

A lady firefighter hired is tricked and tormented by males.

TAPOUT

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ONE

Her heart pounded like an AK-47. Her father must have felt this same terror just before he passed out. Death whispered in the flames, calling her with a sensual hiss...Lacy. Lacy. She was completely blinded; the thick, roiling smoke and total blackness of the raging inferno made vision impossible. A smoldering beam shrieked loose from the ceiling, showering her with hot sparks, knocking her fire helmet askew, jerking the precious two-and-a-half-inch hose from her grasp. She slammed hard onto the floor, the hose disappeared, and Lacy was spread-eagled in the dark. Sightless.

She scrabbled about for the hose, her lifeline, sucking for breath from the air-pack, the noxious smoke curling death-eager against her facemask.

Nails screamed overhead as they were wrenched from wood, making her turn aside as a blazing two-by-four crashed. She'd seen the bricks of the chimney begin to puff and smolder. The one-story restaurant's specialty was brisket and ribs slow-cooked over open flames, a dangerous situation. Lacy lay confused, blinded, terrified, her heartbeat erratic. She had to get hold of herself or die as the first lady firefighter ever hired by the City of Los Gatos, Texas, metropolis on the border between Mexico and the United States.

Lying flat on her back, she knew that she had to find that jumping, heaving hose line. Where could it be? Early on, Lacy had named the hose Gretel because she could follow its length to safety. If she didn't locate it quickly, she was a goner.

The five-minute warning buzzer screeched at her waist, vibrating so that if she couldn't hear it, she could feel it. The buzzer worked, by God, and now Lacy had to; it was her first time on the nozzle, and she wanted to perform well. Bert, her partner who was invisible and six feet behind her, was fighting

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his own battle. Surely by now he knew that she'd lost control. If there were a God, maybe Bert would think she was only grappling with Gretel because Lacy wanted to return the way they'd come.

It would be her fault if she and Bert died with shriveled lungs and fried skin. Like her firefighter father. Oh God, where was that hose? Crawling about on the hot floor, reaching desperately in all directions, she tried to find it. She didn't want to be another name on the honor roll. Gretel was here somewhere, thrashing like a giant snake from water pressure.

What had the training chief said to do? 'Use your head! Stop wasting air! Remember your flashlight!' Of course! Panic had made her stupid. Twisting to keep her face low, she eased the special light out of her coat pocket. The beam revealed a murky interior.

Think, girl, she told herself, breathing slowly to conserve air. Movement to her right. There! Gretel, jitterbugged, her thirty-pound nozzle whacking the wall as one hundred pounds of water pressure made her dance.

With a gasp of relief, Lacy struggled to her knees, heaving herself upright, and hurled herself onto the hose, clutching it, laughing like a maniac at her good fortune. With the powerful hose gripped close to her body, she felt Gretel's ability to save Lacy's life. If she hadn't had her facemask on, she'd have kissed the rubber-polyester hose.

Gretel jumped once more when Lacy's partner, Bert, slammed the hose signaling that he wanted out of the burning building, his own warning buzzer a loud, angry bee behind her. They'd better move quickly.

Hand over hand, she and Bert followed the hose to the outside and safety. The alarm vibes buzzed her abdomen; pumped-up adrenalin made her heart labor, and the thought of fresh air and outdoors was overwhelming. Safe!

They handed off Gretel to fellow firefighters and stumbled, coughing and gagging, to their own rig. Lacy removed her sweaty helmet, then backed up to Hawkeye, the pump operator

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and driver of their rig. He removed her empty air cylinder, replacing it with a full one.

Ready to go in again, she coughed up sooty phlegm, pulled off her gloves, reached inside the coat liner for a handkerchief, and blew her nose. Across the way a fireman from Engine 13 vomited into the grass. Lacy's back was so tired; she leaned against the rig and slid to the ground, smearing filth across her wet face with one arm. She was sweating like a marathon runner.

"I knew bein' partners with a female'd cause problems. Like Hawkeye said, you women lack upper body strength." Bert shook his head.

"As though men are perfect." Maybe if she snarled at Bert now and then, he'd show more respect. She turned away, exhausted. Another time she'd ask him where the hell he'd been, letting her struggle all alone like that.

Four fire engines surrounded the smoking, parboiled restaurant. Captain Mac, the one person at her fire station who tried to be fair to a woman firefighter had told Lacy that only the cook and a couple of waiters had been working when the fire started. They had come early to keep the embers hot under the briskets and ribs.

Lacy and her best friend, Jamie, had eaten here many times. The food was wonderful. Now she watched the restaurant employees stand about gazing at the ladder trucks, the pumper and a snorkel. High above them in thick smoke, a fireman aimed a final stream from the snorkel basket. Smoke surrounded him like clouds around a sky-born jet.

In another five minutes, the fire would be tapped out, and cleanup would begin. Lacy loved this part of firefighting: searching for small, hidden fires, scraping the floor with a pike pole, looking for signs of arson, and hoping to be the one to find it. Hey, she hadn't studied four months at the Fire Academy for nothing! She planned to be an arson inspector in record time. First woman on the department, first woman fire marshal, she thought. Hell with those firemen, I'll show 'em.

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Still sitting beside their rig, she and Bert watched two firemen carry out a fellow officer.

"Jesus Christ," Hawkeye said. It was one of his duties to control water pressure from the truck's gages. "Talk about females and bad luck." He glared at her. "If a fireman's been hurt because you jinxed our unit, I ain't gonna be responsible for my actions."

With his bias against women, Lacy wondered if he'd hooked her air pack properly. Be just like him to jam it. That'd be one way to get rid of her. No air, no female firefighter. Simple. She stood up to face him.

"Since you came aboard, every big fire hits our district," Hawkeye griped. "Mark my words, you're gonna get somebody killed."

Jeez! The way the guys feel, somebody'll probably chop my air hose in half. She resisted the urge to kick Hawkeye. Glaring at him, she picked up her pike pole, ready to head into the tapped-out building when her boss, Captain Mac, told her to.

She heard a shout then, and looked up in time to see Mac, Willie Cruz, and another fireman carefully ease a smoking carcass out of the fallen chimney bricks. She gagged as they laid the charred corpse on the ground to wait for the police and coroner.

"Jesus, what a way to die," Bert whispered, watching someone throw a tarp over the corpse. "Slow cooked."

The body looked mummified, both arms held stiffly above its head from being jammed into the chimney, eyes hardened and skin wrinkled from being smoked every day. Lord knew how long he'd been trapped in there. He looks like the Ice Maiden, she thought, and shuddered. Just another hungry, illegal alien looking for something to eat.

Would-be thieves had been baked in chimneys before. It wouldn't be long before Lieutenant Pete Dugan, head of the Arson Squad for the Fire Marshal's office, arrived. They studied every fire until they could prove it an accident. One thing about Pete, she thought; he was a perfectionist. His boys were

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bonafide law enforcement officers who carried guns; a gun would earn her more respect when she became a fire marshal. Men respected phallic symbols.

Inside the restaurant, she cleaned a spot, squatted, and stared hard at the bare floor. Nothing. She hoped Hawkeye never found out she'd dropped her hose, Gretel. He'd be on her like fleas on a dog. I'm just new is all, and he can't stand a female invading his turf. All three shifts of firemen, except for Hawkeye, were nice to her face and pulled every ugly prank in the firemen's repertoire behind her back, some of which could actually be defined as criminal mischief like the time they let the air out of three of her tires. That's how badly they wanted her out of "their" fire station. Number 13 Station belonged to only men.

"She's tapped out, boys," Captain Mac Connely said, over the loudspeaker. Lacy liked the sound of his voice. "Let's go."

She was glad to.

TWO

Back at the fire station again, Captain Mac Connely pointed to dirty, wet hoses that needed to be cleaned, rewound and stacked; to the axes and other paraphernalia that had to be immaculate, then returned to their proper places. Even the truck would have to be "cleaned down to the shine," as their captain said.

Fires are termed female, Lacy thought, hearing the words, "She's tapped out, boys." The firemen worked in silence, exhaustion nearly crippling them when a job was finished. Their turnout clothes weighed sixty pounds and inside them, they sweated gallons of water. They suffered quick weight loss, which made them shaky.

Lacy swallowed hard as she struggled onto the backseat of their pumper. When they backed into the bay, the captain said, "Get her ready to roll, men. Then you can have down-time." Now even trucks are female, Lacy thought angrily, yet a real woman on the job is bad luck. Go figure.

"Take a shower. Get some ZZZ's. We been hittin' it hard lately," Captain Mac said, cutting his blue eyes at her.

Lacy wished Mac hadn't said that. She knew he didn't mean that the extra runs were her fault, but she hated for Hawkeye to hear it; he gave her an I-told-you-so-look.

Sighing, she headed upstairs to change clothes, wishing she dared take a real shower. Behind her protective screen, she wriggled out of her wet body suit, sponged off in a bucket of water she kept in the corner, dried, and slipped into a dry body suit.

Her figure was nothing to sneeze at, her auburn hair had been long and gorgeous until regulations said it must be short, but she still hurried with her sponge bath because Willie Cruz, the voyeur from the ladder company, sometimes peeked at her from the

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head of the stairs. After she caught him at it, she bought a folding screen at a flea market to hide behind. If he did it again, she planned to pitch her dirty water into his hot eyes. She didn't dare turn him in. The men hated her already, why give them a real reason?

Surely it wouldn't be much longer before Uncle Ross had that shower stall built. More women firefighters were coming into his department, whether he liked it or not, and he'd better prepare for them. She also had to stop thinking of him as 'Uncle Ross' even though she'd called him that since she was a toddler. She'd give The Big Chief more respect in her thoughts too. From now on, she'd think of him as 'Chief Sarter.'

As clean as she could get from a bucket, she dressed and headed downstairs, hurling her wet turnouts into the bay. She'd rinse them off with one of the hoses after she had a cup of coffee. Sitting at the kitchen table, she listened to the splash of water from the upstairs showers, and it sounded wonderful. For Lacy, however, full bathing was usually impossible, although the guys issued daily invitations in phony voices. One echoed down the stairs now.

"Come on in, Bad Luck Baby!" Hawkeye gargled. "The water's fine!" The men's laughter was derogatory. She wished she had the nerve to undress, get a kitchen knife, and saunter naked down the length of the showers, staring at penises as though deciding which tiny one to slice off. Bobbittize 'em! Threatening to cut off a man's penis would immobilize him, surely. She chuckled to think how quickly these firemen would cup their genitals.

She jumped when the klaxon horn sounded 'tapout' again, and Dispatcher Adams' voice bellowed into every crevice of the building. "918 Magoffin. Four story with a standpipe, fire hydrant directly in front! You smoke-eaters gonna swallow lotts'a fumes today. Building is fully involved, men," he said. And then politely, "Women, too."

Darn Adams. She'd tried to de-emphasize her femininity by wearing an oversized uniform, keeping her hair very short and

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talking dirty when it seemed necessary. But even purchasing a special sports bra guaranteed to squash her breasts hadn't helped. No matter what she'd done, she stayed tall, big breasted and curved. The guys hated to work with a woman, short hair, flat breasts or no. How many of them had told her, "This is a man's job. Women ain't got enough upper body strength."

Blast the klaxon horn and the new emergency. Her hair was still gummy with sweat and smoke, and she yearned for a cleansing bath, not another fire. Then she laughed, running for the bay, grabbing her damp turnouts and being first onto the rig. Grumpily, the men hopped aboard late, hair soapy, dripping water into their boots and quick hitches. Getting underway in thirty seconds was sometimes a real pain, and she'd been the only one to make it this time. Served 'em right for making her wash in a bucket.

Hawkeye drove, muscles strained against his shirt, both hands on the oversized wheel as the unit sped down Millikan Street. His back muscles flexed as he controlled the thirty thousand pound truck, but his mouth never stopped. "Another bad luck fire in our district," he snarled. "Damn if it don't look like our lady firefighter is gonna cook all our geeses."

THREE

Lacy sat in her usual place behind Hawkeye on the careening, screaming fire truck. Her ears rang from the howl of the sirens and the boom of the air horn. By now she ought to be used to all the racket, she thought. Riding this big, powerful rig still gave her goose flesh. She had another month to go before probation was up; till then she remained a rookie.

"Scared?" Hawkeye said now, leering at her in the rearview mirror.

"Nuts to you," she said, smoothing on the Nomex knit hood before topping it with her helmet. His little games kept Hawkeye on her all the time. He thought he was so macho, but in her opinion, he was a real candy-ass. Her lips twisted with glee at the thought.

Her captain's face remained expressionless as though he was both deaf and dumb; he ignored Hawkeye's remarks. She didn't really blame the captain, but once in a while she wished Mac would shut Hawkeye up. It was a matter of principle.

Excitement dried out her mouth completely as the truck barreled into the church parking lot. Let's see if I remember studying this building, she thought, fastening the helmet. The kitchen's in the basement. I'll bet that's where the fire started.

The church's belfry spewed feathery plumes already, the ancient brick darkened from smoke. Hopping out of the truck behind Mac and Bert, she shrugged into her yellow Scott Air Pack.

"You remember this layout?" Mac yelled at her.

"Yes sir," she said, trying to hook her helmet. Excitement made her clumsy.

Again, Mac yelled. "Hurry it up, Patton. This building'll turn to ashes while you fumble around."

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"Yes sir," she said, her face red under her mask. There were times when she hated him, handsome or not.

With the air pack snug, she hooked it firmly about her waist. This baby had saved her life once. No matter how she tried to breathe slow and easy, it was difficult not to suck for air once her adrenalin hit. When Mac shouted for a one-inch, she grabbed the correct size, supporting the hose's nozzle still warning herself about conserving air. Don't waste it! She chided herself, heading into the flames and smoke. Don't drop the nozzle. Keep it aimed at the seat of the fire, making a safer path toward the basement stairs.

She and Bert, hose captured between them, felt their way down the stairs while Hawkeye worked gauges and Mac oversaw the operation.

Straightening her shoulders, Lacy braced herself for the sudden blindness she knew waited for her. She flicked her mask down and stuck the air hose in her mouth. Blindness was next. She hated that; it took too long getting used to following the line. Even knowing the building couldn't save her backside without sight. She gripped the hose more tightly and stumbled down the steps.

Inside was as black as her tomcat. Lacy and Bert picked their way single file, Bert supporting the line while she handled the heavy brass nozzle. He jerked the line to warn her the hose was filling now.

One hand touched the wall as she groped forward. The heat from a wooden door stung her bare wrist. Her gloves were supposed to be tucked into the sleeves of her coat.

"Dammit," she hissed, cursing the painful blister. The door was broiling hot. She'd have to hide the burn; it was a dead giveaway that she hadn't had her gloves on right. The men didn't need another reason for abusing her.

Smoke sucked in and out under the door. Back draft. Lacy turned to signal Bert. His back was toward her; he was manipulating the hose.

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He knows enough to stay away from a back draft; he'd just get pissed off if I pointed it out. Cautiously, she turned a corner and aimed the water toward the eight-burner gas stove. I'll bet that's the culprit, she thought, adjusting the nozzle, hearing the steam hiss.

Twenty-five minutes later, her air pack buzzed and Lacy tensed. It seemed as though they'd just entered the room. The air pack vibrated too, and her heart beat faster. Only five minutes of air left. One step at a time, they backed up, Bert supporting the weight of Gretel so Lacy could control the spray. The big flames were out, but smoke and dirt clouded the air and the floor was piled with debris.

In the hallway again, Bert stumbled and grabbed the hot doorknob to steady himself. Without a thought, Lacy tackled him and he dropped in surprise and anger. "What the hell?" His voice was muffled by the mask. On his backside, helmet crooked, he snarled. "What's the matter with you?"

She pointed to the door. "Hot!" she yelled through her mask. Opening that door would have cooked them both; back drafts were lethal.

Nevertheless, she saw that the lines of his body were rigid with hostility. Lacy was only a rookie and a girl at that. So what if he stumbled, his sooty face seemed to say, he wouldn't make mistakes.

Lacy resented his crappy attitude and jerked him upright. "Let's go," she said. "You're wasting time."

"Hey, girly," Bert snapped, voice muffled. "Keep your hands to yourself."

"Yeah, sure," she muttered. A mere woman had saved his Hispanic hide. Muchos gracias would have been nice to hear. Lacy's mouth tightened into a thin line. When would he accept her as a partner, a fireman?

Outside, waiting for a fresh air cylinder, Lacy glimpsed Charlie Demarest from Channel 13, a mike stuck in Mac's face. Good old Charlie. Always the newshound. The only time she saw him

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now was at fires. He left desperate messages on her answering machine. She erased them without listening.

"You're just like my mother," he'd tell her. "No idea what a real woman is; although even she wouldn't want my wife to be a damned firefighter." Charlie hadn't known how to feel about his mother; she'd abandoned him when he was very small to be raised by a farmer somewhere in Wisconsin. No wonder he had such odd ideas about women.

Lacy chuckled softly when she heard Mac shout: "Get your ass behind that line, Demarast!"

Charlie scowled, then turned to obey, and spotted her. Waving in her direction, he grinned. Lacy ducked behind the rig. Since their breakup, Charlie showed up at all her emergencies, and there'd been sure lots of them lately. Hawkeye was right about that; their district seemed to get all the big stuff. For just a nanosecond, she wondered if Hawkeye might be setting the fires. Firemen knew ways that would be nearly impossible to detect. Then she dismissed that ugly thought.

The fire was tapped out now, and her excitement level dropped. Maybe she'd find the origin of fire this time. With her pike pole, she scraped the floor, looking for any revealing clue among the broken tiles and glass, the burned wood and melted light fixtures. She shuddered when she remembered the man in the chimney; she hoped there were no bodies in this fire.

When her probation was up, she'd take the test for the Arson Squad. In her spare time, she was already studying: Arson: Tricks and Targets. The subject fascinated her. Right now though, her shoulders ached and her spine felt permanently bent; she stopped to stretch and decided that nobody would deliberately start a church fire; she was wasting her time.

When they had wrapped it up, and were back at the station again, she ached with exhaustion. She half fell off the truck, yet pride in the work she'd done gave her a nice feeling. Earlier today, she'd even saved a man's life. Surely when Bert told the crew, she'd have more credibility as a fireman. If he told. A compliment from one of the guys would be nice too. Or would

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Bert have been too ashamed to tell? Helpful acts never went unremarked among the men; if nothing else the saved fireman was the butt of jokes for being a pussy. Well so far, her assistance had gone unnoticed, she thought, heading downstairs to clean and wind hose.

At noon, her twenty-four-hour shift over, she went up to the dorm, changed into jeans, then stripped her bed. One bed served three people, one on each shift. Each person furnished his own linen, taking it home to wash. Her bed was used by Richards from A shift and de Laris from C.

As she pulled the sheets aside, she stared at a bloody tampon lying under her pillow. Not again! For a second, she wanted to throw up, but then, marching toward the showers, she hurled the nasty thing in. It hit someone with a loud impact.

"God dammit, Hawkeye, this thing's in my hair!" Willie screamed. "Why don't you stick your wife's filthy rag somewheres besides Patton's bed?" With a great deal of pleasure, she heard a solid pop against wet skin.

"Arghhh!" Hawkeye bellowed, and Lacy knew Willie had smacked him with the tampon. Good, she thought. Serves them both right.

On her way to the car, she passed the locker room. She slowed to listen.

"Why don't you knock off the bullshit, Hawkeye?" Willie Cruz said, disgusted. "We're stuck with a split-tail. I'd like to stick that Tampon where the sun don't shine on you."

Hawkeye's reply had an ugly ring. "Wait'll she finds my next present."

Then he started in on Bert. "Hey, Bert," he bellowed, so the incoming shift could hear too. "I hear our own personal beaver saved your butt this morning. Maybe you oughta start wearing a bra and pantyhose so you and your partner'd match!" He banged gleefully on the metal locker. So Bert had told.

Lacy heard Bert mumble that he should have kept his mouth shut, but she didn't hang around after that. It was enough that

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one of them had to dispose of the dripping Tampon. The hell with them and their repulsive tricks. Bert hadn't fried, had he?

She and Jamie had plans for dinner. Lacy intended to forget these jerks and enjoy Mexican food and sangria for a change. Unlocking the door to her car, she backed out and drove home and a long, cleansing shower before she met Jamie at 7:00 P.M.

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