

The Fire Beagle by Susan May

There's a little town called Jackson in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and that's where this story begins. Jackson has a volunteer Fire Department which means that almost anybody can become a Firefighter, but they do it without pay and because they love it.



One day in early spring, a dog showed up. Nobody owned her; she just walked up when Ed was washing a truck and tried to sip water off the ground. He looked around for an owner. "What's this? Where's your family?" he asked her, then said, "I'll get you a bowl for some water." In his truck, he had a few potato chips left and gave her those, too.

The Firefighters tried to find the Beagle's family. They took a picture of her and made fliers that they posted in Jackson and Glen. But they had no luck. So, at their Tuesday night meeting, they decided to keep her. But, she would have to have a name. After MANY suggestions—even from the schoolchildren, they decided to draw names from a fire hat. And so she was called Fiona.

At night Fiona slept at the top of the stairs on the outside of the Fire Station so she could watch things. She could see cars go into and out of

the village, she could hear birds going to roost in the trees behind the station and she was fascinated by a woodchuck who lived under a porch of the hotel. Bigger dogs like to chase woodchucks, but Fiona preferred to eat puppy kibble and an occasional bit of ham from Ed's sandwich. Ed was the fire chief and he'd stop in from time to time.



Next to the Fire Station was a huge old hotel. This hotel had been full of summer guests until the 1950's when people had shorter vacations and preferred to drive to lots of different places and stay at motels along the way. Luckily for Jackson, there aren't a lot of fires, but this meant Fiona spent a lot of time by herself. She didn't seem to mind this. She liked to chase squirrels and chipmunks and snakes in the woods, and she could wander across the hotel land to the little brook for a nice cool drink and a place to lie under the lilacs.

The woodchuck seemed to be really fat and busy all spring going into its burrow under the porch. There were several holes in the grass that joined the underground tunnels, but the one under the porch seemed to be the busiest. One morning in early May, the woodchuck came out of the tunnel looking tired and much thinner than before. Fiona stared at it thinking it was a different animal, but a breeze brought her the familiar scent, so she knew it was the same animal as before.

A few weeks later, on a sunny, warm day, Fiona saw the woodchuck come out from under the porch and, what?!! There were three little woodchucks behind her. Fiona just couldn't stand the curiosity! She ran over and the mother woodchuck quickly ushered her babies back underground. As I

said, Fiona wasn't interested in chasing the animals; she was just astonished to see them all where there had been just one. Soon, the babies would follow their mother around to all the good patches of grass in the hotel lawn.

The mother taught them how to dig burrows and how to run to safety when she saw the shadow of a hawk or when a big dog appeared. Sometimes when the babies were safely asleep, the mother would cross the road to look for fresh greens by the town pond.

Then, on the 14th of July, while the babies were napping and Fiona was across the street, suddenly, smoke and then flames came from inside the hotel. The Firefighters sped to the fire station, took the trucks the short distance and poured water on the flames. They knew they could not save the building—they had to keep the fire from spreading up the hill behind the hotel. The fire was so hot; trees and siding were damaged on the building across the street.

Fiona started to bark and howl, "wo-wo-wo-wooooo". She knew the mother woodchuck could not get back in time. She ran wildly past the fire trucks. Ed and some of the others tried to catch her; they couldn't figure out what was wrong. She had been to other fires, always riding on one of the trucks with her ears blowing in the wind, but this time she was very upset.

Suddenly, the wind shifted toward the middle of the hotel, away from the porches. Fiona ran across the lawn, and under the porch. The firefighters were very busy, but they yelled to her to come back. In a couple of seconds she ran out with a baby woodchuck in her mouth, and the other two stumbling behind her.

The babies would have been safe in their burrow from the fire, but not from the water. They would have drowned and Fiona saved them all. The mother came running back, saw her babies with Fiona and ran to them. Since that day, Fiona seems like a part of the family and each spring when babies are born, she has a whole new group to look after.