

The Fire Escape

A six-alarm fire went off when 'Danger' Dan Grossman was 150 miles away and traveling in the opposite direction. Of course, it had to happen on the same day as a meeting that was supposed to change his life.

“Can you Waze that call for me?” Danger asked his fiancée. Her feet were propped on the truck's dash.

“It's up in Santa Barbara,” said Samantha. “The old people's home on Pine, the fancy one. I am so excited for today, Dan. This is going to be great. Thank you for agreeing to this.” She picked up the two-way radio before throwing it down on the seat like a leftover fast-food burger.

“Did I have a choice?”

“Of course you do, Baby. It's going to be great. Trust this.” She squeezed his hand.

The radio crackled to life. “Engine 2, Ladder 3. 112 South Pine, Santa Barbara. Cross street, East Main. Eight-story structure. 120 persons inside, and animals. All-hands assignment.”

“We're not responding to that call,” she insisted. “You're a volunteer now, no future for us in that fire pit.” She fiddled with a traditional headscarf she felt she needed to wear for the upcoming meeting. “How do I look in this thing?”

Dispatch broke in. “Ladder 3 reports residents and their pets on the sidewalk. Securing the site. Estimated eighty persons still inside. Blaze contained to western half of the building. Kitchen fire. 112 South Oak. All-hands assignment.”

“I've got to go back, Sam. No one knows head injury like me on the force. I'm sure there will be someone who needs me.” He adjusted his trucker's hat to the backward position. It bore the name of the couple's new private fire-response firm, Brigade RAPID Response.

The calls on the radio released the adrenaline in his veins, what members in Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting called ‘the magnet.’ Only an ARFF member would run toward a chemical fire or exploding aircraft like it was a Sunday supper. His time in the Marines was a lifetime of experience, even though he was still just 26 years old.

Samantha reached over and touched his hand on the wheel. “Dange’, today is about us. We’re lucky to get this meeting today. We’re going to look a royal prince in the eye and ask him for a half million-dollar contract to protect his home from wildfires. We’re on our way to getting everything we’ve dreamed about.”

“Feels more like a nightmare right now.” He slapped himself in mock fashion. “I’m not sure I want this.”

Danger kept listening to the emergency call. “I’m supposed to be protecting people.”

“And you are protecting people. You’re protecting us, our future.” Her voice was quivering.

“I’m protecting a marble palace that some Qatar prince sleeps in twice a year.”

“Who cares how often he sleeps there? We need to build a life together if we are going to have a life together, Dange.”

“We better be getting big bucks for this.”

“We are. I bet we’ll even get invited to spend a weekend at the estate. They built a sky dome with an infinity pool on top. He swam for the Qatar Olympic team. Wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“Wow. The Qatar Olympic team. Do you think any Jews are allowed on that squad?” He touched his Star of David necklace.

Samantha pulled down the vanity mirror and checked herself. “Is this the way you're supposed to wear this thing?” she said, adjusting her black headscarf.

He looked over at her. “You look like a Jewish Arabian Princess,” he said deadbeat.

“Is that good?” she asked, but he drove on with clarifying. They passed a club called Billie’s with huge neon images of a couple dancing.

“We’ve haven’t gone dancing in a while,” he said, but she did not answer.

She was dressed head to toe in black, with a smart jacket and her head covered by the scarf. No sign of the badass tank commander he had fallen for on the flight home from his final tour in Afghanistan. He was taken by her red hair and all-American freckles. That night, he took her to Sam & Nellies and they danced to his buddy’s country band. She looked good with a Pacifico in her hand and swaying hips. Now, her get-up hid her looks, and appeared so grown up, like a glimpse of their lives in 20 years. They hadn’t gone dancing for 6 months.

"This is the exit, baby,” Samantha said as the off ramp whizzed by.

Danger tapped the steering wheel with multiple fingers. “Of all freaking days,” he muttered. He wormed their way back to Santa Monica Boulevard.

He listened to the radio traffic. Dispatch had declared a mass casualty event that triggered a set of logistical procedures. There were many famous people living in the building, and the press was on the scene, calling out Hollywood’s aging producers and actors who lived there, like it was the red carpet. Rex Wharton had now taken command as Fire Chief. The guy was a hack, a glorified clerk, and Danger knew he would have easily beat him in the election next September if he ran.

“Can I mention one little thing?” asked Sam.

“Fire away.”

“I don’t think you should introduce yourself as Danger, OK? I mean, this guy is like a gazillionaire, and his people check names and all that. Just go with your real name, OK?”

“Danger is my real name.”

“To your buddies at AARF, yes, but you are Daniel Grossman, CEO of Brigade now. My daddy says that these foreign nationals are all business and that they have people whose only job is to check these little things. That goes for me too.”

“What does your dad have to do with this?”

“He wants the best for us.”

“What’s the best for us?”

No one spoke.

“I haven’t even told you about our wedding plans,” said Samantha. “It’s going to be simple, but very *us*. Nothing too fancy. I still can’t get used to my new name, Mrs. Grossman!”

“What if I’m not ready?”

Samantha gave him a double take. “For what?”

“For this meeting today,” he offered. But even he was not sure what he meant.

Danger turned the truck into the Peninsula Hotel parking lot and pulled up to the entrance. He nodded as a young valet came over and then noticed a familiar Tacoma parked near the entrance. It had surfboards on top, plenty of beach sand, and a sticker displaying the ARFF emblem. “That’s Duke’s truck,” he said. “Don’t tell me he’s our competition.” He looked at Samantha. “Tell me that Duke’s not our competition.”

“I don’t know why he’s here,” she said. “What’s the difference? This is a job for a real company, not some surfer dude with a water pistol.”

They walked into the lobby and took the elevator to the pool deck where the prince and a woman sat beneath an umbrella. Next to them was none other than Duke Hammersfield.

“Look who's got his sales cap on,” Samantha said. “Must not be any waves today.”

Danger caught Duke's eye. The two young Marines, discharged not two years ago, nodded at one another before he and Samantha made their way to the bar area.

Danger stumbled slightly in the new shoes. Samantha had spent \$450 on the Louis Vuitton shoes, but they could return them if the contract didn't go through. “Shoes are everything over there,” she had said yesterday as she dressed him in front of the mirror. She had bought him a Burberry shirt—button down and off-pink. It exposed the top of his chest, but his Star of David remained hidden.

Duke Hammersfield shook hands with the prince, said his goodbys and headed toward Danger and Samantha. “Hi kids,” he said.

“Hey Duker,” said Danger.

“Heard about that Sixer up in Santa Barbara. Isn't that your turf, Dange?”

“Day off.”

“Didn't know that six-alarms had a day off. Is that part of your pitch to *Big Bucks* here? We should be teaming up. We used to be on the same side, soldier.” His stubble was perfect, and he was dressed in an off-white suit with an open collar.

Samantha said, “What are you going to do if there's a blaze on that guy's Taj Mahal, Duke? Ride your fat bike up there and spit?”

“Nice to see you too, Sam.” Duke smiled. “I'll just have the place so dialed in that any blaze would have to ask permission to get in.”

“That so?” Danger said.

“It’s all in the prep, man. Danger can fly in on his rented bird like we are still in ’Ganistahn and try to shock the monkey. But if the site is properly prepped, then there ain’t no chimp to chase, boys and girls. We could work this out between us, divvy up the pot. That dude has enough to go around.” He looked over at the prince and waved a final time, which the prince and his interpreter returned. “It doesn’t have to be so...winners and losers.” He mimicked a boxer with fists raised and gave Danger a playful punch.

Danger gave him a high five and Samantha tensed at their camaraderie.

Duke turned to leave, then wheeled around. “You know Dange’, they lost a married couple in that six-alarm. Just found them in their bed hugging their cat. Ninety two and eighty-eight years old. What a way to go, huh?”

Danger caught Samantha’s eye.

Duke nodded. “Good luck, team. I’m heading up to Santa Barbara to see if there’s anything this old hand can do to help out. Maybe not much, but I’m going anyway. They’re still pulling people out.”

“Iron to a magnet, buddy,” Danger said, and put a fist to his heart, which Duke returned. The ex-marine turned to leave. The woman who had been sitting with the prince and Duke approached them.

“You must be Noora,” said Samantha, extending her hand. “Samantha Grossman, COO of Brigade Tech Response. This is our CEO, Daniel Grossman.”

So now they were married? He extended his hand to Noora. “Danger,” he said. Samantha winced.

“Thank you for coming on short notice,” Noora said. “My husband and I have been expecting you.” She held a neat folder with the information that Samantha had efficiently sent.

The logo of the BTR was prominent. Noora had the eyes of a woman used to navigating a man's world. "My husband and I welcome you and look forward to hearing about your company." She walked away and the couple followed moments later.

"I wonder which number wife she is," Danger mumbled as they walked toward the table.

"Shh," Samantha said.

Over by the pool, a boy and a girl were taking turns jumping into the water. They were playing a game where the jumper had to imitate an animal that the caller randomly called out.

"*Horse!*" the boy yelled, standing in the pool.

The girl jumped and said, "*Neigh—*" as her body hit the water. She was a little too close to the edge of the cement for comfort.

Danger and Samantha approached the table where the prince and Noora were now seated. A series of introductions occurred. The prince avoided eye contact. He wore Gucci shoes, the logo prominent. Here was the playboy son of the emir whom Los Angeles loved to hate.

As the prince spoke, Noora interpreted for him. She said to Danger and Samantha, "You come highly recommended, but I understand that your company is still new."

"*Monkey!*" the girl in the pool yelled to her brother who did his imitation. He also landed too close to the edge, his head just missing. The children's mother, steps away, ignored them as she read a magazine. No sign of a father.

Danger stood up, excused himself and walked over to the mother. Her manicured toes had cotton in between them.

"Those your kids?" he asked her, blocking her sun. It took a moment for her to acknowledge his presence.

"Can I help you, Hercules?" she asked. She placed a hand over her eyes, like a visor.

“Your kids are jumping very near the edge of the pool, and I don’t want to see anyone get hurt.”

“Thank you for your concern,” she said in a monotone, then looked at her children.

“Kids, please keep it down. You are disturbing this nice gentleman.” The kids either did not hear her or care. She went back to her magazine. Danger stared at her for a few moments, before returning to the meeting.

“I’m sorry for the interruption,” Danger said to the guests. Noora’s look was kinder than the Prince’s, and Samantha tried to land somewhere in between.

Noora continued. “My husband spent seven years building the house in Ventura as a replica of his father’s Mykonos retreat,” said Noora. “I assume you have seen photos.”

Danger turned back to Noora. “We actually flew over the compound.”

“Dan is a Navy Seal helicopter pilot,” said Samantha. “We took a tour of the compound last week. Of course, we did not want to get too close so as not to disturb his Royal Highness.”

The prince did not seem to appreciate unannounced visitors.

Samantha gave an overview of Brigade RAPID Response, Inc. They had met in the Marines, he as a Navy Seal in the AARF division dealing with the worst kind of mechanical disasters, and she as a tank commander. When they were both honorably discharged on the same day, they found themselves seated together on a flight home and were soon engaged.

“A love story,” Noora said, dreamily.

“Tell us about BTR and how it protects our family treasure,” the prince said as if asking about the lobster special at Mastro’s.

Danger and Samantha went into their rehearsed speech. Eight team members on call. Twelve more at a moment’s notice.

“We have two Sikorsky S-64 Aircrane helitankers at our disposal,” Samantha said.

“We can fly anywhere in eleven minutes,” Danger said, memorizing his line.

“Dan lives and breathes fire,” Samantha said.

“As good as the Israelis?” the prince asked, perhaps seeing his necklace. “I admire them, even if I differ with their...tactics.”

“*Giraffe!*” the boy yelled.

Danger looked back at the pool. The girl leaped into the air with her version of a top heavy animal.

He wondered if the six-alarm was live on CNN, and he looked around the area for a television. He found one across the way at the bar, but it was broadcasting a soccer game which was being watched by what looked like a few Saudi nationals.

“Explain your response based on the Adjective Class Rating,” Noora continued. She had obviously been doing her homework, but even Smokey Bear knew the fire rating system, sister. Besides, who is dumb enough to spend \$200M on a hilltop compound in the middle of the worst wildfire territory in the nation?

“*Cow!*” the girl yelled to her brother.

The boy jumped. It was then that he heard the thud followed by a woman's scream.

The boy was sprawled in the water and there was visible blood.

Danger instantly jumped up, but when he felt Samantha tug hard at him he reluctantly sat back down.

The mother threw her magazine, tipped over her drink, and made a clumsy fall into the water. “Benjamin!”

From where he sat, Danger could see that it was an open head injury that had penetrated the dura.

Other adults had jumped into the pool, like a drunken party. A tall man loudly identifying himself as a doctor got into the pool. “Someone call 911!” he yelled. Blood seeped through the blue water, like an oil spill turned red by the tide. The girl was screaming, hysterical. An older woman was in the water trying to calm the girl as the mother was comforted by another guest.

“Americans,” the prince said. “Always in crisis.”

“Excuse me?” Danger said.

“Children should not be left without proper attention by their nurses.” The prince was now speaking perfect, almost American English.

The doctor, with the help of another man, had removed the boy from the pool and laid him on the concrete. A woman in a sarong had placed a towel under the boy’s head and the doctor applied pressure to the wound, checking his ABCs. The mother was on her knees, trying to attend, working on impulse. The girl was being held tightly by the older woman on a nearby lounge chair.

Danger’s Louis Vuitton shoes felt like anchors. Eight or so minutes passed.

Medics were now on the site. The boy was moving. The mother was crying. The little sister was sucking her thumb. The doctor released his charge to the emergency personnel. But Danger hadn’t seen anyone check the boy’s eyes.

“So unfortunate,” Noora said. “Parents really need to be more attentive.”

Samantha nodded and forced a smile. Danger watched as the medics lifted the boy onto a gurney. The mother and daughter trailed the team. The boy’s legs were moving, but from what he could see the medics had still not checked his eyes.

Danger knew he could just walk over there and do an assessment, but Samantha's interruptions held him back like a seatbelt.

"I am sorry for this intrusion," Samantha said to their hosts.

"What are you apologizing for, Sam?" Danger snapped. The royal couple sat back in their chairs and looked away.

"Dan, I was just commenting that it is unfortunate that our guests had to witness this event." She waved her hand toward the pool scene. Blood stained the cement, and the older woman was cleaning it off with a hotel towel.

"I think I should run downstairs and try to check those boy's eyes. That could easily be a subarachnoid hemorrhage. Head injury was my specialty in the ARFF. It's what I do."

"Helicopter pilot, firefighter, and medic," the prince smiled. "I could use a man like you."

"I just put out fires, sir."

"Well your job would be to make sure that one never starts."

"Don't tell me my job."

"Mr. Grossman, I'm not sure that you have the, how do you say it in english...motivation for this. Am I wrong?"

"What motivates me is what motivates me."

"Dan..." Samantha said.

"My name is Danger, Sam. Danger."

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger," said Noora, "my husband is in town for a very short duration, so if it is possible to conclude our meeting, I think you will find it most worthy of your time."

Danger and the prince glared at one another as Sam tried to make peace through her gestures.

“Excuse me,” Danger said, and made his way to the house phone.

“Daniel! Where are you going?” Samantha looked at the prince and Noora. “Please excuse him, he is a first responder, and when there’s an event like this episode, he kind of goes into automatic.” The royal couple gave a reluctant acceptance. Sam walked over to Danger, who was on the house phone.

“This is Corporal Daniel Granger of the Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting. I was witness to the boy who just cracked his head. Please make certain that the EMTs check the boy’s eyes to rule out a subarachnoid hemorrhage. No, I’m not his father! I’m a Marine trained in head injury! Please!” He placed the phone down in its cradle.

“Dan, what are you doing? We’re wrapping up the most important meeting of our lives. The boy will be fine! This is not your fire.”

“They are all my fires, Sam. I’m needed.”

“Yes, you *are* needed. By me! Your fiancé!” She pulled off her headscarf and he watched her red hair tumble to her shoulders.

“Sam, I don’t want that.” He pointed toward the Prince.

Her eyes tried to find the connection with him but all he could return was his honesty. “I’m sorry for not wanting what you want.”

“What about us?”

“What about us?” he repeated. “I love you. I just don’t love this, so if this is our life, then well, I’m hitting the pause button. I gotta go, we’ll talk later.”

The emergency vehicle lights were flashing on the street and Danger ran over to the balcony to look down. He saw the gurney being loaded into the ambulance, and watched it pull

out with its siren blaring. He also noticed the Tacoma with a roof rack full of surfboards was still in the parking lot. Duke was leaning against the truck, smoking a cigarette.

“Hey!” Danger called down.

Duke looked up at the roof and waved to him, then pointed to his watch.

It was only a minute before Danger was in the parking lot handing his last \$20 to the valet. “A redhead wearing a black scarf will be down in a few minutes,” he told the valet before jogging over to Duke.

“What an asshole,” Duke said. “I wouldn’t work for that guy for a million bucks and five wives.”

“I might have just lost both.”

Duke and Danger gave each other a handshake they came up with while on patrol somewhere near Jalalabad. “Let’s go see if that six-alarm can use a couple of old vets, Duker.”

They jumped into the Tacoma, and accelerated out of the parking lot.

“When are we going to grow up?” Danger asked as the truck weaved through traffic.

“Question is, when are we going back for another tour?” Duke said, hitting the siren on the dash. The Tacoma sped onto the 101 ramp and quickly hit 85 miles per hour on its way north.

Danger looked behind in the jump seat and noticed an extra pair of Haix Fire Eagle boots. He kicked off the Louis Vuittons and pulled the boots on. They felt just right.

The End