

FORGED IN FLAMES

A MASON AND STERLING

NOVELLA

BY DAVID BECKLER

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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to my brother-in-law and
friend Michael Cunningham.*

*His sometimes foreboding exterior concealed a
gentle, loving, loyal man with a great sense of humour
and sharp wit. If I ever get above myself, I just imagine
his acerbic response and think, 'Catch yourself on.'*

PROLOGUE

The pressure threatened to explode the boy's lungs and points of light flared behind his closed eyelids. He needed to breathe but he mustn't inhale until he surfaced. The current held him in its unyielding grip, spinning him and dragging him further under. How long had he been fighting it? Too long, and the battle drained his energy until he had barely enough to keep his brain working. He must have air. Even though he knew it meant death, he opened his mouth.

An arm clamped across his chest as he inhaled. A fine spray of salty water entered his mouth, but with it, life-giving air. The boy coughed as oxygen filled his lungs, easing the fire in them.

“Stop struggling.”

Vicky. She'd come for him.

“Can you help me?” Her breath came in short gasps. “Lie back and paddle.”

His limbs refused to respond. He lay back, letting her support him. Her strong arm gripped him against her and the warmth of her body seeped into his. He felt her heartbeat, a fast, powerful rhythm and her breath caressed the skin above his ear. Slowly, sensation returned to his legs and he kicked. The high sun warmed his face and he closed his eyes,

concentrating on paddling, helping Vicky. He knew she'd come for him. How had she found him? He wanted to ask but weariness infused him. He'd ask her once they reached the shore...

Water entered his nostrils, making him splutter, as a wave broke over his head. He squinted into bright sunlight. The sun seemed much lower and the arm holding him had gone.

"Vicky?"

No answer.

"Vicky!"

His limbs thrashed and his legs sank. Then his foot hit sand. He could stand. The water reached his shoulders. He peered out to sea and studied the horizon but saw only gentle waves. On the beach behind him lay the two towels and Vicky's windsurfer. His board floated far out to sea. He waded up the gently sloping beach until the water reached his hips. He scanned the horizon again, searching in vain for Vicky's pale head.

"Vicky!" His yell echoed off the cliffs above the beach.

He ran out of the water, hoping to see further but apart from the glint of sunlight off the waves, he saw nothing. He must find her. But where should he search? He didn't even know from which direction he'd drifted.

CHAPTER 1

17th May 1996

Thick black smoke and flames boiled out of the window a few feet from Adam Sterling's helmet. He ducked, even though the heat hadn't yet penetrated his protective clothing. In front of him, Mal crouched low, the cylinder on his back in line with the top of his helmet. With twenty years' experience, Mal didn't ruffle easily. Lenny's narrow shoulders twisted as he swung the sledgehammer at the front door. He packed surprising power in his tall, wiry body, but the head bounced off the timber. Inside, glass exploded.

Excited voices cried out from the pavement where a crowd had gathered.

"Persons confirmed lads," Station Officer Reed announced from behind Adam, his voice calm. He was the only person on the watch with more time in than Mal. "Young woman lives alone. Nobody's seen her and according to the neighbours, she never goes out."

Adam's pulse jumped: his first job, and it *was* 'persons'. Although he'd spent countless hours training for this moment, this was his first fire in breathing apparatus. Lenny took

another swing, the head smashed into the timber, but the door didn't give. The same height as Lenny, but a couple of stones heavier, Adam would hit harder and wanted to take the hammer off him. Instead, he mentally rehearsed his actions once they got in the house. He pushed away the nagging fear he'd fail the woman, but the longer they waited, the more it persisted.

Three more blows and a crack appeared in the top corner of the door, releasing a plume of smoke. Another thump and the door flew inwards. A cloud of hot acrid fumes burst out of the opening, enveloping Lenny. He spun away, coughing and blinking.

"In you go, lads," Reed said, crouching down beside Adam. "Mal, take the ground floor and Steve," he gestured to the team from the second pump, "you two go upstairs."

The pump screamed and Mal directed a stream of water at the ceiling inside the doorway. He paused to let any loose debris fall, gestured to Adam and headed inside.

Reed patted Adam on the shoulder. "Just remember your training and do what Mal tells you. You'll be fine."

Adam grabbed the black hose-reel and followed. The second breathing-apparatus team trailed behind him. Thick smoke enveloped them all, reducing visibility to zero and swallowing the sounds from outside. Adam switched on his lamp, but the smoke absorbed the beam of light. Intent on coming to terms with this alien environment, he forgot the basics.

“Get lower,” Mal shouted, pushing him down.

A glimmer of flame appeared to Adam’s left beneath the haze. Mal directed a high pressure spray at the fire. Clouds of steam enveloped Adam and he could see nothing again. He wiped his visor with his gloved hand as the two men in the second team brushed past and started up the stairs. Adam followed Mal further into the house. Water dripped and more glass smashed. Heat penetrated his flash hood and tunic, growing more intense. Sweat erupted from his pores, coating his skin. Remembering what Reed said, he ducked lower.

Mal grabbed his sleeve and placed his speech diaphragm against Adam’s ear. “The fire’s in the front room through here. I’ll deal with it and you search the rear of the house. Come straight back if you see flames.”

Cut adrift from his teammate, Adam froze for a moment, then remembered they needed to find the woman. He floundered until his left hand touched the wall and he welcomed it like a drowning man a lifebelt. Behind him, Mal blasted water into the front room. More steam exploded out of the doorway, mixing with the smoke filling the hall.

Adam advanced into the house, the back of his gloved hand pressed against the wall, shuffling forward and sweeping the floor with his boots while staying in a crouch. The door to the back room shouldn’t be far. By stretching, he touched the far side of the narrow hallway. His hands found banister travelling upwards, then a wall. It sounded hollow. Had he found a door? He reached out to check but his left hand lost

contact with the wall. Disconcerted at losing his lifeline, he stepped towards the wall, both hands groping to find it. Relief flooded through him as he touched a doorframe and found the door open.

A sound made him stop. A cough? The hissing of his breathing apparatus covered other sounds, so he held his breath. Flames crackled and popped, mixing with the sounds of boots scuffing against floorboards above him. The noise of the pump and shouts of the crew outside sounded far away. From near the front door Lenny coughed and Reed murmured a response. Adam relaxed and continued through the doorway.

Keep one hand on the wall and use the other and both feet to sweep, he told himself. A big cupboard against the wall forced him to abandon the wall and step into the room. His foot snagged on a table in the centre as he traversed the room, focussed on his search. On reaching a corner, he veered right. In two paces he came to a window. Sooty streaks coated the glass but light penetrated until he moved away. He checked the window fastening, a solid lock. He pressed on, accompanied by the hiss of his breathing apparatus. Heat continued to invade his body and his clothes clung to him. In the next corner, he found a sideboard on legs. He got even lower and checked under it.

A piece of furniture fell. He stopped and listened. Had it come from above or next door? Another crash, this time directly above him. He carried on, making his way back to the

door and stood in the doorway. Visibility had improved but steam and smoke still filled the hallway and Mal was still spraying water into the front room. Should he see if he needed help or press on? He got his bearings and carried on down the corridor. Finding another door in front of him, he searched the kitchen. More heavy-duty locks secured the door and windows. Voices called from the hallway and he rushed to respond.

Two men in breathing apparatus clomped down the stairs. Steve placed his mouth next to Adam's ear. "All clear upstairs. How are you doing?"

"Just finished the kitchen. She must be in the basement."

"Or out. I've lost count of the times we've had a 'persons' and there's nobody in. Where's the door to the basement?"

"Just behind me." Adam started toward it.

"We'll take it. You need to stay on the same floor as Mal." Steve and his partner shuffled past Adam. "Got it," Steve said. He crouched down beside the door to check it.

"Steve, what did you knock over upstairs?" Adam said.

"An old wardrobe. There's nothing else up there."

"She *is* downstairs." Adam pushed past Steve and found the doorframe. He faced the door and straightened. The intense heat almost pushed him to the floor. He lifted his right foot and drove the heel of his heavy boot into the door. It shook and the force of the blow made him stagger.

"Hang on, Adam, we need to check it." Steve grabbed his sleeve.

“No time.” Adam pulled free and kicked the door again. Timber cracked, but the door held. The third kick ripped the lock off and the door flew inwards. Adam grabbed the doorframe, stopping himself falling into the cellar.

“We’ll go first,” Steve said, brushing past him.

Adam followed the two men down open wooden steps. The atmosphere in the cellar was much cooler, the smoke less dense. At the bottom of the stairs, he could make out a corridor with doors off it. Steve disappeared through one and his partner through another.

“Here!” Steve shouted. “I’ve got someone.”

Adam stepped towards him but just then a shout came from upstairs. “Everyone out, we’ve lost water.”

Further reading

I hope you've enjoyed this excerpt. The whole novella is available on [Amazon](#).

The second of the Mason & Sterling novellas, **THE MONEY TRAP**, is available on Amazon and is published by **Long Stop Books**.

Join my **newsletter** to get updates on my writing. Hear about new books and offers, find out more about the characters and have the opportunity of getting involved in the creative process.

My first full length Mason & Sterling novel, **BROTHERHOOD**, is available on Amazon and is published by **Sapere Books**.