

Only One Will Survive

The afternoon sky is filled with screams. Screams escalate into gunfire. Windows shatter. Fights break out. Police caught amidst the chaos. A small, insignificant town in full-blown riot. Darkness looms over the town as dense clouds of billowing smoke rise into the once-clear sky. Helicopter buzz above the scene, broadcasting the whole riot on live television. The county residents sit on the edge of their seats as emergency vehicles arrive at the scene, waiting to see if the town might survive.

Patrick woke up to the dim morning light peeking through the small gap in the window shades. He wiped his bleary eyes and stumbled out of bed. He opened his closet and picked out his clothes for the day: a black t-shirt and jeans, then went to the nearby bathroom to take a shower. For breakfast, he scrambled eggs fresh from the supermarket the day before along with whole wheat toast and a glass of skim milk. After finishing his meal and brushing his teeth, he left the apartment and got in his car, driving to the city's fire station.

On arrival at the station, Patrick was given his tasks for the day. He walked to the nearby garage, which housed the three large fire trucks. He checked each tire on the three trucks to make sure there were no flats before driving it into the parking lot. Grabbing a bucket of soap and a sponge, he washed the remains of dirt and burnt debris. He continued cleaning the truck for three hours, only stopping for a glass of water. Once the truck was clean, Patrick drove it back into the garage and headed inside for a lunch break with his coworkers.

"When d'you think the next fire will be?" Patrick asked his coworkers, sitting around the table with him and eating their lunch.

"I hope it's sometime soon," said Josh. "It's been a while since the last call."

"I wouldn't mind if it wasn't for a while," Xander said. "I like takin' long breaks."

Patrick took a big bite of his ham and cheese sandwich. “You really wanna hang around the fire station all day cleaning the trucks?”

“Firefighting can be stressful. Breaks gimme time to pull myself together,” Xander said.

“The stressful moments are the best part,” Josh said. “Each house has a different layout, it’s like goin’ through a maze.”

“Exactly,” Patrick said. “And you’re helping people out while having fun. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

“Don’t get me wrong, firefighting is really fun,” said Xander. “But it’s really risky, and I enjoy breaks between calls. If I’m lucky, I might get another month to relax.”

Then, the fire alarms at the station went off.

The rioting had died down since the fire trucks had arrived. The streets by the edge of town were clear aside from a couple police cars and ambulances. Patrick heard the cacophony of sirens mixed in with the occasional scream. The air smelled of smoke and fire. Much of the nearby infrastructure was lit ablaze, slowly deteriorating into a hollow shell of support beams. Xander hooked the end of the hose to a nearby fire hydrant, untouched from the damage, while Josh held the nozzle firmly in his hands, ready to blast water at the destructive flames. Patrick grabbed an axe and crowbar and approached the decimated building, ready to save whoever might be inside.

Windows smashed. Water splashed. Patrick entered into the smoking ruins of buildings, crawling along the ground in search of people trapped inside. Josh followed soon after, hose in both hands, putting out the remaining embers. Patrick slithered along the dirty ground, listening to sounds around him. If he found someone trapped in a room, surrounded by flames, Xander would maneuver the ladder up to the window and break it open, while Josh would smother any

nearby flames. Most of the houses were mostly destroyed, reduced to heaps of debris, but occasionally there was a house still mostly intact. After almost an hour of putting out countless fires and saving a dozen people, the trio approached a large, intact house.

The house stood before them in a cloud of dense fog. Wooden planks hung loose off of the exterior walls. Patrick approached the house. He could see flames still eating away the roof of the house. The door stood ajar, hanging by one hinge. Patrick entered on all fours, searching the rooms one by one. Xander entered behind with the hose, looking around for any nearby flames. The house was completely silent, apart from the charred, wooden floorboards creaking beneath their knees. Xander began to cough out the ash-filled air. The coughing became quieter and went on for nearly half a minute. Patrick turned around to Xander and said, “Hey bud, you alright?”

“I ain’t the one coughin’,” Xander said. “Someone else is here.”

Adrenaline rushed through Patrick as he realized the significance of those words. *Someone’s trapped in the house, possibly dying from smoke*, he thought. He scrambled along the ground, looking through room to room, seeing no sign of anyone. Droplets of sweat began to form on his forehead as he searched harder. The heat began to intensify. The smell of smoke was getting stronger. Patrick panted as he exited the last room on the first story. He shook his head at Xander. “No one there,” he said. The last place to check was up. Patrick slowly climbed the stairs, staying low to the ground as to avoid the dense smoke. Once Patrick reached the top of the stairs, he spotted flames ahead. He heard a cracking sound and the roof began to cave in. Before he could get to the stairs, debris from the wall fell and blocked his only escape. He was trapped on the topmost, burning story.

Patrick began to panic. His heart rate accelerated as he focused on one thought. *Survival.* Patrick stood up, his head buried in clouds of smoke. His eyes stung as he struggled to see even a few feet in front of him. He stumbled blindly, looking for an exit, coughing up smoke. He fell to his knees and frantically crawled around, feeling the ground around him for any sign of an exit. His hand shot back in pain- he had touched metal, hot from nearly an hour of fire. His elbow bumped into an unsturdy wall and it began to fall away from him. He could barely see around him, but he didn't hear or see the wall fall. *The hot metal hinge. The moving wall.* Patrick had discovered a door. With confidence, he crawled into the room and looked at his surroundings. A ball of fire the size of a couch stood in front of him. A window hung ajar behind it. He noticed a strange object in the corner. It was around the size of a large box and it was lying unconscious in the corner of the room, bundled up like a package. It was a child.

Patrick ran to the child's side. Its chest was slowly moving up and down, as it breathed in dirty air. He looked back at the fireball of a bed and the window above it. He could make out Josh on the ladder, smashing a hole in the glass wide enough for him to escape.

Josh stuck his head into the room, surveying the area. "Jump over the fires, Pat," he said with encouragement. "I'll help ya get through the window."

Patrick looked at Josh, then back to the child. He could leap over the fires without getting seriously burned and make it safely out of the house, or he could carry the child over the flames, risking serious damage. "There's a child stuck in here," Patrick said. "We gotta save him."

"It ain't worth it, Pat. Only one will survive."

Only one will survive. Only one. But which one? Pat heard a cracking sound. He recognized the sound from just a few minutes before, when the wall separated him from safety.

He needed to make a choice before both him and the child would be crushed. As the ceiling began to cave in, he made his move.

Patrick lunged towards the child, debris smashing to the ground where he was standing. He scooped up the child in both of his arms and stared straight towards the ball of fire. He began to run. He could see the fire get closer as he got faster. Time began to slow down as he focused on the flames ahead of him. Patrick felt his legs moving in slow-motion as he narrowly avoided the caving-in ceiling. He leaped, soaring over the entangled mess of burning wood and bedsheets, arms stretched out in a dive towards the window. His chest smacked into the wall below the window, knocking the wind out of him. Arms stretched through the shattered window and legs dangling into the fiery inferno, Patrick could feel his legs being consumed by the flames. The world started to spin. He was being pulled through the window and an endless tunnel of darkness beyond it. He fell through the tunnel, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, but still feeling two hands pull him to safety. He could hear an unrecognizable voice at the end of the tunnel.

“Pat...Pat...”

The voice got louder and the world got brighter. Patrick opened his eyes. He was sitting in a hospital bed with three faces looking at him. Josh and Xander were looking down at him, smiling. The third was the excited face of a small child, the one that he had saved from the fire. Patrick smiled at the child. He knew that two would survive.