enough to cut through the bedlam.

Will didn't run. Now that they were here there was no reason. He had to be in control. Or at least *look* like it.

"What's the situation?" the dog asked.

Davies was in the alleyway next to the burning building. The better part of a dozen men and women were huddled there.

They were all human.

Will's eyes widened.

"What in the gods' names are they doing here? Get them away from the structure. It could come down any time."

Davies gave him a sour expression.

"Fine, smart dawg. You try."

Stepping up to the first of them, Will put on his *professional* face.

"Come with me. You're being evacuated."

The man was soot stained and bloody, but he didn't move.

"No. If we go out there we're dead."

Will narrowed his eyes.

"If you stay here you're dead. I'm ordering you out." He debated just smacking the human over the head and carrying him to safety, but there were too many of them.

"You're with the government," the human said, his voice trembling. "You'll make us disappear... just like everyone else."

A growl slipped into Will's words as he knelt down. "I am a firefighter. It's my job to save

lives. As for humans..." He leaned forward until his nose all but touched the man's. "My mother was human. If you accuse me of being a speciesist I'll smack you upside the head until you think you're a chipmunk."

For just a moment the man was speechless.

Taking the hand of the woman behind him, they sprinted towards the street. Making a beeline to stand next to the pumper wagon. The rest of the humans followed behind.

Davies set a hand on Will's shoulder.

"A diplomat as always. At this rate you should run for mayor."

A venom filled reply about the mutts who ran the government was on the tip of Will's tongue when the sound of cracking wood came from above.

"Frigging!"

Five seconds later the two of them were sprinting to the safety of the street like their tails were on fire. It wasn't so far from the truth.

The three story structure was quickly losing its integrity. The entire left side of the building began to shudder, ash and timbers falling to the ground. Not five feet from where the humans had huddled a flaming support beam slammed into the alleyway.

"Where in the gods' names is my water?" Will yelled as he skidded to a stop next to the pumper wagon. The horse manning it only nodded to him as he readjusted his aim.

Will whispered a soft prayer as the building began to shift. He knew what was about to happen next...

Holding his breath, it almost seemed to happen in slow motion. Another shudder wracked through the structure. A shower of burning sparks flared down, raining like an apocalyptic snow onto the building next door.

Then, almost gracefully, the structure collapsed.

The sound of it crashing down was near deafening, but Will didn't hear it.

A cloud of dust and ash bellowed towards them, racing along the ground. It hit Will flat in the face a moment later, all but blinding him.

He began walking forward through it, not even able to see a hand before his face.

"Folks," Will's voice was far calmer than he felt, "We are not in the damage control business. Get your tail the *hell* into gear."

The sheer force of the building coming down swept the dust and ash away. A heartbeat later Will could see the flames.

They'd spread down half the block.

Will felt helpless.

Davies was gone, sprinting out to check the new buildings for any trapped civilians, and only the gods knew where Oscar was with team One.

Surrounded by his fellow firefighters, all friends, Will felt alone as he shouted out orders.

"Get the north wall under control! If that loses any more it'll collapse too. Why in the gods' names are you still standing here? Move!"

A hastily sketched out map lay spread out across the wagon bed before him. The little lines that represented walls were becoming fewer and fewer.

Will stopped dead.

Head snapping around, he turned to catch a flicker of motion he'd seen from the corner of his eye.

An entire squad of police dogs stood down the road. Between them and the mob.

Will's gaze connected to the lead dog. The officer nodded, but he didn't take a step.

Will sighed.

They were in this alone.

Turning back to his sketch, he wiped away the ash that had fallen upon it, leaving ugly smudges where there should have been clean lines.

"Frigging mutts," he whispered under his breath.

It took over two hours to contain the flames. At the cost of four buildings.

Will could only thank the gods that they had all been abandoned.

His sketch was nothing more than scribbles and smears now, but it had done its job. He balled it up and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Let's end this," he muttered.

Davies looked up from where he'd collapsed on the road next to him. The cat could move fast, but he didn't have the endurance to last through the long calls.

Grabbing a nearby hose, Will began trudging forward. The flames were contained. Now they needed to be put out.

Footing was perilous on the debris, and more so dragging a hose behind him, but Will continued onward.

Around him the men and women of the team lay exhausted. The team was too small, and the call too long. They weren't trained for this.

The flames roared up before him as Will crested the final broken and shattered husk that had once been a wall. The heat made him sweat.

Gritting his teeth, he manhandled the hose into place.

Steam belched up as he doused the flames. He could hear the hot metal shrieking as it cooled.

A second time, and a third, Will staggered from one hot spot to the next, dousing them. His boots sunk into the mud and ash, making every step an exercise.

A feral grin edged to his lips as he approached the final fire, the one that had caused all this to begin with.

Will unleashed a torrent of water on it. It was dead in seconds.

"Good riddance."

Leaving the hose where it lay, Will made his way slowly back to the pumper wagon. He waved once at the police dogs. They started forward, walking in perfect formation.

Will already knew what they'd find. All he needed to know now was if they'd report it.

"Jakes, sound off!" Will called. After a fight like that he wanted to make sure he hadn't lost anyone.

He let out a sigh of relief when everyone on the team checked in.

"Let's get this packed up," he said, nudging Davies with a toe. "Time to head home. It's up to the boys in blue now."

Davies muttered something incoherent, and likely obscene, before yawning, stretching, and struggling to his feet.

"I'm up for anything that gets me a shower," the cat said before beginning to pack his kit.

Fifteen minutes later, team Two was gone, heading back to the fire house. That left Will and the police dogs.

Will had to squint to make out the name tags on the dogs' uniforms, but he wasn't surprised to

see Elm leading the pack.

"Long time no see," Will said, working up a smile.

The cop simply nodded. "Good day, Officer Hamish. Please stand aside as we perform our investigation."

Will simply crossed his arms and leaned against a wall on the far side of the street. This would be telling.

The V-town police force was many things, but never inefficient. It took them less than half an hour.

Will glanced up when Elm stepped his way.

"Please sign, Sir." The Shepherd's voice was tight, the words grinding from between his lips.

Will glanced down at the clipboard. He sighed.

"No."

Will watched the police dog's face carefully, looking for the slightest spark of surprise. There wasn't one. The other dog simply looked tired.

Turning, Elm dismissed the other officers. They scattered to the four winds almost before the words escaped his lips. It was clear they wanted to be anywhere but here.

Elm leaned against the wall next to Will.

He pushed the clipboard back to the dalmatian.

"Please sign off on the cause report, Sir."

Will didn't have to take more than a glance at the paper. He knew it was wrong.

"You wanted terrorists," Will said. "Well now you've got them. This was no accident." He paged through the scrawled writing. "How in the world did you come up with 'faulty wiring'? A blind man could see it had been set. Just outside the back..."

Elm cleared his throat, cutting Will off as he glanced about nervously.

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest what you're talking about, Sir. The fire was obviously accidental. *It had nothing to do with the current demonstrations.*"

Will could hear the pain those words sent down the policeman.

Reaching out, Will set a hand on the man's shoulder. "Let me guess, you had your orders on exactly what caused this fire before you ever got here. Right? Just like how I had my orders about what caused the last one?"

The dog looked away.

Will forced the clipboard back.

"I'm not signing. You can send it down to the station tomorrow if you want it so much. I'm sure Masterson will sign off on whatever it is the powers-that-be want, but I won't."

Will wasn't sure what the other dog's reaction was going to be, but he was surprised when he got a smile.

"It is unfortunate that we can not come to an agreed conclusion." The police dog's words were hard and formal, but he grinned. The idea of being able to mail the report to the station obviously took a weight off him.

Turning, Elm took one last look at the ruined buildings.

"And there wasn't a single soul in them?" Elm asked.

Will nodded. "Yep."

"Where in the gods' names have all the humans gone?"

The walk back to the fire house was long and grueling. Will didn't even bother trying to avoid

the mobs that snaked through the city. They all let him pass, even the one that had blocked him previously. It was obvious he wasn't off to save any humans, so they paid him no mind.

Was it just Will's imagination, or were there even more mobs than last night?

The sweat had pooled in Will's boots while he'd been fighting the fire. Most of it had drained, but there was still enough to leave his toes damp and mood black.

And above and beyond that he knew *something* was wrong the moment he turned the corner to the fire house. It was simply something in the air. Something he could *taste*.

And soon enough he could hear it too. Masterson. The bull was screaming at the top of his lungs. Will could hear it all the way out on the street.

Stepping through the front doors, Will made eye contact with the men still on duty. They all looked like they'd been browbeaten with a two-by-four. Will had no doubt Masterson had put them through the wringer.

Will took a deep breath and began stowing his equipment. He was in no rush.

"Hamish!"

Will hadn't the slightest how Masterson knew he was here, but the bull's voice boomed down to him.

Will pointedly ignored it as he carefully cleaned his equipment and set it away. Some things were more important than others.

Skipping his sorely needed shower, Will pulled on a fresh pair of fire house sweats and began climbing the stairs to the office level.

Masterson waited for him. And, surprisingly, so were Davies and Oscar. The cat and goat were sitting on office chairs while the bull paced back and forth before them.

"Get your spotted tail in here, mutt!"

Will narrowed his eyes and stepped forward.

"Yes?" was all he said.

"What in the gods' names is this?" Masterson pointed a finger to the big map. Two dots of red stood out on either edge of their territory. "What?"

Will cocked his head slightly. "We had two fires today."

"No," Masterson replied, his voice cold. "You had two *responses* today. That's not the same thing."

Will walked over to his desk, leaning on it. He'd have sat down, but his chair had been taken. "We had two calls. I tried to divert the second to the neighboring station, but they couldn't take it."

Will idly wondered if the bull's horns were capable of emitting smoke.

"Because they were following *orders*. You know full well that you were ordered to prioritize calls to non-human areas. The second call was in a human neighborhood. You should have let it burn. You had a more important call."

For the span of ten heartbeats Will didn't move. Then his ears began to slowly pull back.

"We had the report of a fire, *Sir*. We're fire fighters. I followed normal procedure and sent one team to each incident."

"In a human neighborhood!"

"And you would have had us ignore it?"

Will looked over to Davies and Oscar. The two men looked like they'd had the will to live surgically removed from them. Neither looked up.

"Do you have *any* idea how a fire works?" the dalmatian said, his voice cold. "Any at all? *Any* training? Ignoring a fire in an urban area doesn't just make it go away. It spreads! If I hadn't sent a

team to that fire we eventually would have lost the whole district! Even as it was we were delayed and short staffed, causing us to lose a block!”

Masterson pulled himself up to his full height, towering over the dog.

“I’m confident the mayor’s office knew what they were doing when they sent out the order.”

Will simply stood there, motionless. Only the gentle rise and fall of his breathing betrayed the life within him.

“Then the Mayor and his office are all morons. And you,” he added, voice mild, only the slightest hint of fire touching it, “Are an even greater fool. I won’t let anyone, human or not, die on my watch. You can give whatever orders, make whatever proclamations you want. I took an oath to myself to protect my fellow man. And I’ll do it, and I’ll lead my men to do it, no matter what you say.”

Will’s words had been soft and measured, but Masterson’s response was not so.

“This is treason,” the bull hissed, leaning forward until their noses nearly touched.

Will stared into his eyes and blinked.

“Get out!” The bull’s voice boomed, echoing off the walls of the office. “Get, you, you cur! Get out of my sight. I’ll have your tail nailed to my wall before I let you try to usurp me.”

Will cocked his head.

Leaning forward himself, he could feel Masterson’s breath on him.

The words Will whispered made the bull go bright red.