

A THOUSAND FIRES

SHANNON PRICE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel are either products of the author's imagination
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A THOUSAND FIRES

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You turn eighteen, and they find you. There is no other recruitment.

Eighteen—old enough to have had your heart hardened, young enough that blood still passes through it.

Not everyone is recruited, of course, but the gangs are smart. They pick people with nothing to lose. The ones who are angry. Those who join San Francisco's infamous Red Bridge Wars do so willingly.

"The bridge isn't red," Leo said once. "It's International Orange. We learned that in school."

He was wrong, I think. I saw the red.

But that was a long time ago, in practically another lifetime, and tonight everything will change.

Mom and I sit on opposite sides of the kitchen table. Its surface is marked with old smears of glitter paint and crayon: a record of my childhood. I use my nail to scratch off a bit of crayon.

Outside, streetlamps illuminate the fog like dandelions of orange light in a sea of dark gray. I drum my fingers against my mug of Blue Bottle coffee. Dad gave me two bags of the stuff yesterday before he left on his business trip.

"I know they won't," he had said, "but if they pick you, say no. I don't think they'll come for you, but . . ."

“You have to say it. I know.” My heart splintered at his look of relief. Dad’s never been a man of many words. Even for me, his shining child. Now his only child.

Back in the present, Mom’s mug rests in front of her, untouched. Her usually styled hair is back in a low bun, and instead of a blazer-and-pants combination, she’s in a faded lavender robe and yoga pants.

I poke my fork into the frosting of the cake sitting between us. Lyla says it’s bad luck to bake your own birthday cake, but I’ve never minded it. Baking is my one and only solace. I love the rhythm of it: the sharp crack of eggshells, the scrape of the knife across measuring cups to make them level, the whirl of the mixer as I watch the twin swirls of the beaters disappear into each other.

Baking fills my hands and, more importantly, clears my mind. Kneading dough is like an exhale for my brain. I’ll mix the same ingredients for twice as long as I should, never wanting to stop. Sometimes it ruins the bake, but for the most part things turn out okay. If not, I dump it and start over.

Around us, the kitchen is an explosion of pastries—a tray of blueberry muffins I baked Tuesday morning at 3 A.M. when I couldn’t sleep, a plate of meticulously decorated cupcakes left-over from Mom’s fundraiser meeting last night, and the dark chocolate and sea salt cookies I sent to work with Dad before his trip. Everyone in his office loves me: the daughter who bakes. They’d think differently if they knew why.

But the Wars are my out. I know it’s risky, but it’s all I’ve got. All my research, all my prodding Matthew with questions—it’ll be worth it when the Herons choose me. I check the clock: it’s already 10:26 P.M. The gangs always choose their new recruits on their actual birthdays. *Come on*, I beg. *I’m ready. Let’s go*. I just need to know—am I in or not? Can I make up for what happened, or not?

In Mom's hand is a crumpled note that I knew, even as I was writing it, I'd probably regret. And I do, now. The closet in my room has long been the family storage space for the once-a-year stuff, and Mom just *had* to go into my closet to put away the Halloween decorations.

She found my suitcases, all packed. Mom's smart—she knew what they were for. All it took was the terror in her voice as she called my name from upstairs for me to know what happened. In retrospect, it was stupid of me to leave them there, but there's no changing it now.

"Baby, don't do this," she says. "Finish school. Then you can take a year off. You know your dad and I would be okay with that. Just not this." She shakes her head. "Val, you could die."

"I know, Mom."

"Then *why*?"

I turn away from her. She knows why.

"I won't let you," she says.

"I'm eighteen. Legally you can't stop me if I choose to go."

Mom starts to cry. Even with all my resolve, I nearly break at the sight of her wiping her cheeks—if I keep sitting here, I'll cave. Instead I get up and set the dirty plates in the sink, keeping my back to her. I switch on the faucet. The water is just getting warm when Mom says, "Baby, is this about Matthew?"

"No, Mom. Jeez."

"I know you broke up, but you know the Westons—"

"I want to join, Mom. It's not about Matthew. It's about me."

"Joining won't bring your brother back."

My phone buzzes. Wiping my wet hands on my jeans, I check the screen. It's Lyla. She was supposed to have texted me earlier before she got on her flight, but she must have forgotten. Lyla turned eighteen in October. None of the gangs came for her—like most people, she and her family

were relieved. Even if they had, I'm not convinced the gangs would have gotten past her tough-as-nails Cuban grandmother.

I open the text.

STRANDED AT AIRPORT. CAN U COME GET ME?

Tacked on moments later:

DID MATTHEW WISH U HAPPY BIRTHDAY?

Mom blots her eyes with a dishrag. "Who is it?"

"Lyla," I say. "She wants me to go get her from the airport." Even with the waves of anxiety and nervousness in my stomach, I take comfort in my best friend's use of all caps. It's our thing—we never text without it, even if it's something stupid like I FORGOT MY LUNCH or HEY DO YOU HAVE A SPARE HAIR TIE.

I start typing a sorry-but-I-can't reply, but my heart tugs with guilt and I change it to: SURE THING. LEAVING NOW. GIVE ME 45 MINUTES.

Fingers crossed traffic isn't bad.

Mom turns to the clock. It's 10:28 P.M. "Let's go get her."

"You don't have to come."

"I'm not letting you go by yourself."

"The Herons are going to find me whether you're with me or not."

I get up and go to the coatrack by the front door. As I pull my jacket on, my eyes go to a small gold frame on the mantel. Silver wings sprout from either side. Between them, a little boy with mint ice cream on his cheeks smiles a too-big smile, his brown hair the same color as mine.

The Herons will find me regardless—I believe that. I'll have to come back for my suitcases anyway, and then we'll say our goodbyes. Once I join the Wars, I'm not allowed home for a year. The gangs have a lot of rules to avoid an all-out crackdown from the city, and having members stay away from

their families is one of them. As is the choice—they can seek you out, but you can say no.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Mom.

“Val, please. *Mahal kita*.” She gets up and hugs me tightly.

Mahal kita—“I love you” in Tagalog. Mom only switches to her native language for two things: to talk with my uncle and to make me really pay attention to what she’s saying. *Mahal kita* is ours. We save it for special occasions, like before she goes on a long business trip or before the first day of school.

Mom saying it now means a lot of things. The Wars are one of those things parents both believe and don’t believe. *The Wars are real*, they think. *But it won’t be my daughter. It won’t be my son. My child won’t sign up, I won’t let them.*

Every minute I’m still here, the more my spirit wavers, like sand eroding against an angry tide. I pull myself out of her hug and grab my keys from the basket by the door.

“Bye, Mom, love you.” The door slams behind me, muffling Mom’s shout.

There was a time when Mom would have followed me with fire in her eyes and a maternal determination that could topple city walls. But that was before Leo, before she shattered. I love my mom—which is exactly why I need to leave her now, even as the pain claws in my rib cage the same way guilt has torn at my heart since that day two years ago.

Outside, my city is cool and still, and I tug my fleece tighter against me. I beep my car to life, its lights blinking into the mist. I open the door and am about to slide in when I hear my name.

Matthew jogs toward me. His dark hair is messy and put-together at the same time in the incredibly sexy way only he can pull off—no, no. *He broke up with YOU. You’re not allowed to think anything he does is even mildly attractive. He is your friend and that’s it.*

“Happy birthday,” he says.

“You, too.”

Neighbors since we were seven, I always thought it was cool that Matthew and I had the same birthday. That didn’t change as we got older and I learned about the Wars. No matter what happened, I felt our stories were intertwined. I loved that. I still do.

“Are you okay?” he asks, eyes filled with concern.

I nod. “Yeah. Just a fight-ish thing with my mom. It’s fine.”

He props an elbow on the roof of the car. “Where are you going?”

“SFO. Lyla’s stranded.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. I’m just going to get her and be right back.”

“All right.” He sticks his hands in his front pockets and shivers. “I take it that the Herons haven’t been by?”

“No. You?”

He looks relieved. “No.”

Thank God. If Matthew hasn’t heard from them yet, then I’m fine. He’s going to be a Heron, no question—both of his brothers were and his whole family has been associated with the Herons since the beginning. We’ll be together the whole year.

After leaving Mom and everything else, my brain doesn’t have the capacity to really wonder what that will be like, given all our history.

“I’m coming right back,” I say again. “Be sure to act surprised when the Herons come to your door.”

“There’s no guarantee.”

“Oh, please. You’re like, the prince of the Heron throne, thanks to Alex.” Matthew was so upset when his brother Alex joined. They’d always been close, both in age and just in general. Matthew’s other brother—Aaron—is much older and a bit of a black sheep. He lives alone in a cabin in Tahoe and never comes to the city, not even for Christmas.

But Alex—Alex is different. He’s the hair-mussing, let’s-shoot-hoops brother you see in the movies. Seriously. The night Alex joined the Herons was the first time Matthew ever cried in front of me. I think he was afraid his brother would be killed.

It’s a fear I never bothered to have.

“Believe me, I know. I’ve got Heron blood.” He raises his pitch and draws out the word *blood*—a perfect impression of his mother. She’s good-hearted and usually means well, but only so long as her image is intact. I’ve never seen her with so much as an eyelash out of place.

“Heron blood. Wish I had that,” I mutter.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Then I’d know for sure if I was going to be recruited.”

He doesn’t say anything, just stares at his feet. He’s holding something back—you learn a thing or two about a person after being friends for years. *And* dating.

Matthew and I had only been together six months when he broke it off. But those six months were bliss. Lyla said it was like Disney magic, how it all worked out. “A guy and a girl can’t be friends for so long without getting feelings,” she told me after he asked me to junior prom. “This is your destiny. This is fate.”

But that was all the way back in March, before Matthew came over in late July and just ended it. Then and there. He said he wanted to focus on getting ready for college, which I called BS on because I had a feeling he was thinking about the Wars. He said sorry about a hundred times until finally I screamed at him and told him to get the fuck out of our house.

Rage became a close companion—anything to hide how hurt and confused I was. Lyla got me through the tears-and-ice-cream phase, and Matthew and I avoided each other for the remainder of the summer.

Then school started and we still hung out here and there, both of us silently resolved to move past it by never, ever bringing it up. I spent more and more time with Lyla and the theater kids, grateful for their openness and for the darkness of the backstage loft where we'd watch the rehearsals.

Still, the memories are never far: making out at his family's cabin high up in the mountains, the time we walked together past *Cupid's Span* down by the water, or the way he still smiles at me from across the classroom . . .

A hand on my cheek pulls me back to the present. Matthew leans in, whispering my name just once—softly. Desperately. Then he kisses me.

His lips are rough—and I *love* that they are. There was no pre-kiss ChapStick application, no practice for this moment. It just is. I breathe him in as deeply as I dare, and the distance between our bodies disappears. He pulls back too soon and my heart thunders in my throat.

“Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t—”

“It’s fine,” I reply, avoiding his gaze so he doesn’t see my smile. “Totally fine.”

“Look, I know breaking up with you the way I did was shitty,” he says. “But I didn’t really want to. I just thought it would be . . . better.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t mean I don’t love you,” he finishes. “Because I do. I love you.”

I say the first stupid thing my lips seem able to form. “You do?”

We’d never said it, not like this. Not as if everything in his life was preparing him for this moment.

“I do.” He’s waiting. I’m stalling. My limbs are light and numb and sparkling all at once. Matthew loves me. He didn’t

want to break up. Then why did he? And why the hell would that matter when—

“I love you,” I say.

I tilt my head up to meet the kiss I know is coming. We tighten our arms around each other until there’s not even the hope of space between us. When he lets me go, I rest my head on his chest. I can hear his heartbeat fluttering.

“I’ll do my year,” he says. “I can’t say no, not with my family and all. It’s always been my plan to join.”

I tighten my hug around his chest. “We’ll do our year together.” A cold shiver lances through me. “Unless you already know something I don’t.”

“If I knew anything, I’d tell you.” Matthew lowers his arms and steps back, leaving only our fingers curled together. He tightens his grip on my right hand, then raises the other. “Double pinky promise.”

I lift my hand until my wrists are crossed, opposite pinky fingers interlocked. Leo made this up—he’d make us do it whenever he thought we were playing a trick on him. One pinky wasn’t enough for my little brother. He always made us do both. Over time, Matthew and I made it ours, too. It’s an unbreakable promise, a sacred vow that means we’re being 100 percent honest with each other.

I nod, giving his pinkies a squeeze with mine before lowering my hands. Matthew smiles. “Go get Lyla. I’ll be here when you get back.”

I nod, still reeling from the kiss. *From everything.* “You better be.”

I get in the car and start it, pulse racing, and feeling more alive than I’ve ever been. I roll down the window. “Hey, neighbor?”

“Yes, neighbor?”

I motion for him to lean down. When he does, I grab the collar of his shirt, pull him close, and kiss him. Hard. I let go. “I love you.”

The way he gazes at me is so perfect that for a moment I forget the past, the guilt and the scars and the blood that ran down the pavement like paint.

“I love you, too.”

I could die in his eyes right here and now, but Lyla’s waiting for me. Matthew thumps the roof of the car again and goes back up the hill toward his house. I regain my senses enough to start toward South-880.

Matthew loves me, and we’re going to join the Herons together.

Tonight is destiny, I think, remembering Lyla’s words. *Tonight is fate*.

I lean back in my seat as San Francisco whizzes by me. I recount all the facts about the Wars I’ve spent the past years memorizing, as if that will align the stars in my favor. There’s a “fan” site and Twitter accounts filled with internet denizens who keep tabs on the Wars from the safety of their screens. I follow them all and did research of my own.

The Herons were the first of the gangs. From what I’ve read online, it was originally a club for burgeoning tech start-ups—a place where they could meet up, exchange ideas, and swap condolences when projects failed. Matthew’s dad, Richard Weston, was one of the founding members.

Then came the dot-com boom of the nineties. Having the connections—rather, the right money in the right pockets—was everything. Herons funded some of the first supercomputers. Matthew’s parents met Steve Jobs and Woz long before they were household names.

Over time, being a Heron went from a bragging right to a point by which people defined themselves. The Herons got

so popular that there was a fee to join. The fee doubled then tripled overnight, quickly entering into the hundreds of thousands. Some resisted the change, but most scraped at the pearly gates that was the Heron Club with eager hands. Every company would bring their device, website, and software to the Heron Club altar—aka their investing board.

Tech moguls either were Herons or not Herons—which didn't matter to everyone, of course. But when it did matter, it *really* did. Families grew into dynasties, and people like Matthew have never known otherwise.

The second gang, the Boars, started off as a joke—an “everyman's” club without the snooty air that the Herons had. Where the techies in the Herons come from the South Bay or out of state, the Boars pride themselves on being true San Franciscans. Anyone born in SF can be a part of it. From what I can tell online, they don't really *do* much except petition against the Herons' new building projects and shout at them on the streets.

Then around ten years ago something changed, and the two groups went from arguments in town halls to beatings on the street, armed robberies, and storefronts being burned or broken into. People stopped joking about being in the Boars: if you were one, you were dangerous and proud of it.

Neighborhoods were claimed by one gang or another, the bus stops and trash cans emblazoned with Boar or Heron insignias. Fights started, escalating until the police got involved, and the Boars shrank down to almost nothing. A reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote an op-ed suggesting that the police give the Herons more leeway because so many of them donate to police programs. I don't doubt it.

It's not hard to spot the Herons out and around town. They always dress in pristine ivory clothes like they've just walked off the pages of a Ralph Lauren catalogue. That's the Heron color—white. Clean as they want the public to think they are.

The public members of the club—at Facebook, Twitter, and the rest—maintain an ironclad stance that they are not at all affiliated with the group of misguided teens calling themselves the Young Herons. It’s the latter that actually take to the streets and butt heads with the Boars.

Where Herons wear white, the Boars’ uniform is gray hoodies with red stripes down the side. I’ve seen folks on BART board a train only to get off when they see a Boar in the same car. People would rather miss their meeting or be late coming home than be on the same train as a Boar.

No one knows much about the third gang, the Stags. The Stags wear black—but then again, so does every other North Face-wearing city dweller. They’ve only been around a few years. Dad doesn’t even think they’re real. “Just a bunch of wannabes,” he says.

I slam my hand down on the radio dial, shutting it off. In so many ways, the Boars ruined my life—without them, I wouldn’t know any of these facts. I’d be like everyone else: worrying what colleges I’ll get into, what I want for Christmas, or what color my prom dress is going to be. Maybe I’d still be planning the vacation to the one place I want to go to more than anywhere else. Fortunate as I was to grow up in a house where we took regular vacations, there was one place I had always wanted to go but never figured out how: the Philippines, where my mom grew up.

I envisioned Mom, Dad, and Leo walking with me down dirt paths, breathing in the tropical humid air and catching glimpses of the sea between patches of dense trees. I wanted to experience the chaos of city life, but also the quieter regions and even those that cater to tourists. My phone screen background was a picture of the blue jewel waters of Cebu.

Even though my Tagalog is spotty at best, for a long time I’ve known that I’m not going to be complete unless I visit. A

lifetime of school projects about “what countries are you from” had only fostered that desire to go.

But all my dreams of new horizons died with Leo.

My eyes start to tear up, but I blink it away. *Don't, Val. Focus.*

I come to a stoplight, and the car behind me flashes its lights. My body tenses—I've heard the horror stories of people stopping for a weird reason and getting kidnapped—or worse.

But what if it's the Herons?

The stoplight turns green and I keep an eye on the car behind me. It flashes its lights again. This time, someone waves, a white sleeve out the window.

It's got to be them, I think. How did they know where I was? Doesn't matter—it's finally happening.

The speeding lights of the freeway beckon ahead of me, but I pull over onto a side street. This time, the car behind me blinks its lights repeatedly, which I take as a good sign. When I come to a stop, the other car does, too.

Almost immediately, another two cars swerve out from around it, cutting in front of me and blocking my side. Figures burst from the cars, and none of them are wearing white. Even the first driver I spotted seems to have disappeared into the throng.

“Fuck.” I start my car again. This is for sure how people die. “Oh my god.” I shift the gear with a hand that's already sweaty from panic. Pressing down hard on the gas pedal, I lurch out of my parking spot only to slam on the brakes—instinct alone saves me from running over the third figure who steps out in front of me.

Someone taps at my window. A pair of mean eyes peers at me from above a red bandana covering the guy's nose and mouth. His hood is up. His gray hood.

He taps the window again just as another Boar tries to open the passenger side, but it's locked. Every part of me trembles.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” *The Boars would never recruit me. Not after Leo.*

The guy who first approached me pounds the window then twists his hand twice. When I don’t react, he slams a gun into the window so hard I am amazed it doesn’t break. He makes the motion again. *Turn the engine off.* I nod to show I understand.

Reaching for the key, my car shudders into silence. I check the rearview, looking for a Heron in white to step out, challenge the Boars, and take me to my new home. The irony of my angel-seeking isn’t lost on me.

“Come on, Matthew,” I whisper. “Please.”

The first Boar opens the driver’s side door. “Get out.”

“What do you want?”

“Out!”

When I don’t move, he grabs my hair, undoes my seat belt, and yanks me sideways. He tosses me to the ground like I’m nothing, and my knees scrape against the concrete through the fabric of my jeans.

“Okay, okay!” I shout, raising my hands over my head. I turn to run—but I’m surrounded. The ghostly gray-and-red figures watch me, grinning and nodding toward each other. I tense my muscles to keep them from shaking, but it’s no use. “I decline your offer to join,” I say. “I do not accept.”

The Boars explode into wild, raucous laughter—I’m the funniest person alive. The first Boar-guy steps up, reaches into his waistband, and pulls out a black handgun. He points it at my chest, and I stagger back, screaming.

“No one said this was an offer to join,” he says. “Get on your knees.”

“Please, don’t. W-what did I do? Why me?”

“On. Your. Knees.”

“Why my family? What have we ever done to you?!”

He cocks the gun to the side like they do in the movies.

My breath skims in my lungs as my mind flashes through a jigsaw puzzle of memories: a little body splayed on a sidewalk, a nice family dressed all in black, a neighbor who brushed away tears . . .

I'm so sorry, Leo.

There is a gunshot.

The Boar screams and clutches his arm as blood gushes from his shoulder.

The Boars scatter. Moments later someone grabs me, lifting me from the ground. My ears ring, and I look at him—he's not wearing white, but quite the opposite.

"The Stags?" I wonder aloud.

The guy holding me sets me down behind a parked car. "Stay here," he says, pushing a lock of gelled hair back into place. He grips my shoulders as if I didn't hear him. "Don't. Move."

He darts back toward the mixing sea of gray and black figures, staying low. I do my best to do the same, flattening myself between the ground and a blue Honda Civic. I scrape my hands on the sidewalk to steady myself.

This is real. This feeling, these sounds. The Boars. The Stags. All real.

An unfamiliar scent permeates the air. I never knew what gunpowder smelled like.

Just as I root myself into the chaos, the sounds fade to nothing. Blood pounds in my ears as I wait for a Boar to find me and finish what they started.

But nothing happens. Then I hear talking.

Scooting forward, I peek around the car's bumper. The Boar who pulled me out of the car steps forward to meet one of the Stags face-to-face. The rest of the gang members keep still, giving the two a wide berth. The Boar puts away his gun. The Stag doesn't seem to have a weapon at all. The

Stag shoves the other guy's shoulder, but the Boar doesn't retaliate.

Someone taps my shoulder. It's another Stag—a girl—and she looks bored.

"Get up," she says. "No one's killing you today."

A siren wails from around the corner. At the sound, the bleeding Boar and the Stag dart opposite ways, the latter headed right toward me. As he approaches, other Stags emerge from their hiding places, and my head spins as I count them. Five.

"Valerie Simons," says the first Stag. "I, Jax, do hereby offer you a place in the Wars among the Stags. If you accept, you are inked. You are bound for one year. After one year, you are free to leave if you choose. Do you accept?"

My heartbeat drums in my head. Where are the Herons? I back away from him. "What . . . what time is it?"

The leader—Jax—is unfazed by my question. He glances at the female Stag behind me.

"Ten fifty-eight," she says.

Just an hour left. Can I take that chance? I'm trembling again, the worst of Cinderellas, eyes scanning for any sign of the Herons. Blue-and-red lights shine from one street over.

"Do you accept?" Jax shouts.

It's not the Herons, but it's not the Boars either. *There's just one thing—*

"My brother," I say. "His name was Leo Simons. He died in a Boar crossfire. Do you know who killed him?"

Jax smiles, slow and sinister. "Yes."

"Then I accept."

I don't have time to process what I've just done. The female Stag reaches up around me and covers my mouth with a cloth smelling of acid and heartache.

I black out.