

FIREPROOF

Novelization by ERIC WILSON

Screenplay by
ALEX KENDRICK and STEPHEN KENDRICK



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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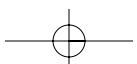
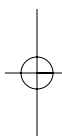
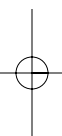
Eric dedicates this book to:

My one and only, Carolyn Rose . . .
Thanks for daring to love me these past eighteen years.
WE H_V_E A L_V_ W_RTH F_GH_ING FOR.

Alex and Stephen dedicate this book to:

Our mother, Rhonwyn Kendrick . . .
Thank you for loving us and Dad these forty-three years.
You are a blessing.
We love you!

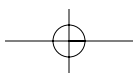
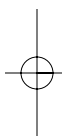
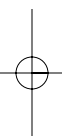
Sherwood Baptist Church . . .
May your faith and ministry always remain fireproof.
We thank God for you!



PART ONE

SPARKS

MAY 1998



CHAPTER 1

Dense smoke stretched between aisles of canned goods and wrapped its fingers around Captain Campbell's upright body. He tried to remain calm. He could see no farther than his leather gloves as he aimed the fire hose into blackness that pulsed with an eerie glow.

Snaking through aisles and licking along the ceiling, the grocery store's inferno seemed infused with a personal evil. It wasn't the first time Campbell had thought such a thing. Other firefighters had been known to say the same.

He told himself to take steady breaths. To stay focused.

No easy task.

The call had come into the station at 9:49 p.m. The locally owned store was getting ready to close its doors, and most of the shoppers had left. The main concern, as expressed by a cashier, was the safety of an assistant manager last seen heading to the back office.

The conflagration was spreading quickly now, seeming to rise from separate sections of the store and demanding the attention of all emergency personnel. Crews from three different stations had

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been sent to the scene. Campbell and his partner had entered the fray a half hour ago, with the rescue of human lives priority number one.

Stores could be rebuilt and inventory replaced, but nothing could bring back the dead.

“Tynes,” Campbell called out. “Tynes, you there?”

His partner was nowhere to be seen. It was possible the man had followed the hose line back outside, in danger of depleting his composite tank. Or he might’ve tried skirting the inferno, in search of the missing manager.

Either way, he should have said something, but Tynes was only in his second year and even the best made mistakes.

A fact the captain knew well.

Though Capt. Eddie Campbell had been part of the firefighting brotherhood since the late 1960s, with numerous awards and honors to his name, he had already managed to lose his two-way radio this evening, somewhere between the market’s front doors and his present location. Maybe caught it on a shelf. Or dropped it while coupling two hoses.

He was on his own, that’s all he knew—cut off from all communication.

The fire, meanwhile, seemed nowhere close to giving up the fight, and the captain stayed firmly planted. Although the quivering hose at his fingertips gave him some reassurance, impenetrable billows continued to close in around him. He felt like a rat in the coils of a boa constrictor.

Steady breaths. Steady.

But he couldn’t maintain this position forever.

He called his partner’s name a few more times, to no avail. His voice was muted by the mask, and if he called out much more, he would risk losing the precious air in his thirty-five-pound canister.

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From his back, several high-pitched beeps sounded in rapid succession.

Could that be right? He peered through the sweat-streaked face guard, squinting to read the dial on his Type 2 SCBA self-contained breathing apparatus.

Was he really that low? The alarm meant he had five minutes max, and then he'd be sucking fumes. The majority of fire fatalities were due to smoke inhalation, and if he didn't find his way out shortly, he would be in deep trouble.

Time to get going. He'd just follow the line back.

He felt his heart rate settle as he eased off the nozzle's water pressure, turned carefully in his gear, and slipped to his knees.

This was routine. He had a plan to follow, a goal in mind.

Campbell started crawling. At fifty-five years of age, he took pride in his physical condition. He moved hand over hand along the hose, knowing that it would guide him back to safety and fresh air. He wasn't done fighting this fire. He'd come back. But he'd be no good to anyone if he were passed out and unconscious on the floor.

His gloved knuckles knocked aside a can of Hormel chili and a box of taco shells. His right knee slipped on a water slick.

How far had he gone—twenty feet, thirty?

A single hose length was fifty feet long, and he and Tynes had been working with two in tandem. That meant it would take another minute or so to get out the door. In all this gear, progress was tedious, but he'd make it if he just kept moving.

Yes, just ahead was his proof. See there? Yellow and red bursts were prying at the smoke, and he realized he must be near the store's front windows. These had to be the fire engine's emergency lights rotating against the glass.

And was that clean air he tasted?

Just in time.

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Something was wrong, though. Not only was his tank nearly empty, but the temperature was rising. Things were getting hotter with each knee forward.

“Oh no,” Campbell said.

The words hung ominously in the mask. He saw now that he was looking at flames, not emergency lights, which meant he had veered off in the wrong direction. How could he have gotten this far off? He’d been following the line, switching from one hand to the other as he shifted along the floor.

The hose—

But no, this wasn’t a hose he had gripped in his fingers. It was a pipe.

That couldn’t be right. A pipe?

He must’ve switched over onto an irrigation system that ran along the floor to the produce section. How could he have been so foolish? Despite his tenure as a firefighter, he’d let circumstances blur his focus on the details.

Captain Campbell was breathing heavily as he turned back around. He had to keep his senses about him. The store was shrouded in darkness, and the only safe route was to backtrack to the point where he had erred.

He feared for his life. Would he make it out of here? Would he ever see his wife and daughter again? Joy and Catherine were his world.

Joy . . .

After twenty-six years, they were still together. She was a gentle soul, and she’d spent more than a few restless nights during the course of his career. No doubt about that.

Catherine . . .

She was eighteen, almost nineteen, a bright and vivacious

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daughter with a streak of independence—some would call it bullheadedness—a trait inherited from her father.

Spurred by these thoughts, Campbell pulled himself onward through the store's suffocating environs. His pulse throbbed in his fingers, but he tried to stay attentive to each change in shape or texture along the pipe.

The hose had to be here somewhere. His only way out.

He kept crawling, even as a memory of three-year-old Catherine played through his mind . . .

CAPTAIN CAMPBELL STANDS just outside her bedroom door and sees shelves of toys and stuffed animals along the wall. A teddy bear has its head and arm wrapped in gauze. A tea set and a wooden fire truck crouch beneath a sign that reads "Daddy's little girl."

He hears giggling as Joy says good night to young Catherine.

"All right, sweet pea," she says at last, "it's time for you to go to bed."

"Mommy, would you ask Daddy to come tuck me in?"

"No, he's at work tonight at the fire station. But he'll be home tomorrow."

Campbell smiles, knowing how surprised his wife will be when she sees that he's come home early—with permission, of course—to celebrate their eleventh anniversary.

"Mommy, I want to marry Daddy."

"You do?" Joy laughs. "Catherine, you can't marry Daddy. He's *my* husband."

"Well, when you're done being married, can I have him?"

Campbell's heart swells. In the moonlight, he catches glimpses

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of his daughter's drawings tacked up beside her dollhouse. In one picture, blue crayon hearts surround the words "Daddy," "Me," and "Mommy."

"I'm sorry, sweet pea." Joy is chuckling. "We'll never be done. You'll have to marry somebody else."

"Who?"

"We don't know yet. But someday."

"Can I wear a white dress and white gloves?"

"Sure, if you want to."

Campbell edges closer to the doorway. He spots the framed photo of himself, outfitted in his turnout gear and fire helmet, holding his darling, dark-haired girl and kissing her on the cheek while she flashes a grin wider than the pink bow in her hair.

From the bed, Catherine's voice cracks with the hope of every little girl. "Will we live happily after ever?" She mixes the words, but her desire is heartfelt.

"Mm-hmm," Joy says. "If you marry someone who really, really loves you."

"Like Daddy?" Catherine asks.

"Yes. Like Daddy . . ."

IN THE CLAUSTROPHOBIC space of his heavy gear and face mask, Captain Campbell held on to that memory. He was a husband, a father. He did not want to die, not like this. Not here in this store, without the chance to see his family again. Without the chance to walk his daughter down the aisle. And what about being a grandfather? Was that too much to ask for?

He pushed on through the heavy smoke, his knees grinding into the floor. He imagined Joy at home on her knees. He'd never

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been much of a praying man himself, but he didn't discount the value of a wife who talked to God.

"You're not losing me yet," he whispered. "Not if I can help it."

He couldn't help it, though. Barely able to breathe, he felt disoriented by the blackness.

What was that?

His hand brushed against something slightly larger than the pipe. It was charged with water—*the hose!*

He was back where he'd started, in the middle of the store, but a long trek stretched before him in the opposite direction.

Air. He needed fresh air. He was gulping at nothing, now that the canister on his back had run dry. He knew that to take off his mask would put him at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. On the other hand, he had only a few breaths left.

How long could he crawl without oxygen?

Forty seconds, sixty? Maybe ninety, if he could force down panic and keep his respiratory system regulated?

He thought again of his wife and his daughter.

One knee forward. *One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand.*

Another knee. *Three-one-thousand, four.*

Five, six, seven . . .

Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four . . .

His eyes were losing focus. His head was swimming. Blood pounded in his ears.

Forty-eight, forty-nine . . .

Movements slowing. Feeling sluggish.

Sixty-one . . .

He peeled off the mask, gasping, finding only toxic fumes that dried out his tongue and seared his throat.

Sixty-two . . .

Three . . .

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“I love you, Joy,” he muttered. “I—”
“Captain!”

Strong hands scooped beneath his arms and jarred him back to the moment. He felt himself dragged along the path of the winding hose, his boots scrambling at the floor. He heard grunts and groans, and then he and his rescuer were exploding through the front doors into the blessed, oxygen-rich atmosphere outside, into swirling lights and cries of relief.

“Caleb found him. Look! The rookie found the captain from Station One!”

“Nice job, kid.”

“Captain, are you with me? We thought you were a goner.”

EMS personnel swarmed around, their voices smudged by the effects of carbon monoxide and exhaustion. He tried to sit up. He had to get back inside. He was held down, while someone pointed out the store’s assistant manager seated on the nearby curb, with minor burns, but safe and sound.

“Tynes pulled him out,” another firefighter explained.

“My partner.” Campbell looked around. “Is he okay?”

“Man, I’m sorry.” Tynes stepped into view. “I thought you were right behind me, Captain. I tried calling over the radio, but you didn’t respond.”

Captain Campbell nodded his forgiveness and closed his eyes.

A firm hand removed his brush jacket and his boots, letting the cool air work as a balm on his sweat-drenched frame.

Later, as the fire was brought under control and the ruckus quieted, he pulled himself up. Still weak, he felt guilty for not standing by his crew. And where was the man who had pulled him to safety?

On cue, the rookie clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You can relax, sir. We got it under control. We’re just glad you’re still with us.”

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“Me, too,” Campbell admitted.

“We weren’t gonna lose you. Not tonight.”

“Your name’s Caleb? Which station you from?”

“Six. This was only my second real fire.”

“You did good, kid. I appreciate you coming after me. I truly do.”

“Well, I couldn’t let anything happen to you, Captain. If I’m gonna take over your job someday, I need you to stick around to teach me everything you know.”

“Is that so?” Campbell raised an eyebrow and looked up into the rookie’s soot-stained face. “Tell you right now, Caleb, that might take some time.”

“I’ve got time, sir. And I’m a quick learner.”