

# Saved By The Firefighter Chapter 1

0 9 minutes read

The breath from my lungs is laborious, as I climb yet another flight of stairs. The weight of my oxygen tank on my back feels heavier than I remember. Yet, another obstacle awaits me, blocking my path, testing my decision making and fitness. Lying flat to the ground, I shimmy under the fallen debris, then make my way to the side of the tall tower. I freeze momentarily, as I look at the slumped dummies that sit in the corner waiting to be rescued. This is not just a test of my physical abilities, but also my mental strength. Fighting against the memory which has haunted my existence for over a year, I move quickly, swallowing the lump that has formed in my throat, and pick up the dummy of the child cradling it into my arms, as I make my way back down the training tower, navigating the obstacles once more, then run out the door, and over the finish line.

The instructor clicks his stopwatch, before looking at me, he remains silent, but as his eyes lock with mine, he gives me a simple nod.

Pulling the mask from my face, I gasp slightly for fresh air. Sweat drips down my forehead, from under the yellow helmet, as the call for the next firefighter is made and the stopwatch reset.

“Bishop, go get changed, you are up with the doc next.” The instructor gives me the order, not even bothering to look me in the eye.

I give him a curt nod, then head back into the firehouse, removing my apparatus and fire clothing, the yellow braces that hold up my trousers hanging low on my hips, I step out of the fire-resistant uniform, that cause many a girl’s panties to moisten, but is life saving for me and my colleagues.

Heading to the showers, I press the button placing my hands flat against the old cracked green tiles, the grout between, discoloured yellow, as I allow the water to spray over my short black hair, soothing the ache in my shoulders. Taking a breath, I grab the soap and begin to wash down my body.

One thing I have done, during my forced furlough, is keep my body in top form. Each day I would embark on a relentless fitness regime, inspired by the soldiers from when I entered a reality TV show. The fitness of my body was not in question, but the sanity of my mind was.

Rinsing off the soap from my body, I walked back towards the locker room, grabbing a towel and placing it around my hips, as I dug out the 'day' uniform. Navy-blue chino trousers, teamed with a navy-blue polo shirt with the red firefighter's crest proudly embroidered on the left-hand side of the fabric. My name, Ben Bishop, embroidered in gold thread underneath. Slipping on the required boots, I took another breath before heading to the medical suit; another hoop to jump through in my bid to return to active duty.

I knocked on the plain white door and waited; the loud voice boomed through the painted MDF.

"Come in."

My hand twisted the silver doorknob, as once again, I took a breath to summon up my courage, and face the doctors who would decide my fate, once and for all.

"Take off your shirt," the command came by the male doctor, standing in his white coat, stethoscope around his neck. His silver flecked hair slicked back.

Removing my top, I stood waiting for the usual prodding and poking, as endless medical jargon would fill the silence, as the middle-aged lady who sat in the corner, silently took her notes.

Walking round to my back, the doctor began his examination.

"Can you feel this?" he asked. I could feel a pressure, but the gnarled skin was numb, the nerve endings shot from the depth of the burn.

"Pressure; I know you are touching it, but the feel of fingers or hands are not recognisable as such," I inform him, for the umpteenth time. Repeating the same answers to different doctors each appointment I was forced to attend.

"Does this hurt?" Again, the same question, but the truth was, I felt no pain, ... at least not on my back.

The scar which ran from my left shoulder diagonally to my right hip was the ugly reminder of that day, but the physical appearance of the puckered pink skin was nowhere near as horrific as the scars you cannot see, those that would wake me in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, as my brain relived the horrors of that fire. My mind instantly went to the memory, the small burnt girl who moved, wriggled in my arms, before the blaze brought

down a ceiling beam, that rendered us both prone, she succumbed to her injuries, whilst I cradled her and the burnt body of her already dead sister, to my chest, and yet I survived, saved by the suit, that many a stripper will wear as their tool of seduction. There is nothing seductive about it, it is not sexy, only necessary. It helped save me, but it could not save her.

“Good, now take a seat.” The doctor motioned to a blue plastic chair which sat beside his workstation.

The cuff of the blood pressure monitor placed around my muscular arm, started to inflate, constricting my bicep as the numbers flashed on the small monitor it was attached to.

“Good, your BP is well within normal range. Physically you are fit for work,” the doctor smiled; it was not new information. I had been physically fit for months now; that is not what held me back.

“Okay, if you wait here, the psychologist will be with you shortly,” the doctor announced before leaving the room to go examine yet another of the many firefighters who wished to return to work after being injured in the line of duty.

Pulling on my top, I waited, sitting on the blue plastic chair, like I had all the time in the world, but the outward appearance of calm did not tell the story of my mind wandering, like I was a caged lion, as I awaited the last test, ... the one I had failed twice before, after being diagnosed with PTSD, and forced to take sick leave, until I could control the horrors in my mind.

The door opened, and the woman who looked no more than 40 entered the room. Her grey skirt hung wide on her hips, the white blouse, tied in a bow at the neck, covered her arms. Taking a seat, she looked at me, and offered a small smile.

“Ben, how have you been?” Her voice calm, the soothing tone helped give you a sense of security.

“Better” my one-word answer, which for once, was true.

A series of questions later, and I am dismissed, told to wait for two weeks when I would get my official letter, which would inform me of my fate. Return to work, or pensioned off, unfit for work, and thrown onto the scrap heap, unable to do a job I had loved, a boyhood dream of becoming ‘Fireman Sam’ the children’s cartoon character. Hours of watching had fostered within me a

desperate need to become the 'hero next door', but life is not like the children's program, not everyone can be saved, and those who run into the burning buildings are the ones often left to pick up the pieces from the 'what could I have done better?' questions which inevitably plague all our minds when we are too late to save the victims of our nemesis. Fire.

Heading back to the locker room, I pick up my backpack. Slinging it over my shoulder, walking out of the training HQ, making my way to the car park, and jump into my silver Nissan Qashqai, I then reverse out of the parking bay, swinging the small SUV round, and heading to the sanctuary of my home, a three bedroomed semi-detached house located in, Seaburn, the small area of the City of Sunderland, a short walk from the beach, found in the north east of England, the lesser known city which sits in the shadows of its big brother Newcastle. As I enter through the black front door, throwing my keys into the bowl that sits on the windowsill of the arched stain glassed window which illuminates the passageway casting red, yellow, and green flecks of light against the pale blue walls, I hang my coat over the banister of the staircase, then walk past the white painted spindles to the kitchen. Grabbing the kettle and filling it with fresh water, I take my blue mug with the fire station crest on the front, and 'Red Watch' written on the back, and make myself a cup of scalding coffee. As I enter my living room, I pick up the remote control, and switch on the TV, aimlessly channel hopping, as I attempt to find something that would occupy my mind.

My phone in the pocket of my trousers begins to vibrate. As I pull it out, I see my mother is calling once more. With a slight sigh I answer her, knowing she will have been worried all day about my tests. A small smile finds my lips, ... my mother, ... the one woman in this world who always has my back, is an eternal worrier. If she has nothing to concern her, she worries she has missed something which requires her constant fretting.

"Hello," I greet her, my tone lighter than normal, as I try to keep her from becoming overly concerned on how I am doing, as I wait once more for the results.

"Hiya, just wondered how today went?" her voice sings out, her tone upbeat, but I know her better than anyone. She's masking the gut-wrenching fear she buries deep inside her, partly wanting me to return to the job I once loved, but the larger part not wanting her only son running into harm's way again.

“Good, passed the physical no problem, now just waiting for the Psychologist reports, should have it in a couple of weeks,” I answer. She already knows the drill, but I understand she will want to hear it again.

“Okay, well hopefully you will pass this time. I have some steak in, if you fancy popping over for your tea?” she asks. I let out a breath, I understand she wants to see me, to support me in my hour of need, but right now, I seek the solitude of my own home to deal with my fractured emotions in my own way.

“Not tonight, Mam, I just want to sit and relax,” I answer.

“Okay, I understand,” she answers, her happy tone not quite masking her disappointment.

“Maybe tomorrow, Mam.” I say, hoping that will help her feel a little less anxious about me, but deep down I know it will not.

“Yes, anytime, right, well ... I am going to go, my soaps are starting, and it is getting to a good bit,” she answers.

One thing about her, she never hovers or lingers. Once she knows my world has not ended, she is quick to leave me in peace. You would think, at 31, she would worry less, but when I say this to her, all she responds with is ‘31 or 101 you will always be my child, and I am supposed to worry, it is in the mother of a firefighter’s job description, one day when you find a wife, she can then take on the responsibility, but until then it is what I excel at.’

I know my mother would love nothing more than for me to find someone to share my life with, but at this moment in time, a relationship is the furthest thing from my mind, it is not something I am seeking, my sole focus is returning to work, to be one with my team again, and get some normality back into my life.

The days of waiting for my answer, turned into over a week of living like Schrodinger’s cat – my career both alive, and dead. As the sun begins to rise in the sky, my alarm clock plays the local radio station, as I lay in bed, listening to the same song they always play at 6am. Stretching out my aching back, I throw back the covers and head to the bathroom, filling the ceramic sink full of water, I splash my face, and look into the small shaving mirror. The dark circles that lay under my light grey eyes, tell of yet another night tossing and turning, as I fight the nightmare of that day in the long dark hours.

I rub the dark scruff on my face; it has grown longer than I like to keep it, so I pull out the trimmers, and methodically begin to cut it down to my preferred short length. As I tilt my head to one side, the sound of my letterbox causes me to halt. Placing the trimmer down on the tiled windowsill, I exit the bathroom and head straight down the stairs to my front door. The white letter with the postmark from Firefighter's HQ tells me, this is it; what I have been waiting for. It is time to discover my fate.