

THE TORCHING by Kerry Peresta

Excerpt

Smoke assailed us halfway up my long, winding, driveway. A dingy, gray film coated my windshield. I jabbed the brake to slow down, but my trembling foot slipped off the brake. Lilly gave me a look that broke my heart.

The surging, ballooning smoke hurled itself at us like angry fog. Visibility fell to near-zero the longer I drove. I slowed to a crawl. We inched along the lane until the strobing white-and-red lights cut through the smoke. I counted two fire engines and one black SUV on the lane as I approached. A couple of firefighters raced into my house. My door lay on the porch in three pieces, and an axe was propped against the wall. Each firefighter wore oxygen tanks attached to large, anteater-shaped masks. With their cumbersome, reflective-striped protective gear and masks, they looked more suited to step on the moon than inside my beloved Maryland farmhouse.

I brought my car to a shuddering halt.

We stepped out. I put my arm around Lilly.

Vaporous clouds of smoke cloaked my house. A couple of firefighters worked with giant, yellow firehoses. The men had divided themselves into teams, and the muted shouts told me some of them were behind the house. Flames leapt toward the sky from the backside of the roof. I counted six firefighters working on the house that I could see—plus the ones in the back. Tears trickled down my cheeks, and a terrifying thought struck—what about my cat?

“Lilly,” I said, my voice shaky, “Where was Riot when you last saw him?”

Lilly’s face went white. “Mom...”

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “No, no...Riot’s smart. He will have found safety. I’ll find him. Stay here.”

I ran across the yard to a woman dressed in navy slacks and a white shirt with metal glinting on the front and official-looking patches on the arms. “I’m the owner,” I yelled over the whump of igniting flames, batting my way through smoke.

She shook my hand and identified herself as the public information officer. “Sorry to meet under these circumstances, but glad you were out of the home. We have it controlled. The team inside is checking to make sure it was contained. As far as we can tell, the seat of the fire is in the attic. Give us thirty minutes, okay? But ma’am, I’ll need you to stay back. Our investigator will be here soon. She’ll let you know when it’s safe to go inside.”

“My cat’s in there,” I yelled. “Can you have someone look for him?”

She spoke into a radio.

The smoke started to let up. Three hoses trained on the roof gushed out torrents of water. The huge flames stretching into the sky began to shrink. Radio chatter stuttered around the space. The firefighters stayed in constant contact, radios slung across their chests with a strap that held a mic.

These guys would not know where to look for Riot.

With an apologetic glance at Lilly, I skirted around the trucks, avoided the PIO, and dashed across the yard, up the front porch stairs, and into the house.

“MOM,” Lilly wailed through the billowy smoke.

Coughing, I ran inside. “Riot,” I screamed. “Riot, I’m here, buddy.”

I looked behind the couch. Underneath the dining room table. On top of his cat tree. Underneath the wingback chair. He wasn’t in any of his favorite spots. I plowed through the murkiness and melting sheetrock.

A bullhorn blared, “Ma’am. We need you to exit the building.” “Now!”

My throat was closing. My eyes stung like crazy. I needed to find him and get the heck out.

I scrambled into the kitchen and opened the lower cupboards, then the uppers. Searched the seats of the barstools, underneath the kitchen table. My heart thrashed like a wrecking ball in my chest. “Riot? I’m here, boy. Come on out,” I begged. A timid sound reached my ears. I waited. I heard it again, louder.

A shaggy, orange head appeared on top of the cabinets. I climbed up, grabbed him, and raced out the back door. The backyard firefighter team made group gestures that I interpreted as ‘get the hell out of here and let us do our job, ma’am’.

I zigzagged through the first responder obstacle course to my car, blinded by the strobing lights. Lilly spurted fresh tears and held out her arms for Riot. We watched in silence as the flames soared

into the sky. After a while, we heard less commotion from the firefighters and the smoke around us grew white and wispy.

A very red-faced PIO barreled toward me. "I need you to stay out of the house until our investigator has completed the investigation."

I wiped my sooty hands on my pants. "Your guys wouldn't have found my cat. Riot would have been scared to death by the way they look. I didn't have a choice."

She told me the fire investigator had arrived, and under no circumstances was I to enter the home without her permission.

Lilly held Riot tight against her chest.

"Thought you hated this cat," I joked.

"Whatever, Mom," she said.

A small, thickset, woman with short hair approached.

"Mrs. Callahan?"

"It's Ms. I'm the owner."

"Good news, Ms. Callahan. The rear quadrant of the roof and attic sustained most of the damage. The firefighters are checking the ceiling of the second floor now, for hot spots. I think you got lucky."

"It didn't spread?"

She smiled her assurances. "They're going to clean up here and have a final look around. They'll let me know when it's safe to go in." She stuck out a hand. "I'm Tasha Jackson, fire investigator. I work with these goofballs." She grinned.

I shook her hand.

In the background, firefighters wrapped hoses. A couple of them worked the hydrant. Another walked the perimeter of my home. Instead of the burble of radios, most of them had ditched the headgear. A man got out of the black SUV and strode toward the PIO. After a few minutes of speaking with her, he approached me. He introduced himself as the Battalion Chief, told me he was sorry the fire had interrupted such an important occasion, and if there was anything they could do...to call the PIO. She wiggled her fingers at me, then went to talk to the camera crews and TV reporters that had crashed the scene. His expression somber, the Battalion Chief handed me his business card.

“If you need them, Red Cross services are available for three nights at a local motel and \$600 gift cards for each displaced person. Please contact your insurance company immediately, they’ll do their own investigation.”

I gave him a blank look and took his card.

“Our investigator will talk about next steps, and ask you some questions to complete her report. Please remember not to go inside the area of damage alone, Ms. Callahan. Do you have somewhere to stay?”

With a sigh, I glanced over my shoulder toward my compact, office on the corner of Worthington Avenue and my property. I could stay in the office guest bedroom, and Lilly could stay at my neighbor’s house. “Yeah. We do. Is the...do you think the bedrooms in my house are okay? Can we get some clothes?”

He yelled a couple of names and asked them to check. They walked toward my house. The porch that stretched across the front of my house looked as if someone couldn’t decide whether to drown it or blow it up.

The public information officer waved off the reporters as she walked in my direction. One of the firefighters stared at me so long it became uncomfortable. I groaned. Was he one of them? A cult fan of the ‘Mercy’s Miracle’ persona? Why had I thought it was a good idea to write a book? After the publisher’s marketing department flew me all over the country for publicity events, the book hit the bestseller list and stayed there. The story of my survival and struggle to re-create my life had developed a rabid following.

I gave the firefighter a hard stare. He dropped his gaze. Reporters screamed questions at me from a distance. The PIO did her best to keep them under control.

I longed for a normal life.

My mind flew back. I closed my eyes, remembering.

The first few days, waking up in the hospital panicked and breathless and unable to move; the second week, when I’d begun to see flickers of light, the third week, when my fingers twitched and hope sprang to life. Neurology interns stealing in and out of my room at odd hours to see the ‘miracle’ restoration. I remembered my daughters’ first visits and the terrified looks on their faces when they realized I didn’t remember them. The fourth and fifth weeks, when physical therapists did everything they could to help restore my mobility and speech.

I could still visualize the reporters closing in on me. Waving their microphones in my face before I could even form a coherent sentence. I remembered watching my mom herding my daughters to my room on the fifth floor of the hospital, and the television crews that formed a tight knot around them as they made their way to the entrance of the hospital.

My youngest daughter had burst into my hospital room with an excited smile. "Reporters are dying to talk to you, Mom! Get ready."

I rubbed my eyes and sighed.

Reporters were a plague to be avoided, now.

"Olivia? Are you okay?" The PIO looked at me in concern.

I blinked. "Sorry. Yeah. I'm okay."

She held out her cell. "Create contact info for me?"

I entered my number, and my neighbor Callie's, for good measure. The two firefighters that had inspected the bedrooms returned with a thumbs-up. "Bedrooms look good. Stairs are intact."

The PIO smiled at me, tilted her head toward the reporters. "I didn't realize you were *that* Olivia Callahan."

I attempted a smile. She was trying to be nice. She had no idea that I hated the notoriety.

She handed me her card. "If you need *anything*. I mean it." She left.

Lilly put her hand on my shoulder. "Mom? Everybody's leaving. Now what?"

I squeezed my eyes shut. How do I accept this new reality?