

# A Kind of Fire

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*Published on FanFiction.net: (Aug 22, 2011 - May 16, 2013)*



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## CHAPTER 1

**Johnny:**

*'...What the people need  
is a way to make 'em smile  
It ain't so hard to do if you know how  
Gotta get a message  
Get it on through  
Oh now mama's goin' to after awhile...'*

Oh, man, I had that tune in my head all morning, since the alarm went off, playing that song off the radio. It fit my mood to a 't'. I'm not normally a whistling kind of guy, but every so often I can't help myself. I'd had a *fantastic* vacation and I couldn't wait to tell Roy.

I was in the locker room, gettin' my threads on, when I saw a shadow on the floor looming up from the vehicle bay. *Damn, I forgot I shouldn't wear these shoes to work, I have a hard time gettin' em off.* I gotta press down real hard on the heel of the doggone thing with my other foot just to get my foot out. Suddenly, Roy was at the door, leanin' on it kinda weird.

"Mornin', Roy!"

"Mornin', yourself. It must've gone well, you're awfully chipper this morning."

"Aw, it was *great*, Roy. At first, I wasn't sure I liked the idea of spending part of my vacation as a working vacation. But, man, it was *just* fantastic. The kids on the reservation really took to it, y'know? Learning basic first aid, basic fire prevention. I mean, they *really* took to it! I wouldn't be surprised if a few of those kids become firefighter paramedics." I couldn't help grinning like an idiot – I was so *proud* of those kids!

"Well, I just came to tell you the coffee's ready."

"Thanks. Be there in a minute." I had to reach all the way into my locker to find my spiffy all-professional firefighter shoes; I'd just tossed them in before I left 'cause I'd been itchin' to get going. "Oh, so how did Benjamin Dunning do?" I'd almost forgotten he was called in as my replacement. He was doing overtime from 24s. Kind of an unknown to the rest of us and a fairly new paramedic. I was a little concerned 'cause Cap over at 24s seemed a little too eager to lend him to us, but Roy wasn't all that worried. I was curious to see which of us was right. But then I realized, he hadn't answered.

"Roy?" I closed my locker door, but he was gone.

**Roy:**

Benjamin Dunning.

A name that will live in infamy. I suppose I should've been more upset about it. I mean, don't get me wrong. I *was* upset. But I was worried that if I'd allowed myself to think too much on it, I would've been too upset to be of much use to anybody. In hindsight, that might not've been the smartest move on my part. Or maybe it was. All depends on your perspective, I guess.

I'd heard Johnny ask the question. But I wasn't ready to reciprocate war stories, just yet. Only because I knew how he'd react to mine. Figured I'd make my escape while he had his head in his locker. If I could stall him for the next two weeks, maybe I could come out on the other side of this, unscathed. I'd already had the lecture from Joanne. And Cap. And Brackett. And Dix. And everyone else at Rampart. Even Stoker weighed in on it, so that tells you somethin'. But I really wasn't interested in another one. *Especially* from my own accident-prone partner.

Of course, I knew I really only had a matter of minutes before the levee would break.

Shoulda thought to put in for medical leave. That was my first mistake. Out of about several hundred as far as all this went. But not putting in for time off was definitely a big one. Maybe if I'd had, none of this would've happened...

**Johnny:**

Mmm, that coffee smelled extra good this morning. Must be either Stoker or Lopez coffee. It's funny, after so much time, so many shifts and easily, a whole lakes' worth of coffee after all these years, I've almost learned to tell who made it just by the smell. I can tell Roy's, Chet's and Cap's. Still don't always get Marco's or Mike's. Can't lose on either count – both of those guys still make the best coffee on our shift. One last whiff test...I'm gonna go with Marco coffee.

I followed the aroma from the locker room and rubbed my hands together in anticipation. I never understood my parents' fascination with coffee when I was growing up. Now that I am grown up, I can't imagine starting the day without it.

“Mornin', everybody,” I said, still trippin' from my trip.

A chorus of answering greetings erupted from the others.

Chet and Mike were already in the coffee line. Bingo! Marco coffee it is. This day was gearin' up to treatin' me right, so far. Roy was readin' the paper at the table with Marco.

But something struck me funny about the way Roy was sitting. Not only had he leaned on the doorframe back in the locker room kinda weird, he was sittin' at the table all weird, too. He was by the tv, first of all – not his usual spot – and he was sittin' completely at a right angle to the table, facing the window. He never sits like that. I mean, who sits down at a table without having the table right in front of 'em? Couldn't figure out why he wa'n't just sittin' on the couch. Marco was across from him tugging a section out of the stack.

“So, John, how was it?” Chet asked, handing me the coffee urn.

I was about to regale my shift mates with my incredible vacation stories, but then we heard Cap's voice from the vehicle bay, “Roll call!”

We scurried outta there and lined up beside the Engine. I saw Roy trail out last, stop outside the kitchen, then, turning at right angles like he was still in the Army, he walked behind the Engine, to go stand all the way at the other end of the line. *What the heck's gotten into him?*

Cap ticked off the attendance sheet, read the announcements then went through the assigned duties. Finally, he eyed my partner, “Roy, you feeling alright?”

I looked over at him. *Now why would he ask that?*

**Roy:**

*Well now you've done it, Cap.* I saw Johnny out of the corner of my eye further down the line by the Squad just lookin' at me.

More for my future benefit than his current one, I put on the biggest smile I could, “Oh yeah, Cap. I'm fine,” in the hopeless hope that it would dissuade any discussion from my curious and sometimes overly enthusiastic partner. Oh I knew better, no doubt about that. I just really didn't want to hear it again for the umpteenth time. 'Cause then I'd really get upset, and...well, we've already been over that. *Well, my cover's blown. Then again, it's not like I could've hidden it forever...*

“Alright, men, let's try to get some of these chores done before a call comes in, alright?”

**Johnny:**

Now I was *really* starting to wonder what was going on. The Engine crew started back toward the kitchen, but I hung back, determined to confront Roy.

“What did Cap mean by that?”

Roy walked right past me to go around the Squad, headed for the kitchen, and pointed back at me, “Hey, did you do the morning radio check to Rampart?”

“Not yet. I was just about to get to it.” I made for the Squad. “Roy, you didn’t answer my question.”  
Silence. “Roy?”

**Roy:**

I did everything I could think of to delay it, but there was no getting around the inevitable. He was gonna notice it, sooner or later.

I downed the last drops of my coffee at the sink, ready to start in on the sleeping quarters. I should’ve started when Johnny went to do the radio check. But I really wanted to finish my coffee. It was Marco coffee, after all. But like a dummy, I decided to put the paper back, first. Mistake number two. Old habits and parental training die hard, I guess. I heard the squeak of skidded shoes at the door just as I turned back toward the table. And that’s when the Santa Ana winds blew in.

“What’n the hell *happened* to you?”

*Oh boy, here we go...*

## Chapter 2

**Johnny:**

I couldn't believe what I was seeing! My *partner*, my *best friend* had been sneaking around all morning trying to *hide* it from me! ME! Like I was never gonna find out!

With a resigned sigh, Roy looked up just as I walked up to him.

"Here, lemme see." I made to grab his face to look at it better, but he frowned and put his arm up to ward me off.

Too late. I'd already seen it from across the room, anyway, and I followed him as he tried to move away from me, anger and worry all jumbling around in my gut. "Those are *burn* bandages, Roy."

I was not happy. Not in the least. Cuts, bruises, lacerations, that's one thing. But burns? On my partner's *face*? I didn't like it. Not one damn bit. I wanted to know how the hell Benjamin Dunning allowed that to happen. And I knew it was Dunning's fault cause I knew Roy would never be *stupid* enough to allow that to happen.

"What? You didn't tell him?" Marco asked, eyes practically boring into Roy.

"Tell me what?" I'd had enough of him trying to hide from me. I seized Roy, steered him to the table and plunked him down into a chair. I nabbed another one, took hold of Roy's face and turned his head. He tried to move out of my clutches, again, but I threw him a look that clearly told him I wasn't fooling around. He knows full well I don't mess with burns. I grabbed him again. "Tell me what?" I asked again.

"Roy got injured," Chet sipped at his coffee.

"I can see that." Most of the time Chet gets on my nerves but every once in awhile he just *grates* on me.

That musta distracted me, cause when I brought up my other hand, I nearly poked Roy's eye out.

He reared back and leveled me with a look like I'd just broken one of Jenny's dolls, or some'in'.

"Sorry."

"I don't need you to finish what the fire started."

"Well I said I was sorry." I peered closely at Roy's face, examining gingerly around the bandages that covered a quarter of his face, lining his right temple, down past his eye and to the top of his cheek. The edge of his eyebrow and sideburns had been singed off and his neck, ear and cheek below the bandage were red with severe-looking sunburn. Roy flinched. "Would you hold still." I inspected further and the more I did the angrier I got. "These are first and second degree burns, Roy!"

**Roy:**

Like I don't know that. That's the problem with being in this business. Everyone you know knows what you know. Except they treat you as if you don't know the same thing they know.

"Yeah. I know. Relax, they're only superficial."

**Johnny:**

"Good job, Gage. Next we'll cover bruises and paper cuts," Chet needed.

I wasn't in the mood for Chet's wisecracks so I ignored him. I could feel myself gettin' hot under the collar and knew I should've quit while I was ahead. But there was no way I was lettin' this go. "How the hell did this happen? And don't tell me you were at home, 'cause I know you were on shift the day before last and you did overtime yesterday and these burns are fresh."

"Now you see why I didn't tell him?" he appealed to the rest of the guys.

"Is that why you've been hiding from me all morning?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"It is, now. And the fact that you were hiding from me tells me it happened on the job and could've been avoided. So spill it, Roy. What the hell happened?"

"Dunning left Roy in a fire," Marco answered bitterly.

I nearly jumped out of my seat. "He did *what!*"

Now, see, I was right! I knew whatever it was was Dunning's fault. But I'll tell you, I wasn't expecting *that*. I think I understood, at that moment, that defensive instinct parents feel when their children are in danger. Not that I look upon Roy as a child, but I suspect the intensity was about the same.

"He didn't *leave* me, exactly—"

"Well, what would *you* call it?" Marco countered. I don't think I'd ever seen Marco pissed before. I'm not sure I want to see it again.

I went from hot under the collar to enraged in about half a second. "What happened, Roy? And I want *all* the details. Don't leave anything out."

**Roy:**

*Fantastic.* I tried to figure out the best way to explain what'd happened so Johnny wouldn't go ballistic on me. Cause I've known him a long time, see, and I know for a fact how he'd react to this. So I tried to think of a way to approach this whole thing and let him down easy, at the same time. Mainly because, like I said before, I didn't want to hear it. Not throughout the next two days of our shift...

"We had a 3-alarm the other night," Chet began.

I threw Kelly my best indignant look.

"Well, you were taking too long."

"Nevermind, keep going," Johnny encouraged.

Then I threw it at my partner, "Can I tell my own story?"

"Well, hurry up," Marco and Chet chimed in unison.

I looked around at my brothers, "Look, it wasn't that big of a deal."

"Not that big of a deal! Half your face looks like you were the marshmallow at a campfire, Roy. Now tell me, how did this happen?"

"Okay, look. Dunning and I went in in search of victims. We went down a hallway and separated. I took the right, he took the left." I didn't see any real reason to continue on from there.

Gage narrowed his eyes at me. "Okay, so you separated. Then what?"

"And then...I never saw him again until I got outside."

Johnny's nostrils flared. And I was almost certain I saw actual smoke coming out of his ears...

"Did you flunk storytelling in school, DeSoto?" an incredulous expression crossed Chet's face. "So Marc and I were in there, what, 15 minutes? Now, mind you, we started in after Dunning and Roy. We come back out to change tanks—"

"And Dunning comes walking out, takes his tank off, sits on the running board like he's all done for the night and grabs a canteen," Marco finished.

"So Chet and I are switching out *our* tanks and I ask him, 'So there's no one inside, huh?'"

"And he sits there, just looks at us, and says, 'Oh. No.'" Chet was reenacting Dunning's apparent casualness with his usual dramatic flair.

"So I'm thinkin', well, if the place is empty, switch your tank, grab a line and come help us."

“Right. But does he? No,” Chet continued. “So Marco and I are lookin’ at each other like, ‘what’s up this guy?’”

“I figure, maybe he’s hurt,” Marco says. “I ask him, he says no. I look around and realize, I don’t see Roy.”

Johnny shifted forward in his chair.

“Is it just me or is this like watching a tennis match?” Stoker observed.

“It does kinda seem that way, doesn’t it?” I agreed.

**Johnny:**

“Would you two hush,” I complained. “So then what?”

“So I asked him, ‘where’s Roy?’. He says ‘I don’t know, I thought he was out here,’” Marco went on.

“So *I* said, ‘Well, why didn’t you just use your HT?’ *He* says ‘Why would I if I thought he was out here?’,” Chet mocked, veins sticking out of his neck. “I mean, can you believe it?”

“I asked, ‘Did you guys get separated?’ And he said you guys had agreed to each take one end of the building,” Marco sipped his coffee.

“So I said, ‘You mean to tell me he’s still inside?’ So *he* says, ‘Well, I guess if he’s not out here then he must be’. I wanted to *kill* the idiot!” Chet nearly yelled.

“So Chet and I go tell Cap—“

“And I swear his face got redder than the flames that were shootin’ outta that apartment building,” Chet interrupted.

“So we go in to find Roy,” Lopez continued.

“And find him yelling to us from a doorway,” Chet said.

*That did it.* “Wait, hold on a minute.” I looked at Roy, “What happened? Where was your HT?”

**Roy:**

“Well, I tried to meet up with Dunning on the main stairwell after checking all of the apartments at the other end, but he wasn’t there. 110s had warned us about a possible ceiling collapse and they were right. Just as I went to call him on the HT that whole section of ceiling above the main staircase came down on top of me just then and the HT went flying out of my hand as I tried to roll away from it. But all that debris also blocked Dunning’s access to the main stairway, so I figured he was trapped. Then I realized I was trapped because the end of the hallway on the other end was already fully involved. I took my mask off to yell for him, but he wasn’t answering. By this time, my alarm had already gone off, twice. My only way out was through one of the apartments that I hadn’t checked, yet. I kicked open a door—”

“—and shazam!” Chet exclaimed.

Johnny’s eyes widened. “Backdraft?”

“I realized it just in time, too. Couldn’t get my mask on in time, but I managed to duck out of the way...mostly. And then Chet and Marco showed up.”

Captain Stanley walked in just then, “I don’t recall the inspection of Roy’s injuries being on the duty roster, fellas.”

His eyes narrowing, Gage leaned back, laid an index finger at his temple and aimed a hard look at me that I couldn’t read.

**Johnny:**

It’s not like stupidity isn’t unheard of among firefighters. But the incidents I know of usually stem from extreme job fatigue or a probie mistake.

But *this*...

There was *no* way...

I *could* not *believe* what I was hearing.

Madder ‘n a mosquito in a mannequin factory doesn’t even *begin* to cover how teed off I was. It just brought back everything that happened that time when Roy fell through the...

That sickening, helpless feeling that I vowed I would *never* go through again.

That *fucking* sonofabitch...

He left him.

He *left* him. He *walked out* and *left* my partner. In a *fire*. That sonofabitch just *left* him. Without saying a *fucking* word; he just *left* him! Two in, two out. That's Cap's rule, that's Roy's rule, and that's *my* rule. And that sicktwistedsonofa... Now, see, if *I'd-a* been there, I'd-a had his back. I'd *never* have done that. Not even to *Chet* on his *worst* days. There's *no* excuse for pullin' a stunt like that.

And a backdraft? A *backdraft!* Roy's been doin' this longer 'n me, what the hell was he thinking?

And why the hell didn't he just come out and tell me? 'Stead of hidin' it from me all morning!

I threw all of that at Roy when I looked at him. How he could be this calm about it, I'll never know.

I couldn't stand it, any more. I had to get up and do something before I stalked over to 24s to beat Dunning to within an inch of his *life*.

## Chapter 3

**Roy:**

He pushed the chair back hard as he got up and didn't say a word as he left.

That's not a good sign.

A silent Johnny means he's hurting and he's buried it. Which means it's bad. And hauling it back up can sometimes be a bit of a chore.

"Something going on that I should know about?" Cap asked, catching the look Johnny'd given me.

"Roy didn't tell him," Mike replied.

"You didn't tell your partner you were nearly barbecued?"

"No..." I guess that was Mistake number 3. Or it coulda been the first one. Depends how you look at it, I suppose. I wasn't sure if I should leave Johnny alone and let him broach the subject when he was ready or tackle it, now, head on. I musta been starin' after him 'cause Cap suddenly barked.

"Roy!"

"Yeah? Sorry, Cap."

He thumbed a gesture out toward the bay, "Maybe you oughta go talk to him."

*I guess that answers that...* I got up and followed after my partner.

"Well, now that you've all had your coffee break after that long, arduous roll call, can we please—"

"Coffee break?" Chet whined, "we barely had the *coffee*...!"

The voices from the kitchen retreated as I headed into the sleeping quarters. "Johnny?"

The sound of a bucket filling with water sounded from the latrine. I cautiously entered in and saw Johnny by the utility faucet, waiting for the water to fill the bucket.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"'Bout what, Roy?" He shut off the water and busied himself with readying the rags and cleaners.

"You're obviously upset about something. Mind telling me what it is?"

"What makes you think I'm upset about anything?"

*Oh, I see, we're gonna play it that way. OK.* “You’re stalking out of the kitchen, for one. And you’re not looking at me.”

He didn’t answer. Ee-yup, he was pretty angry. Just the reason I’d wanted to keep this under wraps, in the first place.

*Maybe humor will do the trick.* “Chet’s started calling him Doorway Dancer Dunning.”

No reaction. I guess Truth wins out, after all. “Cap placed him under probation if that makes you feel any better.”

“Is it supposed to?”

I debated with myself as to what would be the best way to handle this. Since Truth got something out of him the first time I guess continuing that straight-forward tack was the best course of action, “Are you mad at me?”

Johnny walked toward me, “‘Scuse me, I need to get the mop.”

I grabbed his arm as he started past me, “Who’re you mad at, Johnny? Me or Benjamin?”

**Johnny:**

I couldn’t even *begin* to figure out how to answer that. He hides these burns from me... *second-degree burns! On his face! Hides* them from me and then dumps me with this story about this twitheaded *jackass* who just casually walks off to leave my partner to *die!* I mean, can you believe it? And he has the gumption to *ask* me that. Everything about this whole thing was roiling around in my head and my gut and all I could do was *stand* there, ready to jab a finger at his chest, needin’ to blame somebody for something before I *lost* it.

“I don’t know.”

And I didn’t. I had a thousand thoughts all goin’ through me at once and I couldn’t sort it all out.

The alarm tones rang out and both of us stopped and listened. “*Station 51. Hang gliding accident. Holy Crap ascent at Stoney Point. Holy Crap at Stoney Point. 11000 Topanga Canyon Boulevard. 1-1-0-0-0 Topanga Canyon Boulevard. Park Rangers will meet you at scene. Time out, 8:37.*”

I looked Roy straight in the eye and stuck my finger at him to drive home the only thing in this whole mess I was absolutely sure about. “All I know is, I would never leave you, Roy. I would never do that.” I held his eyes as I moved past him to let him I know I meant it.

**Roy:**

*Now what was that supposed to mean?*

But as I watched him head to the Squad with that weird comment floatin' around in my head, I...felt something move in me. Some kind of...emotion, I guess. I'd never felt it before. It was awfully brief, too quick for me to hold onto and figure it out. Didn't matter, we had to move and so I ran to join him.

I've learned something about my numb-nuts partner over the years: he cares a lot. He cares almost to a fault. So when something happens that overloads his Sensitive circuits he shuts down. And whatever's bothering him gets its wires crossed with something else. His fear turns into misdirected anger about something that he's not really angry about.

What I said earlier about hauling back up what he's buried can sometimes be a chore? It's not just the one feeling he buries – it's like a cave-in, everything associated with what's bothering him gets caught up in the avalanche. Having to sort through all that can take time. And this was definitely proving to be one of those times.

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I peered over at my sullen partner several times as we raced through the LA traffic.

“So you *are* mad at me.”

“You're damn right I'm mad at you!” He looked at me, eyed the bandage, and his face screwed up even more.

*Now we're getting somewhere!* “Why? Why're you mad at me?”

“Backdraft? C'mon, Roy, you're not that stupid!”

“I was running out of air and I lost the HT. I didn't have a whole lot of options.”

Johnny shook his head and turned to look out the window.

“It's not like I did it on purpose, y'know.”

“You still coulda put your mask on before you busted open the door. Come to think of it, why didn't you?”

“Been askin' myself that same question. Look, it was just a stupid accident.”

“You tell Joanne that?”

I sighed and steered around a lane of traffic at a stoplight that had no room to move for us. “She wasn't happy about it, either.”

“No kidding.”

“That’s not the only reason you’re angry, is it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

**Johnny:**

No, it wasn’t the only reason. But I was just too damned furious to walk down that road. I mean, how does *any* firefighter, no matter how new or how burned out on the job, just *leaves a man in there?* I couldn’t wrap my head around it! I couldn’t fathom how, for all the money in the world, you could sleep at night knowing you just *walked out* and *left* someone in a *burning building!*

And why didn’t he just come straight out and tell me? He *hid* it from me! His own partner. Now what does *that* tell ya?

I know I should’ve asked but, like I said, I was too keyed up to wanna go down that road. Now was not the time, anyhow. We had a victim who was gonna need our help and it was time to start thinkin’ about what kind of equipment we might need and what kind of injuries we’d be lookin’ at. With these Santa Ana winds, it wasn’t lookin’ to be an easy run.

“Hold on, did he say ‘Holy Crap’?”

**Roy:**

Unfortunately, for me – or perhaps both of us – that’s precisely what he’d said. Johnny probably told you it was a sign that our Spirit Guides were telling us something. I might not ever have believed in such things until...well, until all this went down. Can’t say as I *believe* any of that stuff still yet, but...let’s just say I’d think twice, now, before discounting it. But that name sure turned out to be apt and an eerie foreshadowing of things to come, given that it led, arguably, to the worst mistake out of this whole mess –

Mistake Number 4.

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**A/N:** You’ll have to forgive the geography-swapping. There really is a rock-climbing ascent called *Holy Crap*, but it’s actually located at Tick Rock. I preferred the location of Stoney Point for this story, but just *couldn’t* pass up the name. Also, I don’t believe there are any service roads at Stoney Point. I also am guessing wildly on the wind situation when the Santa Ana winds are blowing. Anyone familiar with the area (and mountain rescue procedure and protocol), I humbly beg your forgiveness and forewarn ye, for your own sanity, that it might be easier to smile and nod and just pretend that the following rescue sequence is straight out of a manual \*cough\*...