

Fire-Engine Love

A Short Story by MaryAnn Diorio

From *The Short & Sweet Collection of Romance Stories* by MaryAnn Diorio

“Mommy, when is Daddy coming home?” Tammie Burke’s four-year-old son wrapped his chubby arms around her neck and laid his blond head against her shoulder.

She swallowed the lump that rose to her throat.

“Jason, Daddy isn’t coming home. Daddy went to Heaven.”

“No, Mommy!” Jason lifted his freckled, cherub face and looked Tammie straight in the eye. “Daddy promised to bring me a red fire engine.”

Hot tears spilled over Tammie’s brimming eyes onto her cheeks as she pressed Jason closer to her heart. It wasn’t fair! It just wasn’t fair! Only yesterday, Rob, her precious husband of seven years, had held her in a warm embrace just before leaving on a routine business trip to a nearby city. Later that day, she’d received word that the company van had skidded off the road during a heavy rainstorm, struck a pole, and careened into an adjacent valley. Rob and his three co-workers were killed.

Tammie moved Jason to the side of her bulging belly. In less than a month, her second child would be born—a girl. How excited she and Rob had been upon viewing the ultrasound! Now their family would be complete. Tammie had imagined their precious little daughter curled up on her daddy’s lap. Their little angel would wrap Rob around her little finger for life.

But now, all time had stopped. In fewer than twenty-four hours, Tammie had gone from a happy, excited young wife and mother to a frightened and grieving widow with two small children to rear alone.

“Hi, Baby Sister!” Jason tapped Tammie’s rounded body, bringing her back from the brink of despair. In quick response, the child in her womb pushed her tiny fist against the underside of Tammie’s skin.

“Mommy, look! Baby Sister is playing with me!”

Tammie smiled in spite of herself. How ironic! Death juxtaposed against life in a drama of contradiction and conflict. If only Baby Sister knew that her daddy would not be there to greet her at birth. If only she knew how much her daddy would have loved her.

If only. If only. If only.

A fresh wave of tears flowed from Tammie's eyes.

"Why are you crying, Mommy?" Jason framed her tearstained face with his chubby palms.

Ignoring his question, Tammie gently lowered him to the floor and took a deep breath. Soon family and friends would be arriving for the funeral. There was much to do, and no strength to do it. How would she ever get through the next few days? "God, please help me!" she whispered.

To her surprise, as she prayed, anger ripped her soul. "It's too late for your help, God!" Tammie punched her fists in the air. "It's too late! Where were you yesterday when Rob needed your help? You could have prevented that accident. Why didn't you?" She sank down into Rob's favorite recliner and buried her face in her hands.

Jason tugged at her shirt. "What's wrong, Mommy?" He gently uncovered her face.

Instantly, Tammie regretted her outburst. She might be angry with God, but she mustn't let her child know it. She drew her little boy close once again just as the phone rang.

"Hello, Tammie. This is Keith." Her husband's boss sounded compassionate and concerned. "I've arranged with the funeral home for you and your children to be escorted to and from the services by limousine."

"Thank you, Keith." Relief washed over her. She needed someone to take charge in the midst of her anguish.

As far as bosses went, Keith Anderson was among the best. Rob had always said so. Keith was more than a boss; he was a genuine friend. He'd suffered his own tragic loss four years earlier when his young fiancée drowned just before their wedding. Keith understood.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Tammie thought for a moment. "I don't think so. My brother is helping me handle all the details. Fortunately, Rob insisted on writing a will when I became pregnant with Jason. The will included all of Rob's funeral arrangements."

"Rob was quite a guy," Keith said. "Always prepared. Always thinking of others."

Tammie's throat tightened at Keith's compliment. "Yes, he was." A sob caught in her throat.

"Tammie." Keith hesitated. "I want you to know that I understand. If you need a listening ear, just give me a call."

"Thanks, Keith. I just might do that." Somehow, talking with Rob's boss made her feel closer to Rob. She leaned against the back of the chair and closed her eyes. Images of Rob floated across her mind as her soul slipped into numbness.

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