



# **before the fire**

*a prequel to the Forged in Flames series*

**SUSAN REIMER**

## Introduction

This prequel to the **Forged in Flames** trilogy takes place a couple of years before **Embers**, book #1 in the series. In **Before the Fire**, readers are introduced to the four main characters of the novels and have an opportunity to hang out with them on a typical summer day. Grade eight graduation is behind them and the whole summer is in front of them! I hope you enjoy this short story. Links to all three books in the **Forged in Flames** series are included at the end. Happy reading!

## Before the Fire

Hello Reader, and welcome to Hartford, a small town in the middle of nowhere. A town where kids feel safe to ride their bikes to school, the neighbours are nosy and the dogs are friendly. If you're a reader of the Forged in Flames series, you will already know the four boys heading over to the local park. If not, let me introduce you to them.

Along the trail, weaving between the trees and jumping every rock he comes to, is 13-year-old Billy Jackson on the bike his big brother Beau just finished fixing with found parts. Beau is a great fixer of things. Billy has arrived to find the park empty but if he could see past the elementary school in front of him, he would know his friend Joey Floretti is on his way on an old mountain bike. Joey lives the furthest from the park. The apartment he shares with his dad is over the family garage on the corner of the highway and the main road into town so by the time he arrives, he is already dusty and sweaty. From the street a block over Peter Xavier has just left his driveway. Like Billy, Peter and Joey are both 13.

Right behind Peter is Alex Smiley, the oldest at 14, pumping his legs as hard as he can to make up for lost time. Alex's folks are what they call "helicopter parents" (they hover, get it?). He's wasted ten minutes convincing them he can go to the park on his own and meet his friends there. Finally, he's arrived and thrown his bike on the grass beside Peter's.

Alex

“Hiya, Pete!” Peter looked down from his perch on the monkey bars and waved. Hanging upside down, Joey and Billy grinned up at him.

“Hi Alex! Come on up!”

Alex began to climb the ladder on the side. He grabbed the rungs and threw his chubby legs up one at a time until his nose was level with the bars. He looked across at the other boys. Billy and Joey had hooked their feet under the bar and lowered their bodies backwards through the monkey bars to swing upside down. Peter sat with his legs hanging through the bars looking at him expectantly. “Come on, Alex!”

Alex took a deep breath and stood on the very top rung of the ladder. Reaching across he carefully placed a hand on the side bars and pulled himself up until he lay across the shorter bars on his stomach. Slowly, he pushed himself up so that he was on his hands and knees. He looked up at Pete and began to inch his way across. It took forever. The metal dug into his knees and twice his hand slipped and he almost plummeted to the ground. Finally, he was right beside Peter and chanced looking down between the bars. His head swam.

“Hey, you’re alright, Alex.” Peter put his hand on the bar between them. “Just put your hand here and sit down.” Beads of perspiration had formed on Alex’s face and his short blonde hair was sticking up in sweaty spikes. He did just as Peter said and sat. His hands had a tight grip on the bars on either side and he hooked his feet under the side bar just in case. He grinned to himself. *I made it!*

Billy swung up between the bars and hoisted himself to sit beside them. “Man, I was getting dizzy.”

“Me too,” Joey appeared beside him and rolled his eyes making them all laugh. “My head’s spinning!”

## Before the Fire

They had a good view of the town. Alex felt proud sitting up there with his friends but a tiny voice in his head was warning him, "Don't look down." Interrupting his thoughts, Billy whooped and jumped off the monkey bars landing in the sand beneath. He stumbled and landed on his back but jumped up and was running across the playground before anyone could ask him if he was OK. Joey glanced at Peter and Alex, shrugged, and following Billy's example, jumped to the sand below. He didn't fall backwards, though, and bowed as if they were applauding him before running over to the swings where Billy had already started pumping towards the sky.

Peter looked at Alex, his eyebrows raised as if to ask, wanna jump? Alex shook his head at the silent question.

"N...No way, Pete!" he stuttered. "I'm not jumping off this thing!"

"Nah, me neither," Peter held onto the bars on either side and slowly lowered his body through them. When he let his feet down, he was only a foot or so off the ground. He let go and landed easily. Smiling up at Alex he said, "Your turn."

Alex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "OK." He trusted Peter. If Pete said he could do this, then he could. He tried to remember what Peter had done. He lowered himself through the bars, his ankles hooked over the long side bar and his hands holding on tightly.

"OK, now pull your feet down, Alex." Peter stood beneath him with his hands out ready to catch him. Alex pulled his feet through. He was holding on with both hands and his whole body was hanging from the monkey bars. "Now, let go!" And he did. He landed with a grunt on the sandy ground. Peering through the thick lenses of his glasses, he grinned at Peter.

Billy

Billy soared into the air. He could see over the fence all the way over the bush to his house when he got high enough. He knew Beau was already at work and his parents were probably still in bed. He'd put together a peanut butter sandwich and drank a glass of milk before running out the door after Peter called. He didn't worry about leaving a note. His folks always knew where to find him.

School was over and he and his friends were free for the summer. Too young for most part time jobs, they had little else to do besides play and fish. And that was just fine with Billy. School wasn't for him. He'd had a hard time finishing this year and knew he probably wouldn't have made it to grade eight grad without Peter's help. And Joey's pushing. He glanced at his friend. Joey struggled as much as he did but he had something Billy didn't. He was determined. Joey wanted more than a life in a small town and he knew he needed decent marks to get it. Billy had resented Joey's constant reminders at the time. He had texted him every night to make sure he was working on the final assignment. More often than not, Billy would be watching movies or playing video games with Beau but when Joey wouldn't let it go, he'd put the controller down and work on it. And it had paid off. After Peter looked it over and helped fix it up, Billy had graduated with a B average and his folks had been proud. Billy straightened his arms and leaned back in his swing making it go even higher until his seat was parallel with the top bar and he could see all the way out of town.

"Hey, up there!" Peter and Alex looked like little kids from so high up. "It's getting hot," Peter called. "Wanna go to the lake?" Billy let his swing slow down until he could put his feet on the ground and drag to a stop.

"Yeah, sure, but I need to go home first." Billy glanced at Joey who had slowed down as well. "You in?"

## Before the Fire

Joey nodded. "I brought my stuff just in case." He jumped off his swing and threw his arm around Alex who was at least a head shorter. "What about you, little buddy?"

Alex frowned in the direction of his house. "Aw, I better go ask first."

Billy nodded. "Let's meet up at the dock then. Last one there's a loser!" He laughed and ran for his bike, Joey right on his tail.

Billy rode down the bike path. It was cooler in there. The sunlight streamed through the thick tree canopy creating shadows on the ground. Billy rode over the wooden bridge enjoying the rumble of the boards under his tires. He made a couple of turns and then rode up the short hill that led to his backyard. He biked through the tall grass careful to avoid the car parts strewn everywhere from Beau's latest projects. Dropping his bike by the steps he took them two at a time and opened the screen door. It squealed on rusty hinges and he winced at the noise.

"Hey son." His dad was up, sitting at the kitchen table.

"Oh, hi Dad."

"Where you been this early?"

Billy thought it best not to point out that it was almost lunchtime. His dad had worked a late shift and come home sometime in the small hours and he knew he was probably still tired. "Just at the park with Joey, Peter and Alex."

"Oh, OK." His dad rubbed at the stubble on his chin.

"We're gonna go swimming. I just came home for a towel." Billy held his breath hoping his dad didn't have a bunch of chores for him.

"OK, your mother is still sleeping, though. Try to be quiet." Relieved, Billy nodded, glancing down the hall to his parent's bedroom. His mom was always sleeping, at least that's how it had been for a while now. She'd get up sometime around lunch, maybe get dressed and then tidy up before making supper and lying down again. If there was extra money, they might jump in dad's old truck and get

## Before the Fire

burgers but that hadn't happened for a long time. All these thoughts ran through Billy's mind in the time it took to cross the kitchen and climb the stairs and he knew better than to say anything. It would just lead to an argument and then he wouldn't be going anywhere except maybe the garage to coax the lawn mower into life. Even though he was young, Billy had long known how to pick his battles. Finding a frayed beach towel, he ran back downstairs, grabbed an old water bottle and filled it up at the tap outside. His dad stood silently at the kitchen window and watched his son ride away.

Joey

Joey left his bike on the beach and ran down the dock stopping at the end and peering into the water. It was dark and minnows darted through the weeds. He debated jumping in but decided to wait for his friends. Instead, he sat down on the end of the dock, dangling his feet in the water. It was shockingly cold even though it was the end of June but as he sat there, he started to get used to it. The sun glinted off the surface of the lake and he watched a family load up a fishing boat and then troll out into the middle of the water before opening up the engine and racing across to the mouth of the river. The sound of the little girls' delighted laughter carried clearly across to where he sat. He frowned thinking of the phone call he'd overheard last night. His dad on the phone with his mom. Dad had tried to keep his voice down but the apartment was small and the walls were thin.

"Come on! What do you mean, you don't have time! You seem to have all the time in the world for your new family." There was silence but Joey could hear his dad pacing in his room and then the sound of his beer bottle slamming down. "Yeah, sure, they're young, but Joey needs you, too. Be a mom for once in your life!" The phone hit the wall and there was silence. A couple of minutes later his dad had knocked lightly on Joey's door. "Hey son, you in there?"

"Yeah," Joey had answered. His door had swung open. He had been lying on his bed with his arm over his eyes but he'd moved it to look at his dad and spoke first. "Don't worry about it."

His dad shook his head. "Guess you heard then. Sorry son. I was hoping maybe the three of us could go and celebrate your grad but it looks like..."

"Mom's busy. It's OK, Dad, I get it." Joey had sat up then and looked at his dad in the eye. "I mean, come on! Did you really expect her to come? When is the last time the three of us did anything Dad? Face it! She has a new family and she doesn't want a reminder of her old one."

"Joey...your mom loves you..."

## Before the Fire

“Yeah, yeah, I know. She sure has a crappy way of showing it, though!”

Joey shook his head at his reflection in the lake. Tears ran down his face and he watched them bounce off the surface of the water. It had been just the two of them, him and dad, for years now. The two of them and Grandpa. He was always there when they needed him. Like last weekend. Joey’s dad had gone out on a rare date and Grandpa had come over. “Not that you need babysitting, of course,” he’d said. “Mr. Grade Eight Graduate,” he’d called him. “I hope you don’t mind hanging out with your old grandpa!” And of course, he hadn’t. They’d started out playing crib and then moved to the living room to watch an old movie. “Joseph,” his grandpa had said before the movie started. “I know things haven’t always been easy for you. But I’m proud of you, young man. You and your dad. You’ve made a decent living here. And you’re a big help to your dad. I wish things had been different with your mom...” His voice had trailed off.

Joey looked up and was surprised at the depth of sadness in the old man’s eyes. “Hey, Grandpa, it’s OK, honest. I always knew I had you and Gramma.” Images flashed through his mind of the last time he’d seen her. Lying in the white coffin at the front of the little church. All the pews had been full of the people she had touched over the years. He remembered how tenderly his grandfather had reached out to stroke her white hair one last time. In that touch, he saw for himself what love was.

“She’d have been so proud to see you on that stage, Joey!” his grandfather wiped the tears sliding down his face. “So, so proud.”

Peter’s voice brought him back to the present. He glanced around and saw the three boys gathered at the top of the hill. They walked their bikes down, and he saw that Peter had one hand on Alex’s bike as well. He got up and ran down the dock to meet them on the beach. “Hey, took you guys long enough!”

Alex smiled at Peter who nodded. “Alex’s parents took a little convincing!”

## Before the Fire

“Yeah, and then we had to go to Pete’s, right Pete?” The small blonde-haired boy grinned up at his dark-haired friend. “You took forever!”

Peter shrugged. “Well, we’re all here.” They threw their bikes down on the ground and pulled their t-shirts off. The sun was directly overhead and intense.

Billy pointed across the lake. “Uh-oh. See those clouds? Beau said there might be a thunderstorm today. Looks like he was right!”

Joey laughed. “Thunderstorm? Nah! Last one in’s a rotten egg.” He took off running towards the dock.

Peter

Peter followed Joey down the beach and out onto the dock at full speed. Alex and Billy were right behind him. He saw Joey slam on the brakes and teeter at the very end, seemingly unsure whether to jump in. It was too late and Peter slammed into him from behind. Joey's arms pinwheeled in the air and then he hit with a splash. Peter landed beside him and soon Billy and Alex were sputtering to the surface beside him.

Joey yelled and slapped the water with his palm. "Nice one, Pete!" He grabbed Peter around the neck and forced him under.

"Hey, stop!" Alex reached over and pulled Joey's arm. "Don't hurt Peter!"

Joey let go and held up his hands as Peter resurfaced. "Hey, no worries, Alex! I was just kidding around, man!"

"I'm OK, Alex!" Peter smiled at the smaller boy. "Joey wouldn't hurt me!" He splashed water in Joey's face and quickly pushed backwards into a backstroke yelling, "He wouldn't dare!"

Alex grinned at him. He was the only one wearing a lifejacket, the only one of the four who hadn't completed his swimming lessons. Peter knew Alex was embarrassed about it especially since he was the oldest. It was a sore topic with Alex and he, Joey and Billy knew better than to bug him about it.

Peter paddled in a circle. Where the sandy beach ended, the shore became covered in shrubs, bushes and willows. He turned and swam out to a small platform followed by Joey and Billy. Pulling himself up the ladder, he noticed Alex still bobbing by the dock.

"Hey, Alex!" Peter called, "You coming?" Alex squinted at him and made his way over to climb up. The boys took turns jumping off until they were so tired, they could barely drag themselves back up the ladder. Finally, as if by mutual agreement, they jumped in and swam for shore.

## Before the Fire

Billy's teeth were chattering. "Man, that was cold!" A breeze blew across the sand. It grew darker as the sun disappeared.

Peter looked up at the gathering grey clouds. The wind had started to whip up, old leaves tumbling across the sand. "I think we should get changed and get out of here!" Alex found his glasses and they all pulled on their t-shirts and stuffed their towels into their backpacks. Within minutes, the clouds had built into a grey mass over the lake. A fishing boat pulled up to the dock and a family with two adults and two young children unloaded as they watched.

"Get up to the car!" As the father began pulling their gear out and laying it on the dock, his wife grabbed each little girl by the hand and ran. Glancing up he saw the group and yelled, "Best get home, boys! They're calling for a big storm." At his words, there was a low rumble.

Alex's eyes grew huge behind his glasses. "We need to get going, Pete!" As they picked up their bikes, the first bolt of lightning hit the sky. As they watched, the dad tied off the boat and gathered everything in his arms. Running up the hill, he threw his gear into the back of his SUV and drove down the boat ramp.

Despite the wind and the gathering storm, the boys watched as the man expertly backed up the trailer and loaded his fishing boat. Through his open window he waved, giving them one more warning to "Get on home now!" and then he drove away.

Thunder rolled again, louder this time and the boys pushed their bikes up the hill. The sun had disappeared. They clicked on their helmets. Lightning flashed overhead. "OK, we better make a run for it." Peter leaned over his bike and yelled. "Alex, you come with me."

Billy grimaced at the towering black clouds above them. "Let's go!" There was a massive crack overhead and a few seconds later lightning struck the streetlight at the end of the parking lot. All four boys jumped.

## Before the Fire

Peter looked at his friends, their faces pale with fear. "I think we better stick together. Whose place is closest?"

Alex suddenly brightened. "Mine, Pete! My house is closest! My mom won't mind. We can all go there!"

As they headed to Alex's house, there was a flash of lightning. It seemed closer. Remembering science class, the four boys began to count out loud. "One, two..." Thunder boomed directly overhead.

"Whoa! That was close." Peter led the way keeping Alex beside him. Joey and Billy followed. They turned onto the next street and lightning flashed illuminating the houses and trees. Thunder rumbled and there was the smell of something burning. As they rounded the corner they saw where the smoke was coming from. A tree in the yard beside Alex's had been hit. The far-off sounds of sirens mingled with the crackle of the flames. The owner of the home was on the front step shouting into a cell phone and gesturing at his lawn. The boys skidded to a stop and watched as the fire devoured the tree. Then the sky opened up and the rain fell in sheets instantly drenching them to the skin and turning the pillar of fire into a cloud of dense black smoke.

## Before the Fire

I hope you enjoyed this short prequel to the Forged in Flames series. If you'd like to read more about Alex, Billy, Peter and Joey, click on the links below. Happy reading!

*Embers* - Forged in Flames Book#1

<https://storyoriginapp.com/universalbooklinks/8efda53e-bd8f-11eb-9c8d-038dfccd09df>

*A Spark of Faith* - Forged in Flames Book#2

<https://storyoriginapp.com/universalbooklinks/2a9b4c8a-bd90-11eb-893f-0386abf4cc23>

*Through the Fire* – Forged in Flames Book#3

<https://storyoriginapp.com/universalbooklinks/fc0aff90-bd90-11eb-9c43-8ffd9e5e3afa>