

The Best of Intentions

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Part Two

Chapter 5: Backup

Gunshot victims were the worst, especially when they were probably very nice people who just happened to be in the wrong place at the very possible worst time. Very nice people with incredibly bad timing, like a couple of college students who left a party to buy some more beer and walked into the middle of an armed robbery.

And they bled a lot, especially when the bullet damaged a major blood vessel.

And for a change, it wasn't the girl doing all the crying this time; it was the boyfriend because they were trying to keep the girl from dying. Successfully as it turned out. They'd hauled ass to Rampart with two large bore IVs of lactated Ringer's running wide open, both he and Roy working on her the entire trip. Brackett never looked happy when they brought him a patient in this condition but she was still alive when he took her up to surgery, which was way better than either of them had thought it would go.

It wasn't the worst call of the shift – and damn, he knew better to even think something like that when the shift still had almost ten hours left in it - but it sure was the messiest so far.

Roy was quiet, well quieter than usual, as they scrubbed the blood from under their fingernails in the men's room at Rampart. Even with the institutional soap that he'd swear doubled as a paint stripper, there was still a tint to his fingernails that just wasn't washing away.

"You want to get some coffee or try to catch a ride back to the Squad?" Roy finally said after five full minutes of silence.

Gage exhaled hard, thinking, thinking, thinking; still studying his fingernails.

"Coffee, then catch a ride."

Roy was using a paper towel to try to blot the blood from his shirt but was just spreading the reddish-brown tinted blot onto a larger patch of blue. They were both definitely going to have to soak their uniforms when they got back to the Station.

"We might get lucky. Scotty probably needs to get some information for his report."

They were and he did.

Even luckier, they'd managed to sit on the couch in the staff lounge for almost ten whole minutes drinking coffee and doing absolutely nothing while Scotty finished getting the information from the boyfriend that he hadn't obtained at the scene. In contrast to the Emergency Room outside, the staff lounge was a little oasis of calm. It seemed everyone was too busy working to take a break and Gage enjoyed the chance to get his head out of the last run and into the here and now. It also gave him a few moments to try to remember how many clean uniform shirts he had in his locker as he watched his partner pick at the dirty red-brown stain on his left sleeve.

"Hydrogen Peroxide will get that stain out, you know," Dixie said as she came in for a quick jolt of caffeine.

"Yeah, but will it get us a ride back to our vehicle?" he said, stretching tired shoulder and arm muscles. "You working nights these days, Dix?"

"Seems that way," she said with a smile before heading back into the controlled chaos of the Emergency Room.

Gage squinted after her and then turned to his partner and opened his mouth.

"Don't ask," Roy said before he got a word out. "If she wanted to be clear, she would have been clear."

"He's right," Scotty said from the doorway, all creaking leather holster and authority. "You guys ready to go?"

"Oh yeah," he said, suddenly restless and anxious to get back to the Squad. "Night's still young. Lots of people doing stupid things that'll earn them a visit from us yet to come."

Roy elbowed him in the ribs and gave him a 'look' as they followed Scotty from the lounge.

The Squad was still sitting, intact and apparently unbothered in the parking lot adjacent to the liquor store that had been robbed. Before they'd left, they'd hurriedly packed up the equipment they didn't need for the ride in and Scotty had made sure the Squad was secure before he'd made his way to Rampart. Still and all, they checked it over; partly because of the worry of a Charlie ass kicking if it had been damaged in any way and partly the worry that someone had ripped off some essential piece of equipment while the Squad had been left locked up, but otherwise untended.

The liquor store had closed for the night after the robbery attempt and the parking lot was dark, only a few scattered cars parked near to the all night Laundromat.

Roy started the engine, let out a quiet sigh of relief and then reached for the radio handset. "LA, Squad 51 available."

There was a delay in Dispatch's response, not terribly long but just long enough that their eyes met in silent 'oh shit' communication.

"Squad 51, assist Station 36 at their incident. Pacific Telephone Company building at S. Main and West Lomita. Pacific Telephone Company building at S. Main and West Lomita. Time out 2245."

Roy confirmed and Johnny didn't even try to hide the sinking feeling in his stomach. He knew that address. He knew that location. He knew people who worked at that location.

"Roy, that place is *full* of electrical equipment..."

"Yeah," Roy agreed as he activated the Squad's lights and siren.

"...and insulated copper cable, and you know what that's like when it burns."

"PVC wrapped," Roy said, eyes straight ahead. "Which'll turn into chlorine, among other things, when it burns. If there's a fire, I'll be glad we refilled all our bottles earlier."

"If there's a...." Gage trailed off and considered his partner's point. "Well, okay, you're right. He didn't actually say..."

If he'd thought he'd lost that point, it was moot the second they turned from W. Sepulveda onto S. Main St. Even at a distance, they could clearly see the light truck, the confluence of LA County FD apparatuses, the blur of rotating red lights and the smoke.

"Well, shit," he said quietly.

"You said it, partner," Roy agreed, just as quietly.

On the other side of the throng of Engines and Trucks, the intersection of S. Main and W. Lomita was almost completely shut down. Through the red glare of LA County FD and law enforcement vehicle lights, Gage thought he saw the two southern lanes on W. Lomita moving slowly, directed by a phalanx of police officers. He counted the Engines that he could see, and the Trucks and the Squads.

"Who's here?" Roy asked

"Everybody."

"Squad 51, Battalion 14," squawked over the radio and Gage grabbed for it.

"Squad 51," he acknowledged, leaning forward and squinting through the windshield, wondering if there was anyone inside, wondering if any of the guys he knew from the bowling league worked the evening shift. Now that they'd cleared the outer police-enforced perimeter, he could see the flames leaping angrily from the doors and windows of the first floor and the front of the second floor of that little fortress of a building. A tangle of hoses led directly into the main entrance on S. Main. Engine and truck companies ringed the building streaming water at it and a Light Truck was set up just inside the entrance to the parking lot on their right.

"Squad 51, set up a triage area in the Northwest quadrant, rear parking lot near Engine 51 and stand by for further assignment."

He saw Roy frown. 'Further assignment' probably meant search and rescue. He hoped like hell there were no employees still inside that building breathing in that smoke.

"10-4."

Roy turned into the parking lot and carefully navigated through the Engines and Trucks parked in what might seem a haphazard fashion but which were actually positioned in a way that made sense to him. Most of the time.

"Squads 22 and 28 are here," Gage said. Squad 36 was presumably there too, but he didn't see them.

The drove past both Squads - the doors for all of the compartments on both were wide open but he didn't see any of the paramedics - and found an open spot near their own Engine three-quarters the way towards the back of the parking lot.

It was a little smoky when he climbed out of the Squad. He took a cautious sniff, waiting for an irritation that didn't come and then grabbed his turnout coat from the compartment and with Roy, begin spreading a yellow blanket and arranging their equipment. Then he took a good look around.

To his left, Station 28's Engine and Truck seemed to be working the northeast corner of the building. They'd passed Engine 38 on the way in and its crew was working the midpoint of the building with a 2.5" hitting the first

floor. Truck 86 was covering the northwest corner, with a master stream hitting the flames on the second floor. And Engine 51...

He looked at the charged lines running from Engine 51 and followed them with his eyes to a group of firefighters in the distance, none of whom worked on 51's A shift.

"Hey, Roy?"

"Yeah," Roy agreed, as he tightened his chinstrap. "Let's go find out."

They jogged the short distance to Mike Stoker, who was standing with one hand resting on the panel, the other hand holding a HT, gaze moving from the gauges to the firefighters at the other end of the lines to the burning central office building.

"Hey, Mike, what's the story? Is everyone out? And, hey..." He glanced around the scene for emphasis. "Where's the rest of our Engine crew?"

He said it nice and casually but Stoker scowled and looked away, back toward the building.

And just about when he was getting warmed up for a couple of probing questions and maybe, just maybe, some color commentary, the HT in Stoker's hand crackled to life and a familiar, slightly nasal voice stopped him before the first word left his already opened mouth.

"Battalion 14, this is HT 51."

"Go ahead, HT 51," Chief Miller said almost immediately.

"The third floor is clear. We are beginning search of the fourth floor. Be advised that the northwest staircase is now unstable and unsafe for egress."

Stoker swore – a nice, quietly intense "Damn" – but it carried a lot more impact from Stoker than it would from anyone else. Gage looked at him and then at Roy, feeling uncomfortably like he was missing key information.

"10-4, 51. Alternate points of egress are the staircase in the southwest corner or aerial ladder. Trucks 86 and 28 are available on the north side of the building, Trucks 31 and 106, the west. Maintain radio check-in every five minutes."

"10-4. HT 51 out."

Well, that was... Gage turned back to Stoker.

"Are there civilians still in there?" Roy asked.

Roy sounded worried, but it wasn't clear if he was worried about possible trapped employees, worried about Engine 51's crew already inside searching for someone, or worried about having to conduct an additional Search and Rescue mission. Of course, since it was Roy, he was probably worrying about all three at the same time.

"The evening shift's out," Stoker said. "Fire started in the cable vault. One of the employees tried to put it out." His shrug at the flames conveyed his opinion of that effort. "36s was first on scene, went right in but by that time

the whole basement was involved." He scowled their shared opinion of basement fires. "By the time we got here as part of the second alarm, the fire had already spread through the cable risers to the first floor."

"So all the employees are out?" Gage asked, trying to remember if he actually knew the shifts that Cleveland and Renner worked.

"They are now. The guy who tried to put out the fire ended up with second-degree burns; 28's paramedics took him in. The guys from Squad 36 ate a little too much smoke getting two other Telco guys out and ended up taking themselves and their patients in to Rampart. 22s got here when we did, and their Squad went in after a missing employee on the third floor. Ferrara brought him out with pretty bad smoke inhalation."

"Wait," Gage said, waving a hand to stop the Stoker version of a briefing. "You said Ferrara brought him out. Not Kelleher and Ferrara brought him out."

"Kind of my point, Johnny." Stoker's face once again set in grim lines. "They got separated inside. Ferrara said it was like a huge maze, lots of racks, pitch black and easy to get lost in there. Plus the Pac Tel guys weren't sure if the missing guy was in the frame on the third floor or in the switch on the fourth floor."

His heart starting thumping a little harder than usual and he took a steadying breath. "So where's Kelleher?"

Stoker's face twitched and he shook his head.

"Don't know. Ferrara went straight to his Cap, told him that he'd lost contact with Kelleher inside. They both had HTs but Kelleher wasn't answering and the guy Ferrara found was in respiratory distress, so he had to get him out right away. Captain Wozniak told Ferrara to take the vic to Rampart and got the okay from the Chief to take a search team inside."

"And?"

Stoker took a deep breath and Gage knew he wasn't going to like what was coming, and based on the way Roy's shoulders sagged, he knew it too.

"They went in, reported in a few times while they were searching the third floor and then they went silent. No radio contact."

"How long ago?" Roy asked.

He noticed Roy starting to pat his pockets to check that he had all his gear, which was a part of his normal routine to mentally and physically prepare himself to go inside. Assuming the Chief gave them the order. Gage started checking his own pockets.

"A bit over twenty minutes since they lost contact," Stoker said quietly enough that they almost didn't hear him.

Gage mouthed the word 'shit' this time, for emphasis, but Roy's expression froze and then started to shift from grim determination to alarm.

"Don't tell me," Roy said.

"Yeah," Stoker said. "They are."

"How long ago?" Roy asked again.

Now he was completely lost.

"About fifteen minutes," Stoker said. "They've cleared the third floor so the guys from 22s have to be on four."

It came together in his head with an accompanying buzzing sound, and Gage dropped his face into his hands.

"Shit," he said, voice partially muffled. "Thirty Rescue Squads in the county and we're sending our engine crews on Search and Rescue."

He felt rather than actually saw the hard look from Stoker and as he raised his head, he saw Roy shaking his head, lips pressed into a flat line.

"Okay," he raised his hands in supplication. "That totally came out wrong. You know that if it was me or Roy in there, there's no one I'd want coming in more than Cap and you guys, right? You know that, Mike." It wasn't flying. "Oh, come on, you do so know that. You guys have saved my ass more times than I really like to think about. I'm just wondering why the county didn't call in more squads."

"Cap took Chet and Marco inside, right?" Roy said quietly. "Who did 22's Captain take in with him?"

"Ostrander and van der Heijden," Stoker said. "I know. Four guys from 22s, including Kelleher, and three guys from 51s doesn't add but that's what was available and the plan was that Ferrara or the guys from 28s would be back around now. We already had three squads on scene and from what Cap said, all the other squads in the whole area were tied up on calls, including you guys."

"Well, we're here now," Roy said flatly. "We can meet them on the fourth floor. Search'll go faster with five of us."

"Cap said the staircase was unsafe for egress," Stoker countered. "That means it's unsafe for access too. The Chief told you to set up a triage station and stand by for further assignment. You stand by."

Roy turned toward the building and just looked at it. Gage did too and then spun back to Stoker.

"What's their exit strategy? Now that the staircase is out, how are they getting out of there when they find the guys from 22s, or if it goes bad? The truck companies?"

"You heard the Chief," Stoker said. "There's a staircase in the southwest corner, a Snorkel on the south side, Ladder Trucks on the rest." He shifted his jaw. "The backup is the roof if they need it and they've got ropes, of course."

Gage studied the building, the odd arrangements of windows and the long span of concrete between the second and fourth floors without a hint of glass. Ropes weren't much help if you couldn't actually get out through some point of egress and axes weren't going to cut one in a concrete wall.

"Okay," Roy said. "Cap's going to need us to be set up down here. Probably a safe bet 22s has some injuries. Let's get the Stokes ready in case they have someone who can't be helped down the stairs or ladders. O2, compresses, splints, anything he might call for."

"Air bottles," Stoker said. "Our guys should still be good but 22's has to be sucking fumes and Kelleher is probably completely out."

"22s and 28s should have some we could borrow," Gage said. "I'll get 'em."

Running to the other squads was a good excuse to burn off a little nervous energy. Being on scene at a major fire and waiting was not something that he did well. Either send me in or give me someone to treat, he thought and then gave himself a mental slap. Okay, give me something to do, he revised; sounds like there have been plenty of people that needed help already.

Squad 22 had two full spare bottles and so did Squad 28, but he left those alone because Shafer and DeAngelo were probably on their way back from Rampart and might need them. Instead, he placed Squad 22's bottles in the triage area and ran over to Engine 22 to chat up their Engineer.

Bobby Harrison, like most Engineers he'd met in his career, was watching everything and had already figured out what Gage was doing. He had a spare bottle waiting for him.

"Get my guys out of there," Harrison said, the tendons in his neck practically vibrating.

"We will, Bobby," he said. Twenty minutes inside without any word, inside this fire, was not a good thing. "Our guys will find them and get them out of there and Roy and I will take good care of them. I promise."

With the three bottles he'd borrowed, plus one from the back of Squad 51, they had everyone covered. At least until an unsmiling Roy told him to put their spare back.

"Johnny, who knows how long we'll be here or whether we'll need to go inside. We're going to need our own backups."

"That leaves us short," he protested. "We've got seven guys in there, Roy, at least four who are either out or running out of air. We need four bottles. You or I can always borrow one from 28s if we need it."

Roy gave in and sent a worried look towards the burning building and then glanced at his wristwatch.

"They're two minutes past check-in," he said, lifting his own HT to check that it was still on the right channel.

"Two minutes, Roy," he said with an impatient exhale. "You know what it's like when you're inside searching, focused on what you're doing; you lose track of time. Plus, it's pitch black and smoky in there, which makes it even more of a hassle to read a watch. They're fine, they're just busy."

Right about now would be a good time for Cap to chime in on the HT and prove him right.

Chapter 6: Triage

It was endlessly long wait; fidget-filled minutes spent listening to communications between the various companies on scene come across the HT. His free-floating anxiety was only mildly distracted when a Mayfair ambulance arrived on scene, but ten seconds later, when Steve Ferrara climbed out the back of Mayfair, he was good and distracted.

Ferrara's head swiveled back and forth, gaze slowly sweeping the entire scene, and then he headed straight for Bobby Harrison at Engine 22, pace increasing until he was trotting and then jogging.

They were too far away for Roy to make out any of the words and Steve Ferrara was one of the more soft-spoken guys he'd ever known, so he contented himself with keeping a worried eye on 22's paramedic. If he were in Ferrara's shoes, his stomach would be a churning mess of snakes, writhing around and poisoning him from the inside. Maybe it was a good thing that the trip to and from Rampart with his smoke inhalation patient had taken so long.

"What do you *mean* they're still inside?"

Huh, Roy thought. For someone who you sometimes had to really listen hard to hear, Ferrara could project when he wanted to. Or needed to.

Harrison was waving his arms in the air, gesturing at the building, gesturing at Engine 51 and then he grabbed Ferrara's left shoulder and held on to it for a few minutes while he talked, and then talked some more. Ferrara listened, narrow face frozen, blindly nodding at whatever Harrison was saying. And then when Harrison finished saying what he had to say, or maybe just ran out of words, Ferrara looked around, spotted the very obvious triage area and headed straight towards it.

"How bad is it?" Ferrara finally said, voice raspy and terse, looking at the building instead of at Roy.

"I don't know, Steve. Our Engine crew is in there looking for them, but they're over five minutes past their scheduled check-in." He held up his HT. "To tell you the truth, I got a knot in my stomach too."

Ferrara took a deep breath and then sighed it all out, nodding as he did so and some life came back into his eyes.

"What can I do?"

It sounded to Roy's ears an awful lot like 'Give me something to do.'

A burst of static from the HT caught their attention. Silence. And then another burst of static.

Static, static, static....

"....alion 14, HT 51. Do you copy?"

Definitely Cap, and he was machine-gunning his words in that rapid, very clipped tone of voice he used when things were hopping. Roy found himself automatically leaning forward, anticipating orders.

"You're breaking up some, but I copy, 51," the Chief said.

More static.

"...delay in contact....we got 'em, Chief....entrapment from an interior wall collapse affecting the switch control room...." Another burst of static, longer than the previous ones and then, "I repeat, Code I times four."

"Those are the guys from 22, right?" Johnny whispered a little nervously as he paced back and forth along the side of the Squad, shooting a quick guilty look at Ferrara.

Roy started to nod but then changed mid-gesture into a shrug as he watched a group of what appeared to be civilians cluster around Chief Miller, pulling out what looked like blueprints.

"Yeah," he said. "Kelleher and the guys who went in after him: 22's Captain and their linemen."

"Your transmission is breaking up, 51. What is your exact location?"

More static.

"....get near a window..."

A few long, breathlessly long, seconds of silence, of more waiting.

"Battalion 14, HT 51. Do you copy?"

It was about a clear a transmission as anyone could expect over an HT spoken through a facemask amidst a hell of a lot of ambient noise from the scene. Roy sighed and saw a corner of Johnny's mouth tip upward.

"Loud and clear, 51."

"Chief, our location is almost exact midpoint on the North side of floor four..."

One of the civilians near the Chief pointed to something on a blueprint and the rest of them nodded in agreement.

"....we are going to need assistance to get these guys out of here."

"Truck 86 is available, and Squad 51 is on scene and can assist you inside."

"Negative, Chief," Cap said, quickly enough that he either never gave it a thought or had considered and dismissed it already. "It's getting a little hot in here and these Code Is are not able to walk down a ladder. We need a rapid evac and treat on the ground. I'll knock out the window where we'll hand off."

"10-4, 51."

In the distance, Chief Miller bent over the blueprints and then raised his head and looked directly at the fourth floor as if he could see his men inside.

"Snorkel 127, Battalion 14. Assist 51's rescue on the North side of the building. Floor four, window number five from the northwest corner. Look for 51's signal."

"Snorkel 127. 10-4."

"Truck 74, Battalion 14. Assume Snorkel 127's assignment and keep water on that fuel tank and generator."

"Truck 74. 10-4."

"Engine 51, HT 51. You copy my last transmission?"

"Every word, Cap," Stoker said, and even over the HT, Roy could hear the underlying sense of relief intertwined with Mike's calm. "We've got stuff prepped for you down here. Tell me what you need."

"Are Gage and DeSoto with you, Mike?"

Roy thumbed his HT before Stoker could answer. "We're here, Cap."

"Roy, we've got one case of smoke inhalation and loss of consciousness. The rest are injuries sustained in the interior wall collapse. Victim two has a broken arm and probable concussion. Victim three has a dislocated elbow. Victim four has a fractured femur. Everyone ate some smoke so they're going to need O2 as soon as you get them but victim one is going out first."

He was pretty sure that victim one was Kelleher and what Cap wasn't saying was that Kelleher was in pretty bad shape. From Ferrara's anxious pacing, he'd heard what wasn't being said too.

"Okay, Cap."

"Mike, if there's anyone in the perimeter around midpoint, north side, give them a debris fall warning."

As Roy was turning to look, Stoker said, "You're clear, Cap."

He watched Snorkel 127 come lumbering around the back, the west side, of the building, crawling into position to approach midpoint in between Truck 28 at the northeast corner and Truck 86 which had been pouring water through the windows on the second floor in the northwest corner of the building since he'd come on scene.

Cap must have seen the Snorkel approaching too. Roy couldn't hear the window glass shattering, but he could see some of the falling shards, oddly beautiful in the reflected light from the Light Truck mixed with the streaming water that an Engine company on the ground was shooting into the first floor. The head of the axe came through the window again, clearing out framing and panels of glass that hadn't fallen the first time.

Axe marks the spot, he thought and smiled, his own small, only slightly lame joke that he'd probably tell his partner later, not that Johnny would find it funny.

"Johnny?"

Gage swiveled to look at him.

"Let's get set up. We're going to need O2 on everyone, splints for the arm injuries, possibly a traction splint for the femur, and probably Stokes for two of the guys."

By the time they had the triage center set up and ready, Snorkel 127 was in position, spreading its A-frame stabilizers.

Roy and Ferrara grabbed the two Stokes and carried them, huffing a bit towards the Snorkel. He could feel the sweat pouring down between his shoulder blades and the tips of his ears were growing hot. Engine 28 to their left had a hose stream trained on the second floor windows above them, and the spray that blew their way was refreshingly cool.

"Five bucks says that cable vault'll burn through midday tomorrow," one of the guys from 127 was saying as Roy passed the Stokes baskets up.

"No bet," 127's Lieutenant replied. "It'll burn through Thanksgiving if we can't get more water on it. Those cables come in underground. Wonder how far that fire extends."

Roy looked down at the pavement beneath his feet and had a few uneasy moments contemplating an underground fire moving outward away from the building, under the parking lot, underneath all the Engines and Trucks and their triage area.

Finally, 127's long articulating boom began steadily rising towards the fourth floor window Cap had cleared.

Roy glanced over at Ferrara but his gaze was trained on the rising boom and the fourth floor window, top teeth chewing away at his bottom lip as the bucket reached the fourth floor.

Above them, Marco appeared at the window and took the Stokes that was passed up, handing it to someone behind him. Then he grabbed the railing of the Snorkel's bucket and helped one of 22's crew step over the railing and down into the arms of 127's operator.

Roy released a breath; one on his way to safety.

The spotlight glinted off a yellow blanket in the Stokes about seventy-five feet above their heads, handed carefully down into the bucket and then secured across the railings as best as possible, with 127's operator in one corner of the bucket and the other injured guy from 22s diagonally across from him. Ferrara shifted in place, anxious to get started, needing to take care of his partner and his crew.

Roy knew from experience that standing inside the bucket as the Snorkel raised or lowered it felt like a controlled rush, a glide. From the ground, it felt more like watching a snail crawl; the long seconds were interminable as they waited for the bucket to reach them.

And then, just like every other time Roy had been on a scene where a firefighter had been trapped or injured, there were more hands than strictly needed to help carry Matt Kelleher, pale, motionless, with a definite gray-blue tinge to his face. Ferrara walked at the head of the Stokes, talking quietly to his partner the fifty yards to the triage area and then took a stethoscope from Gage with a silent nod of thanks. He unwrapped the blanket to begin a vitals check while Gage set an oxygen mask over Kelleher's face.

Roy walked 22's lineman, Alex van der Heijden towards the triage area. Based on his dazed expression and his lack of response to verbal queries, he was probably concussed and his right arm was tucked into his coat in an attempt to protect it from jarring.

"I got him," Gage said, meeting him midway. Between the two of them, they half-walked, half-carried van der Heijden to a yellow blanket.

By the time he returned to the Snorkel, the bucket had climbed most of the way back up to the fourth floor. He waited, watching as it reached its destination. Marco helped 22's other lineman, Carl Ostrander, step down into the bucket, steadied immediately by 127's operator.

28's Captain was standing by the Snorkel and nodded to Roy.

"Shafer and DeAngelo caught a ride on a Mayfair back here. They're about three minutes out, maybe less."

"Good," Roy said, meaning it. Three paramedics for four firefighters with mostly unknown injuries was less than ideal. "We're gonna need their help."

28's Captain was looking upward now at the window, his jaw tightening. Roy followed his gaze upward and watched Captain Stanley lean down and rest his hand momentarily on the last of 22's injured guys, clearly reassuring what had to be 22's Captain in the Stokes. Then Cap helped Marco maneuver the Stokes into the Snorkel's bucket, wedging it between Ostrander who grabbed for it with his right hand, and 127's guy.

Cap said something to the guy from 127s who nodded in return and then the bucket pulled away.

Roy watched it descend, ever so slowly, and then glanced back up at the window, surprised to not see 51s crew waiting for their ride. Cap probably had them cleaning up, making sure that any equipment they'd carried in was coming back out with them.

He waited in silence, relieved that 28's Captain didn't feel the need to make small talk; he was busy, mentally triaging. Ferrara was going to treat Kelleher; he'd made that clear. Whether that was a good idea or not, Roy wasn't going to argue. He knew that if it had been Johnny – and considering Kelleher's condition, he said a quick prayer of thanks that it was not - he would have insisted on that right too. Johnny was treating van der Heijden. Based on what he'd seen of the transfer into the bucket, it was 22's Captain with the broken femur. Ostrander could wait until 28's paramedics arrived on scene; a fractured femur took precedence.

He chewed on the corner of his right thumb and then spat it out, scowling; it tasted like smoke, the noxious taste of an electrical fire.

He turned around and glanced back at the triage area, yellow blankets overlapping, treatment areas laid out and organized so that one biophone, oxygen tank set-up, EKG monitor, defibrillator, trauma and drug box could be easily accessed by two different paramedics, each working on his own patient. With the equipment from Squads 22 and 51, they'd set up two separate and distinct treatment areas, each able to treat two patients with shared equipment.

Naturally, Steve Ferrara was in one, with the handle of Squad 22's biophone cradled against his ear, and John Gage was in the other, in the process of starting on an IV on van der Heijden.

Roy sighed and shook his head, and then, as he heard a noise behind him, turned a little to his left.

For a moment, it sounded as if he was at the beach and there was a wave coming in, crashing on shore and then he was falling forward, grabbing for the side of the Snorkel to keep his balance, hands sliding off its chrome. He hit pavement far harder than he should have from such a short distance, from a nothing fall.

There was a buzzing in his head when he opened his eyes, and the world was full of tiny, narrow cracks. He blinked once and then again and a third time, until he realized that the tiny little lines were real and not a product

of out of focus eyes. There was a hand on his left shoulder and someone's fingers scrabbling at his coat and hauling him up from the pavement.

Someone was talking to him but Roy couldn't make out what he was saying. The ringing in his ears was drowning out the words and the buzzing in his head made it impossible to read lips. He let the other fireman – 28's Captain, he finally realized - pull him up into a sitting position and then, remembering that he was waiting for the injured men in the Snorkel's bucket to reach the ground, turned and looked over the shoulder of 28's Captain. He was facing the wrong way though; he was looking back at the triage area. He could see Gage put a hand on van der Heijden, lean down to say something and then he turned and started running towards Roy.

The buzzing inside his head was lessening and though the ringing wasn't going away, he could now hear just well enough that he heard the distant sound of someone shouting.

He turned to his left to try to figure out if they were shouting at him and then he froze, eyes widening, mouth opening. He pushed upward, trying to climb to his feet, and grabbed at one of the Snorkel's stabilizers for leverage. On his feet now, he took a step forward and stared up at the building. Stared up at the flames bending upward from the windows of the fourth and fifth floors, spreading, intent on consuming, on devouring the upper levels of the building.

The flames were raging from all of the windows but one, and that was only because Truck 86 had already adjusted its position and was pouring water into the fifth window on the fourth floor. Big dark, heavy wet curls of smoke were rolling out of that window.

A hand grabbed the back of his coat and he turned into his partner's shell-shocked expression.

"You okay?" Johnny said slowly, making it easy to read his lips as if Roy couldn't have read his partner's face. "Roy, man, you were pretty close to that blast. Are you okay?"

He turned back to look at the Snorkel, at the bucket that was almost but not quite to the ground, at both 127's operator and Ostrander leaning dangerously far over the side of the bucket, Ostrander's face reddened, contorted in pain or concentration as he strained to hold onto his Captain's Stokes with only his right hand. 127's guy was leaning almost halfway out of the bucket but had both hands on the Stokes basket that swayed back and forth below him, Wozniak still strapped in place.

"Holy..."

There were three or four firemen gathered on the ground below, reaching upward to the Stokes several feet beyond their extended fingertips. 28's Captain was shouting at someone from his crew to "bring a ladder, goddamnit!" 127's Lieutenant was scrambling up the boom, trying to reach the bucket, presumably to take over the controls or bring up a line that they could use to lower the Stokes.

Gage shook him to get his attention. "Roy, you stay here, and I'll be right back," he yelled, getting right up in Roy's face, his words coming from a distance, as if through a watery tunnel. "I'm going to head over there and help. You just stay here and wait for your head to stop spinning, okay?"

He reached out; his fingers slid off the heavy canvas of Gage's turnout coat, but that fragile contact was enough to draw his partner's attention back to him.

"Johnny," he said. And then since he'd run out of words, he looked up at the flame-engulfed fourth floor, at the blackened window frame gusting smoke.

Gage's expression completely dissolved for one second before Roy could see him make a conscious effort to pull all of that raw emotion back under control and harden his surface.

"Yeah, Roy," he said, voice gritty, a voice years older than Roy had ever before heard from John Gage. "*I know.*"

Chapter 7: Vigil

"HT 51, what is your status?"

It was the silence that ate at him. Ironic considering the nicknames he'd been given, that he'd earned over the years.

The initial blast had rocked the building and blown out all the windows on the fifth floor, the secondary blast, less than a second later, had done the same to the fourth floor. The shock wave had rolled across the back parking lot, dropping firefighters on their asses and rattling Snorkel 127 hard enough that for a moment he thought it might topple, like Snorkel 3 had in 1970, killing one firefighter and seriously injuring two others. This Snorkel listed briefly and then settled but the blast had done its damage, jarring the Stokes basket from its unsecured resting spot across the bucket's railing.

Mike Stoker was far enough away that he'd only fallen back against Engine 51's panel, barely stunned but immediately aware of exactly what had happened and what it meant for his crew.

They'd known that if the fuel for the back-up generator on the fifth floor was exposed to the heat of the fire long enough, and enough pressure built up in the fuel tank, the outcome was predictable, inevitable even. Snorkel 127, and then Truck 74, had been pouring water into the fifth floor from the south side of the building, attempting to cool the tank and the generator. But the combined efforts of the deluge, the foam unit and all other companies inside and out had failed to contain the fire in the basement cable vault and lower floors; the heat had continued to build and rise despite all efforts to control it.

They were lucky that it was a smaller generator, relatively speaking. He'd heard from 28's Captain who'd heard from the Pac Tel guys that some of the larger central offices had turbine engines the size of a 747 jet engine as part of their power plant. That and a long string of cabinet-sized batteries that served to act as an uninterrupted power supply during the time between the failure of the power grid and that generator being fully up and running. Telephone company central offices were built to survive days, even weeks, of a major power outage without anyone losing phone service.

"Battalion 14 to HT 51. Captain Stanley, respond."

There was more and more time now between the IC's calls to his missing men, a silent acknowledgement that he wasn't going to get an answer. Those answers would come only when someone went in after them.

The linemen from Engine 19 that were working the hoses off his Engine were still sending occasional sympathetic glances in his direction. At least he was in a place where he could see what was going on, unlike his counterpart on Engine 19 whose Engine was part of the relay from the hydrant on W. Lomita halfway to S. Figueroa. It would be unfathomably worse to be that far away from his Engine crew, to hear the explosion and try to fight the rising alarm, the panic, try to figure out what had happened with only the chaotic communications across the HT channels to answer his fear.

"HT 51, Snorkel 127. Do you copy?"

He'd watched crews from 127s, 28s, and 38s converge on the Snorkel after the blast, watched them use ladders and ropes to bring both the Stokes and Carl Ostrander to the ground safely.

Now, he watched Gage and about five or six other firefighters carry Captain Wozniak's Stokes to the triage area, setting it down near where Roy DeSoto was treating Ostrander. For some reason, Gage and DeSoto were working the end closest to Engine 51 instead of the end nearest their Squad and he didn't want to dwell on why that made him feel better.

They'd gone from three paramedics on scene to five: 28's DeAngelo and Shafer had climbed out of the back of a Mayfair just in time to get knocked off their feet. Now they were working next to 22's Ferrara, down by Squad 51. DeAngelo was taking care of van der Heijden, Ferrara taking care of Kelleher, and Shafer was moving through the triage area, helping out as needed.

"Snorkel 127, Battalion 14. Have you made contact with 51's team inside?"

Cap, Chet and Marco had had full air bottles and protective gear when they'd gone inside. He didn't like to think about what they might be breathing now. Assuming they still were.

The smoldering copper cables alone were producing a mix of carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, hydrocarbons, hydrogen chloride, heavy metals and ash, among other things. The real fuel was the PVC insulation on those cables, which when burned released the chloride from the PVC and turned it into chlorine, and that burned your eyes and did a number on your ability to breathe.

"Battalion 14, Snorkel 127. Negative, Chief; no response. We are completing hydraulics check and expect to be operational in five."

From where he stood vigil, he could hear the near constant hum of Gage's voice as he bent over the battered Stokes, talking to Wozniak, talking to a firefighter from 14s - and where he'd come from, Stoker had no idea - who'd been shanghaied into helping.

"Leave it alone, Cap, that collar's on for a reason," Gage said, gently batting down Wozniak's befuddled grab at the cervical collar. "Now, McIntyre, listen up. Shafer and I are gonna roll the Cap, and I'm gonna check him out, real quick, check his back, and then you're gonna get that backboard in when I tell you. You got it?"

Gage kept up the patter, his voice cheerful and reassuring even as his jaw tightened and his eyes went flat while running his right hand down Wozniak's spine.

"Okay, McIntyre, now slide that in there right now. Yup, just like that, and...."

Gage and Shafer rolled Wozniak smoothly onto the backboard, grimacing as 22's Captain yelped.

"Hang in there, Cap." Gage switched to the biophone. "Rampart, this is Squad 51..."

Stoker turned his attention back to the building.

It would be a quick rescue, grab them and get out. Truck 86 was already in a supporting position; they had knocked down the flames in that area immediately following the explosion and had been keeping it wet with fog since.

He swallowed, and if he'd believed in some kind of higher power, this would have been the time he'd have said a prayer. Instead, as Snorkel 127's boom began rising smoothly into the night, inside his head he simply said *'please.'*

He'd already calculated that it would take two excruciatingly slow trips. As expected, 127s was sending two men in to search, and one to man the bucket; it would be a tight fit with four, there was no way that bucket would carry six men.

It probably took forty-five seconds for the bucket to reach the window; it felt like four or five minutes. Two figures clamored out of it and disappeared into the smoke-filled fourth floor. And then the real waiting began.

He checked the gauges: the pressure on the lines was unchanged. He looked in the direction of Engine 19's guys, and then glanced over to the triage area. He watched Roy carefully wrap and secure Ostrander's left elbow for almost an entire minute before looking back at the building.

127's guy was standing in the bucket, peering toward the window, waiting.

He sighed.

He watched Gage start an IV on Captain Wozniak before glancing back to the window and this time, his tired, straining eyes made out shapes at the window, two bulky forms carrying a third bulky form. They passed him to the guy in the bucket, and then turned around and went back into the building.

He took a shaky breath, startled to realize he'd held it since the three figures had appeared at the window.

He shifted his attention to Truck 86 who'd adjusted the direction of their fog pattern, presumably able to see what he could not inside the fourth floor. Truck 28, just east of the Snorkel, had suppressed most of the fire on that side of the fourth floor. The fifth floor was still burning and if he strained he could see the IC pointing at it and discussing something with man in a Captain's helmet, too far away to identify.

When he looked back at the building, a figure appeared in the window, followed by another, and between them they held another limp form. They handed him off to the man in the bucket and as the bucket started to descend, they went back in to find the last missing man.

They're not dead, he kept reminding himself, as first Chet and then Marco were laid gently on formerly pristine blankets. If they were dead, surely someone would have started some type of resuscitation attempt the minute they were on the ground. They wouldn't have carried truly lifeless bodies to the triage area, would they?

SCBA tanks were removed first and then shears appeared and cut off turnout coats that were both charred and soaking wet. The oxygen masks were non-rebreathers, not bag valve, so apparently they were breathing on their own. Shafer grabbed for the BP cuff and wrapped it around Marco's arm as DeAngelo pressed his fingers against Chet's carotid. They looked like a well-oiled team. They looked like Gage and DeSoto.

It took longer than forever and it took about five minutes. By the time the last unnervingly still member of 51's search team was being carried down in the bucket with all three men from 127s, Stoker was jittery, as if he'd been mainlining caffeine for a month. It felt like swimming the length of a pool underwater, at the very bottom, eyes open and ears slightly popping and then breaking through the surface and being stunned at the noise.

He winced as an attendant slammed the back of a Mayfair. Ferrara was riding in with Kelleher and van der Heijden, the two most seriously injured that were ready to be transported. Wozniak was probably in worse shape than van der Heijden but he was nowhere near stabilized and Gage was chewing his lip as he talked to Rampart on the biophone.

"Over here," Roy's voice called out sharply and the two men carrying the limp body of his Captain veered in that direction.

"You okay, son?"

At first Stoker thought he'd imagined the voice, and for one incredibly unnerving second, he even thought it was his father's voice. Then a hand settled on his right shoulder and startled, he whirled.

The man was older than he was, probably mid-40's, and wore a Captain's helmet with a large 19 on its front.

"Yeah," he managed to get out through a dry mouth. "I'm..."

The words were there, they were familiar, but his tongue wouldn't form the syllables, as if even his own tongue didn't believe he was okay.

"... I don't know," he finally said. "That's my crew and I don't know if they're ..."

His traitorous mouth failed him again and his traitorous mind continued to substitute words other than 'okay,' words that echoed and paralyzed him.

19's Captain nodded solemnly and then he realized with sudden horror that those were Engine 19's guys at the end of the charged lines from his Engine and he was supposed to be making sure that they had what they needed. Frantically he turned and looked at the gauges and then out at the firemen. They were fine, but he might not have even realized that they weren't until it was too late. He'd betrayed their trust; he'd failed them.

"I can't stand you down," the Captain said with obvious regret. "We just don't have the manpower. But I can relieve you for a bit. Let you go take care of your guys while I take care of mine." His mouth twitched into something that was almost a smile. "Plus I get to remember how much fun it was to be an Engineer."

He fought down a surge of emotion that was wild and barely under his control - whatever it was would be embarrassing at best –and, lips pressed tightly together, he nodded in gratitude.

"Thanks, Cap," he said, amazed that his voice only slightly wobbled.

He strode quickly toward the edge of triage area and made eye contact with Gage who looked puzzled. Gage leaned hard to his right, peered around Stoker and apparently put the pieces together.

"Roy's just finishing up with Ostrander; he'll probably go out in the next transport. Can you get Cap started? Basic vitals check, let us know if there's something we need to take care of right away?"

He swallowed and his nerves must have shown on his face because Gage immediately said, "Roy'll be there in a minute, Mike. Just get his coat off and get him on some O2. See if that wakes him up, okay?"

It was men from Engine 28 who'd carried Hank Stanley over to where Roy had directed, between where Gage was working on Wozniak and where Roy was working on Ostrander. From the looks on their faces, the guys doing the carrying were waiting for some direction.

Okay, coat off, get him on O2. I can do that.

"Get his legs down, we're going to have him flat on his back in sec. Lean him into me for now," he said as he dropped into a crouch, straddling Stanley's legs. "Then help me get his gear off."

A few seconds later he had an armful of unconscious company officer, Stanley's facemask up against his left shoulder and he could feel the heat rising off the charred turnout coat through the protection of his own coat.

"Get his tank off," he said.

That was the easy part. The harness was designed to swap out tanks and Stoker immediately felt a reduction in weight pressed against him. Now for the rest.

"Cut 'em," Roy said from the other side of Ostrander. "Just cut the straps and then cut his coat off. Don't bother trying to get it off the regular way." He tossed a set of shears that landed flat on the blanket a few inches from where Stoker was kneeling. "I'll be there in a sec."

A couple quick snips by one of the guys from 28s and then the other removed the tank frame and harness.

"Helmet next. Wait, loosen his chin strap."

Cap always wore that tightly fastened, he never lost his helmet, and the association between the two appeared to be something that no one was able to get through Gage's head.

"Careful with his head and neck," Roy said.

Stoker spread his right hand over the back of Stanley's neck, gripping the base of his skull and neck to keep them in position. "Go ahead."

The helmet was easy, as was the facemask. Now he had his Captain's head slumped against his shoulder and rapid, shallow breaths hitting the side of his neck. He nodded a go ahead to the shears guy who ran them up the right sleeve of Cap's coat, over the right shoulder, across the back and then stopped.

"Left shoulder's out."

Crap.

"Yeah, I see that now."

He almost added 'be careful' or something but he bit his tongue.

The guy continued cutting, slowly, carefully, around a left shoulder that was not the right shape or position. Mike's gaze followed the shears down the left sleeve to a ferociously swollen wrist, to several gloved fingers that were misshapen and crooked, obviously broken.

Shears guy peeled away the back of Cap's coat and then squatted in position, ready to hold c-spine and they shifted Stanley until he was flat on the ground. The other guy from 28s dragged an oxygen setup to right exactly where Mike needed it.

"Thanks, guys."

This was familiar turf. He'd helped Gage and DeSoto dozens of times, probably more than dozens of times. He set the plastic oxygen mask in place, pulled his gloves off and then moved on to taking vitals. He never saw or heard the men from Engine 28 vanish back into the fray; it was as if the triage area was a scene unto itself.

"How's he doing, Mike?" Gage called from behind him.

Stoker finished multiplying in his head.

"Pulse 116, respirations 24 and shallow. Pale, comatose. I'm not sure if he's diaphoretic or just wet; he feels cold even though his coat was pretty hot. Possible dislocated left shoulder, fractured left wrist and a couple of fingers on his left hand."

"You're doing fine," Roy said, startling him with his nearness as he knelt across from him and wrapped a BP cuff around Cap's upper arm. "What else do you see?" He puffed the cuff up and then bent down with his stethoscope to listen.

Mike ran his gaze and then careful hands over each limb.

"Left knee's swollen."

Cap twitched underneath his hands as they ran across blue uniform shirt.

"Ribbs on the left are tender. Left collarbone is swollen, possibly broken. Damn, he hit something hard."

"Or something hit him. He's out pretty deep," Roy said as he straightened, frowning. "BP's 90 over 66," he said, eyes searching up and down his patient. "See if you can find where he's bleeding."

There'd been a little blood on the broken fingers but nothing major. He started from the bottom and worked his way up again, searching with his eyes, testing with his fingers.

"That's it, Hank, give me a good cough," Roy coaxed, stethoscope tucked inside Stanley's shirt. "Respirations are fast but if he ate any smoke, it's not bothering him much."

Stoker straightened and raised blood-covered fingertips.

"Laceration and swelling, base of the skull on the right," he said, trying to suppress the flutter in his stomach at the thought of a head injury. "And there's blood in his ear."

DeSoto moved rapidly, fingers probing the back of Stanley's head. "Hank! Come on, Hank, open your eyes."

As Roy pulled the pen light from his shirt pocket, checked both ear canals and then pried each eyelid upward, Mike wiped his fingertips on his own uniform pants, his own gaze locked on the penlight's beam.

Coat's off, O2's flowing. C'mon, Cap. Time to wake up.

"I don't think that's it," Roy muttered and then looked up at Stoker. "Pupils are unequal but neither is blown; probably a concussion. I think the bleeding in his ear is coming from the eardrum, which could've ruptured. It happens with blast injuries. Can you get me some gauze?"

Stoker grabbed more gauze than was necessary and passed a stack of 4x4s to DeSoto.

"Any word on Chet and Marco?"

Roy squinted at a piece of bloody gauze and sighed in what sounded like relief. "Okay, it's just blood." He looked over at Stoker. "Chet's conscious, Marco's semi-conscious. From what I heard Shafer and DeAngelo saying, it sounded like blast injuries on both, blunt trauma, nothing penetrating, some fractures. First, maybe second degree burns on their legs. Marco might have some crackling in his lungs." He frowned as he looked down at his patient. "Help me roll him, I need to check his back."

He held c-spine and they rolled him on Roy's count.

"No deformities, no swelling, everything feels normal," Roy said. "Cap, where the hell are you bleeding?"

A set of shears from Roy's belt easily sliced Stanley's uniform and under shirts, exposing a couple of lacerations and large contusions that were going to be spectacular and colorful bruises, but no external bleeding that either of them could find. They rolled him back and Roy gave a soft sigh as his seeking hands slid down Stanley's torso, finding and palpating contusions on the chest and abdomen.

"Mike, I'm gonna need the biophone, data scope and drug box."

Stoker scrambled to his feet and turned to Gage's side of the treatment area and suddenly he could hear other voices calling, the ever present crackle of traffic on the HT frequencies, and the roar and heat of the fire again.

"Hey, Mike, when you get a chance, I could use some help," Gage said as soon as he caught sight of Stoker.

"Sure thing, Johnny," he said, and his voice sounded a lot calmer than his racing heart. "You done with the biophone?"

He delivered everything Roy had asked for and then returned to Gage's side.

"What do you need?"

Head immobilized in the c-collar, only Wozniak's eyes were able to shift towards Stoker. His usually ruddy face was blotchier than normal and his sandy hair stood up in spiky clumps that gave him an oddly punk look for a Fire Captain in his mid-40s.

"How are my guys doing?" he said, voice scratchy, eyes anxious.

Stoker looked at Gage. He was willing to bet that this wasn't the first time the question had been asked and he didn't honestly know the conditions of all of 22's men. He had seen Carl Ostrander and he didn't look too bad.

"How about I check and see if Carl can come over and fill you in, Cap?"

Gage gave him a quick, approving nod and said, "Good idea. Help me get him secured to the backboard for transport and then go get Ostrander."

That was something definitely easier done by two guys and he wondered where the shanghaied guy from 14s had gone; probably back to where he was supposed to be in the first place. Gage's reassuring patter, explaining exactly

what he was doing while he was doing it, with a refrain of 'don't worry, you're doing okay, you're doing fine,' was starting to soak into his own brain. By the time they were done, and he stepped towards Ostrander, he felt as if the band that had tightened around his chest was starting to loosen.

"Hal," Roy's voice called, "he's going first, right away."

Stoker turned. In the time, he'd been helping Gage, Roy had hung two bags of saline from the oxygen cart, established the IVs and had inserted an oral airway. Stoker felt the band start to tighten again, just a little as he took a hesitant step back towards Roy and Captain Stanley, watching the Mayfair attendants drag the cot towards the triage area.

"Mike," Roy paused in front of him, and his voice gentled. "The airway's precautionary but his BPs not good. We need to get some fluids in him as quickly as possible so I need you to hand pump those bags while I talk to Johnny for a sec."

He nodded, grateful for something he could do, and knelt next to his captain.

He reached down and touched a blanket covered shoulder, which was pale and cold despite the heat still pouring from the burning building. In the anemic light reaching the triage area from the Light Truck and the swirling red lights bouncing off the yellow blanket, Stanley's face was ashen where it wasn't streaked with soot, his features utterly slack.

Stoker swallowed hard and tried not to react, tried not to notice how his own breathing had changed, how his hands shook as he pressed the bags of saline.

"You probably heard," he said, voice wavering a little, "but in case you didn't, you got the guys from 22s out of the building safely. Chet and Marco are out and safe too. They're a little banged up, but no worse than you are. I know you're going to deconstruct this later, but I don't think there was anything more you, or anyone, could have done to get everyone out of the building faster. No one knew that fuel tank was going to blow when it did."

He heard Gage say, "Yeah, okay," and then Roy was back.

He helped Roy and the Mayfair attendants lift Captain Stanley onto the cot and trailed after them, weighted down with Squad 51's biophone, data scope, defibrillator and drug box. Behind him he could hear Gage shouting directions to Squad 28's paramedics.

"Brackett says Cap'n Stanley is transport immediately. Cap'n Wozniak," Johnny said, pointing, "and Marco go next, so I can take the Cap or take 'em both. Chet and Carl go when the next ambulance is on site. You guys work it out but we need one of you to stay and the IC wants us all back as soon as Rampart releases us and we find a ride back."

"You've been taking care of Kelly," Shafer said to his partner at the exact same time DeAngelo said, "I'll take Chet in."

Hal, George and Roy loaded Cap into the back of the Mayfair. As Stoker handed Roy the drug box, Gage jogged up.

"Roy, you sure you're okay with him on your own?"

Roy looked up from where he hovered over Cap and his compressed lips and the way his eyes didn't seem to want to meet theirs said 'no, he sure wasn't.'

"I'm not on my own," he said in a flat tone. "Hal's with me. Besides, Captain Wozniak may have a spinal cord injury; you know you need to take care of him. "

Gage didn't immediately reply.

"Johnny," Roy said quietly, insistently. "We need to go now."

Gage nodded and pushed the back door shut, his face blank of all expression as he did so. He smacked it twice and then turned away, motioning sharply to the next set of Mayfair attendants.

"These two go next."

Stoker stood there in the midst of organized chaos contributing absolutely nothing, as Gage and one of the attendants loaded Wozniak, and then Shafer and the other attendant loaded Marco. They were loaded and pulling out before he remembered that Wozniak wanted to know how his men were doing and he was supposed to have brought Ostrander over to reassure him.

He wanted to go talk to Chet, see how he was doing. He watched DeAngelo talking to Chet and casually rechecking vitals. Shafer tugged the blanket a little higher on Ostrander and it looked as if both guys were in good hands.

Work now. Feel later.

Engine 19's Captain had been a huge help to step in but they were down two entire Engine crews now. 19's Captain needed to get back to his job, so he needed to go back and do his.

He leaned down in the detritus of plastic and paper wrappers, cut-off charred and smoky turnout coats and discarded gauze; he picked up the striped helmet, then made his way through the triage area towards his Engine. She was the only part of his crew that was still fighting the fire.

Chapter 8: Disconnected

You'd think a guy in a turnout coat would be easier to find in an Emergency Room. Okay, scratch that. He'd pulled off his helmet and coat before he'd climbed inside the ambulance with Wozniak and Marco, and thank God it was one of the boxy, larger ones because there was nothing worse than trying to keep your balance and take care of two patients in one of those long, skinny ones that looked like a hearse. And for a change, his patients had remained stable, requiring only monitoring and updated vitals on the way in.

Roy'd probably done the same thing, left his coat and gear somewhere, but he should have been able to pick out a guy in a Fireman's blues in the midst of all the white coats and white nurses uniforms and the civilians clogging up the place.

And speaking of white nurse's uniforms....

"Dix! Hey, Dix! Dix, you got a sec?"

She really didn't look as if she did, rushing out of Treatment Room 3 and headed into Treatment Room 1. She turned startled eyes towards him; her well-known ability to juggle three thousand things at once apparently maxed out.

"Well," she said, trying for her usual casual drawl, but she sounded terse and time pressed. "Just about one, Johnny. But only because it's you."

It warmed him, just as it always did and he almost managed a smile.

"You seen Roy?"

She nodded and then looked around, eyes searching up and down the main corridor.

"Huh, he was just here." She turned back to face him. "He was trying to find a working phone to call his wife. I told him they were all out, payphone, hospital phones, probably his home phone, you name it, if you're trying to call an outside line." She gestured towards the glassed-in room where they ran the Squads assigned to Rampart. "Radio frequencies are working and we've been communicating with the Fire and Police Departments that way but TV reports say the phones are out all over Carson and Gardena. Parts of Torrance and Lomita too." Her expression softened, gentle and worried. "That fire you guys are working sounds like a bad one."

He nodded, momentarily speechless as he considered the unbelievable prospect of no phones working anywhere in this part of the county.

"No phones?" he said.

"No phones," she confirmed. "Listen, I've got to go. Good luck finding your partner," she paused and turned back to him. "And hey, keep an eye on him when you do find him. Your Captain gave him a rough time on the ride in. Roy seemed a little... shaken up." She made a face, trusting him to figure the rest of it out.

"Yeah, okay," Gage said, stomach bottoming out. "Is Cap...?"

"On his way to surgery. I'll see you later."

As she pushed into Treatment Room 1, he could hear Morton's voice rising, each word precisely enunciated, "I asked for that CBC almost twenty minutes ago..." and then the door swung shut.

He leaned against the wall outside Treatment Room 1 and breathed into steepled hands cupping his nose and mouth.

Cap on his way to surgery meant still alive. Marco was in Treatment 2 with some intern and a Pulmonologist. Wozniak was in Treatment 3 with Early, along with an Orthopedics specialist and a Neurosurgeon. That left Kelleher or van der Heijden or possibly a non-FD patient in Treatment 1 with Morton. Maybe one of the injured employees Ferrara or the guys from 28s had brought in earlier. It felt as if the entire world had stopped and everything revolved around the fire, which he knew wasn't the case because he could turn his head about 2 inches to his right and see a waiting room full of civilians who were there for reasons that had nothing to do with the fire.

He needed to find Roy and then find a Mayfair heading back to the scene. DeAngelo should be bringing Chet and Ostrander in any minute now and they needed paramedics on scene because that fire was just a respiratory nightmare. At minimum, lots of guys were going to need their eyes washed out and a little quality time with 100% O2.

He'd collected the equipment he'd brought in with Wozniak and Marco and was now stocking up on saline with one hand and trying to log it out in the book with the other when he caught sight of Roy DeSoto coming through the doors that led up from the basement. He really had been trying to find any possible working phone. And, crap. He looked awful: red-rimmed eyes and exhaustion just written all over his grime-streaked face.

"Roy!"

His partner straightened, blinked a few times and tried to put his professional expression back on but Gage could see right through it as Roy nodded at him and headed towards the nurse's station.

Roy cleared his throat but his voice still sounded rough, hoarse. "I was trying to call Joanne. The phones are out."

Gage nodded, piling up the bags of saline into a box, letting Roy set the pace. Despite his reputation, he really did know when to shut up and listen and his partner wasn't someone who liked to be rushed under the best of conditions. And okay, maybe he didn't always actually *act* on that knowledge, but now looked like one of the times when he really should.

"Television is saying it's all of Carson City, West Carson, Gardena and some other areas too." Roy peered into the box and his expression shifted. "Let's restock some Ringers. Just in case."

Gage swung around to the cabinet and reached for the right drawer, lifted two bags and raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, that should do for now," Roy said. "How come you don't look as tired as I feel?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I'm a marathoner, not a sprinter." He scribbled his signature and the date in the book and then glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes past midnight. He scribbled out yesterday's date and wrote today's in cramped script. "You ready?"

Roy was staring at him. "Weren't you Mr. 440 in High School? You ran it in a 48.3 or something, right?"

"That was high school track, Roy," he said, and then grabbed the box and swung it onto his hip. "I'm talking about life here, you know?"

Roy was still staring at him a little oddly. "Who are you and what have you done with John Gage?"

"Maybe I just have hidden depths. Did'ja ever think about that?"

They reached the Ambulance Only entrance just as the doors swung open and Tom DeAngelo and a Mayfair attendant walked Chet Kelly in. He knew you could tell a lot about someone's condition by how quickly the attendants were moving the bed and while DeAngelo wasn't taking his time, he wasn't running either.

"Heeeey, Chet," Gage said, walking backwards and keeping pace with the stretcher.

Chet's eyes blinked open slowly, and then he gave Gage a lazy grin under the oxygen mask and a thumbs up.

"Someone's getting the good stuff," Gage said, with a look at DeAngelo.

MS in the field mean no worries about a head injury, although really, with Chet Kelly, how could you really tell? The boxy shape of a splint under the blanket on the right side meant that Chet was probably going to be out for at least a couple weeks, probably more like a couple of months.

DeAngelo nodded. "Knee, ribs, some minor burns and muscle strain. He should be fine."

He kept pace with them all the way into Treatment Room 5 and then spun back to his partner who was walking along the stretcher bearing Carl Ostrander, talking softly. Ostrander was propped up, his elbow bandaged and held in place against his body. He seemed to be a lot more comfortable than he had on scene.

Gage grabbed the attendant just coming out of Room 5. "Hey, you guys going back to the Pac Tel fire?" At the man's less than enthusiastic nod, he grinned. "Okay, you've got two passengers for the trip back. Don't leave without us, okay?"

He spent a few minutes in the hallway, waiting for Roy who'd walked into Treatment 4 with Ostrander and was probably briefing whatever intern was handling the case. Between the fire and the waiting room, it looked like the Rampart ER docs were stretched pretty thin tonight.

"Ostrander's going to be fine," Roy said as he came out of the room, and if he wasn't actually smiling, at least he didn't look as exhausted as he had earlier.

"Chet looked good too," Gage said, walking side by side with his partner. "Marco was pretty out it; the doc thinks it's a concussion and not a mild one either. He messed up his lower right arm but they're going to need x-rays it to see if it's a break. Could just be a bad sprain. He's got a lot of deep bruising, probably some muscle strain, and they're checking his lungs because Shafer found some upper airway edema and he heard crackling."

Roy nodded absently, volunteering nothing as they loaded their equipment in and then climbed into the back of the Mayfair. Gage put the box of saline and Ringers bags on the bench between them.

"Dr. Early's got a bunch of specialists looking at Cap'n Wozniak," Gage said. "There's definitely swelling around the L1 but they don't know if there's cord damage." He shook his head as he took a deep breath. "I just don't know if that happened when that interior wall collapsed or when his Stokes fell."

He wasn't sure why the thought of the injury happening during the rescue was bothering him so much. It wasn't as if an injury to the L1 vertebrae would be less damaging if it had happened inside.

He slid his eyes to the right. Roy was staring into the distance, not really listening to him.

"Okay, man, you're killing me here," he said, turning to face Roy as he reached the end of his patience. "What happened on the way in? Is Cap going to be okay?"

Roy straightened a little, some ambiguous emotion flickering across his face.

"I hope so." He paused and then frowned. "But I'm not really sure." And then he sagged and looked exhausted again. "He was hypovolemic and shocky at the scene but he'd stabilized somewhat. Or at least I thought he had, but then when we were about five minutes out, the scope started showing some arrhythmias..."

"V-fib?"

Roy shook his head. "No, thank God, but his BP was dropping to the point where as we pulled in, I couldn't get a diastolic, and that was more than enough to scare the hell out of me. Brackett got him stabilized enough that the surgeons could take him up and do an exploratory, figure out where and why he was hemorrhaging. It's just," he drew a somewhat shaky breath, "the next time Cap starts getting on us about giving him gray hair, remind me to let him have it, okay?"

Gage sagged against the back of the bench.

"Okay, just as long as there is a next time." He thought about what he said versus what he'd meant and frowned. "You know what I meant. Not that we should be involved in something that gives him gray hair because it's not like we're really having all that much fun either when that happens."

Roy bumped him with his elbow. "Yep."

"You know, I thought you were going to tell me he'd coded on the way in or something like that and you had to do CPR all the way to Rampart."

He could sense Roy turning to look at him and definitely could feel the heat of that incredulous stare.

"'Cause I wouldn't wish that on anyone, but since you were acting all..." he paused and fumbled for the right word, "freaked out, I figured it had to be something *really* bad to get you so rattled."

Roy snapped; he was almost shouting when he said, "Because Cap bleeding out on the way to Rampart and knowing that nothing I was doing was making any difference *wasn't* really bad?"

Got him.

"Roy. That's not what I said," Gage said, fully serious now. "I knew he was in bad shape when you took him in." He paused briefly and dropped his voice. "If we'd had enough guys on scene, I would have gone in with you because I just had a real bad feeling about it." He waited for Roy to take a couple of deep, pretty shaky breaths. "You know, you said nothing you were doing was working but you got him to Rampart, and maybe if you weren't doing what you were doing, Brackett getting some whole blood and the right meds into him wouldn't have been enough. That's a long way from nothing."

The ambulance wasn't running hot but it bumped around a corner probably faster than it needed to and they both swayed with it, many hours of practice making the adjustments almost unconscious.

"You know, Dr. Freud," Roy said, and Gage could already hear the difference in his voice, "that was actually pretty sneaky. I'm never really entirely sure if you're being deliberately provocative to get me to talk or just being an insensitive ass. "

Gage peered out the window and could see the glare of the fire in the distance.

"Well, you're kind of a difficult case, Roy," he said and really, he tried not to smirk, no matter what it sounded like. "It takes a special form of shock therapy to help someone as repressed as you are but I knew it was the right course of treatment when you were going to wake up Joanne to talk about it. Or you would have if the phones were working. I mean, from what I heard, you pretty much tried every phone in the hospital trying to call her."

"Oh."

And there was just enough weirdness in how Roy said the single syllable that Gage sat up straight and turned to look at his partner.

"That wasn't actually why..." Roy trailed off and then regrouped. "Okay, maybe partially it was. Dixie said that the television stations have been doing special reports, breaking news alerts on the fire since it started earlier and you know they're going to harp on the fact that there were line of duty injuries."

Gage sighed in agreement and nodded his head.

"And if by any chance, Joanne was watching the news, I didn't want her to worry. I wanted to let her know that we had some guys injured from 51s, but you know, that I was okay."

Gage nodded again.

"And then I couldn't find a phone. None of them are working, and I tried pretty much every phone in Rampart, pay phone, the one at the nurse's station, the one in Brackett's office, and then tried some other floors..."

"Well, think about it, Roy," he said. "If the place where all the phone lines *originate* is on fire..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but I wasn't thinking about that."

They were a couple of blocks from the fire, but traffic was amazingly heavy for this time of night, probably because so much of it was diverted from W. Lomita and probably some of it was the vultures who came out to watch the fire, as if watching the news reports wasn't enough. And of course there was the media. He could see the lights from the television camera crew trucks in the distance already.

"What I was thinking... Well, you're not married, so maybe this wouldn't occur to you," Roy said. "But you've got Emergency contacts, we all do. You've got your Aunt listed because she's local, right? How'd you tell her that she'd be notified if you got hurt?"

"Someone from the Department would call her, probably Cap or you, but maybe someone from HQ."

Roy nodded, head bobbing rapidly. "Okay, and what did you tell her about how she'd get notified if, you know, the worst happened? If you got killed, line of duty?"

He would swear he could feel his heart rate increase but it was probably his respiration. "I told her that someone would come in person if they could, because ..."

And then it clicked.

"Shit."

"Yeah," Roy echoed. "No phones."

"Shit, shit, shit," he said quietly as he imagined Cap's wife, Marco's mother, Chet's mother, all getting woken up in next hour or next few hours by someone from the Department ringing the doorbell or pounding on the door and exactly what they were going to think when they saw that it was someone in uniform standing on the doorstep looking somber and uncomfortable.

"You know, I told Joanne that it's not a hard and fast rule that a phone call equals injury and that a home visit means someone died, but you know, or maybe you don't, the wives talk and compare notes, and most of the time that's how it goes, or at least that's how they expect it to go."

"Well, it's not like getting a call after midnight would be all that great either," he said, thinking about his Aunt and how she'd react, and feeling just absolutely sick. "The phone rings after midnight and it's either a wrong number, in which case you want to kill the other person, or you know it's bad news."

"Or in your case, it might be one of your nutcase neighbors."

He decided to just let that slide, being as Roy was still bouncing back.

They approached the turn onto S. Main, local law enforcement waving the ambulance through and he started trying to get his head ready to go back on scene, to get ready to treat any other injuries.

"You know the other thing about the phones being down, Roy?"

DeSoto made a sound, part grunt, part hmmm, that he chose to interpret as a request for him to continue.

"There are going to be a lot of people this part of the county who need assistance - fire, police, medical, you name it - who aren't going to get it."

A/N: There is a telephone company central office in Torrance, but as far as I know there is not one in Carson. If you Google Map the location I gave, you'll find what looks like a dirt lot on the corner of S. Main and W. Lomita. Maybe there was a telephone company central office there in the 1970s and it burned down or maybe it's entirely the product of this author's imagination...

Chapter 9: The Long Hours

The Chiefs had arrived on scene.

He didn't know if it was the threat to public safety for tens of thousands of Los Angeles County residents and businesses without phone service that had brought out the white helmets, or the millions of dollars in fire, smoke and water related damage to the telephone company central office, or the fact that seven – no wait, 36's paramedics were still getting breathing treatments so it was nine - firefighters had already been hospitalized, but Roy wondered if the Los Angeles County Fire Department had opened a Headquarters branch in Carson. And there were a lot of guys in business suits hanging around with them; he presumed that the Pacific Telephone Company's upper management had arrived in full force as well.

He noticed other things too. Parked next to the light truck was a mobile air trailer for refilling SCBA bottles at the scene and someone from HQ with a brain had made sure that all responding companies had plenty of water to keep their guys hydrated when they rotated off the hoses and swapped out their tanks.

But based on the IV that Shafer had going on a firefighter Roy'd never seen before, not everyone was taking advantage of it.

"Word is that the Sheriff's department, the LAPD, pretty much every law enforcement agency has every vehicle on the road, patrolling slowly so that if there's an emergency, someone can wave them down and they can radio it in," Shafer said as he adjusted the flow of the IV.

"Makes sense," Gage said, as he dropped the box of supplies in the center of the triage area. "Kinda smart, actually."

Roy glanced around, surveying the mess they'd left behind when they'd pulled out earlier and he grimaced.

On the plus side, in the time they'd been gone, the crews on scene seemed to have gotten the fourth and fifth floors under control, and the second floor was on its way to being contained even if it was still putting out smoke so dense that that it seemed the hose streams were slicing it into pieces rather than dissipating it.

"All of the television stations and radios are broadcasting updates, letting people know how to get help and of course every politician in the County is getting his face in front of the cameras whether his district is affected by it or not."

Shafer hadn't left the scene any time in the last hour so Roy wondered if there was any truth what he was saying, or if Shafer was just repeating the rumors he'd heard from the guys he'd treated.

He watched Shafer listen to his current patient's lungs with a stethoscope and then say something with a grin that was returned.

Shafer patted the guy on the shoulder. "Finish out that bag and then we'll see how you're doing, okay?"

He joined Roy in picking up some of the medical debris.

"How'd it go?" Shafer asked in a quiet tone, one not meant for the guy on the IV. "You see Ferrara while you were there? Any word on Kelleher?"

He was definitely not interested in reliving his trip in so he went for the easier questions.

"I didn't see Steve at Rampart; I was kind of expecting to see him back here." Come to mind, it was a little surprising that Ferrara hadn't been more visible. "I don't know. Maybe he was trying to get in touch with Kelleher's family but he would've had to go somewhere out of district to find a working phone."

It wasn't as if Ferrara's Captain or crew were in position to know if he'd taken an unauthorized side trip, but it just didn't seem like something the Steve Ferrara that he knew would do in this situation.

Shafer bent down and swept some discarded wrappers into the palm of his hand, and then looked around for a place to toss them. Roy held out the bag he'd been using.

"All I got from Brackett was that Matt had inhaled a lot of smoke. With all the activity from this scene, plus the normal stuff, the ER docs are spread pretty thin, so he told me that some doc from Pulmonology had taken over Kelleher's case. And then Brackett got pulled into something else, so I didn't get a chance to ask him anything more."

"A pulmonologist? That ain't good. Don't suppose Brackett mentioned his O2 sat levels?"

Roy shook his head, slumping a little as he thought about what Gage had said about Marco getting his lungs checked too.

"Hey, Shafer!" Gage yelled. "Where're their helmets and stuff?"

Shafer didn't even fully turn, just twisted his neck to one side. "On their Engines. Stoker picked up some, Harrison picked up some and I brought over the rest."

And damn, Roy thought, I haven't even checked in on Mike Stoker, Engine 51's last man standing. He turned and looked toward the Engine, where Stoker stood dutifully at his post, which seemed a lot more solitary than it usually did. Roy felt both obligated and reluctant and then he was swept by an embarrassing surge of relief when Gage waved him off and jogged over in that direction.

"You guys okay?"

He should have been the one to check on Stoker, not Johnny.

He, Mike and Cap were the senior guys on their shift: the leaders, officially in Cap's case, unofficially in theirs. They were the ones who set the example for the rest of the guys to follow. He had a pretty good idea of how Mike might be feeling after watching that building blow with the rest of their crew inside it. Or maybe he didn't; he'd been lucky enough to have his partner at his side afterwards and then plenty to keep him occupied.

"Roy?"

Mike wasn't the type to open up to just anyone either. He was pretty sure that Mike was even careful about what he said to Cap, since there were things you might talk about with a good friend that you really couldn't tell your commanding officer, even one as fair-minded as Hank Stanley. And then he was blindsided by the sudden realization that with Cap down, Mike was officially in charge of Station 51's A-shift right now, *his* boss, at least until the Department brought in a replacement Captain.

Shafer stopped into his personal space and Roy jerked his mind back to the scene. Wandering minds were a hazard at a working fire, or so he'd had drilled into him over and over and over again.

"Roy, you okay?"

He tried to smile but just couldn't summon any kind of positive feeling, or much of any feeling at all come to think of it. He sighed; that seemed to be coming pretty naturally.

"Yeah," he paused, trying to remember Shafer's first name. "Yeah, I am, or I will be anyway. What do you hear about replacements?"

Shafer pushed his helmet back up off his forehead and rubbed a hand at his hairline.

"I know a guy who works at HQ," he flung an arm in the direction of whichever chief had taken over as Incident Commander, "and he said that they're trying to bring B-shift crews in early for Station 22, Engine 51, and Squad 36, and bring in some guys individually to tag out the heat exhaustion or smoke inhalation cases. But the phones are out of service all over Carson City, West Carson, Gardena, Torrance and Lomita so Headquarters is having a hell of a time getting in touch with any of the guys who live locally."

Shafer hadn't said a word about replacements for Squad 51 and with the way his luck seemed to be running today, they'd end up with Hookrader as their replacement Captain, if only because he lived in El Segundo and presumably had phone service. He wished he knew where Ben Collins lived. Hell, he'd take Dick Hammer over Hookrader if anyone asked and he knew for a fact that Hammer didn't live locally.

"And speaking of phones being down," Shafer said, and his voice dropped in both volume and tone. He nodded in the direction of Engine 51. "I gotta admit, it hadn't occurred to me that someone was going to have to go do home visits for the injured guys who live in this area but when Houts did his walk around..."

"Houts was here?" Roy said, flabbergasted.

Shafer shrugged. "Still is, as far as I know. This is a big f'ing deal, Roy. Lead story on every news channel including national news, according to my brother-in-law."

Roy blinked at him.

"The guy I know at HQ," Shafer puffed out an embarrassed exhale. "My wife's older brother. He's some kind of staff guy. Anyway, when Houts did his walk around, Harrison and Stoker both asked him straight out if they could go out with whoever was notifying the emergency contacts for their crews..."

Roy already knew the answer since Stoker was still manning Engine 51.

"...but without any replacements, and with both of their Engines being an essential component in relaying water to the crews on scene..." Shafer shrugged and his mouth twisted into something mocking. "Blah, blah, blah. You get the idea."

It would have been nice for the Stanley, Kelly and Lopez families to see a familiar face when they got the news; Roy wished he had thought of it himself.

Maybe it was a married guy thing to obsess about it so much, which is why Johnny didn't get it, since he didn't have anyone waiting or worrying at home, someone with an abiding interest in local news reports and a conflicted relationship with a ringing telephone. Every time he thought about Karen Stanley or Mrs. Kelly or Mrs. Lopez hearing a doorbell ring at this time of the morning, what he heard was the doorbell for his own home. He pictured Joanne being woken by the sound of it; woken by the repeated ringing or maybe someone leaning on the bell hard and long enough to wake her from sleep or to get the dog barking, which would wake her. He could plainly imagine the look that would freeze her face as she fumbled for a robe, knowing what that doorbell ring might signify.

"So who's doing the notifications?"

"Not sure," Shafer admitted. "I think Houts said that they had off-duty Battalion Chiefs and some Company Officers out doing it, but he didn't say who."

Roy changed his mind: Hookrader as a replacement Captain for this shift was tolerable; it was a hell of a lot better option than Hookrader doing any notifications, especially for anyone from Station 51. He wouldn't wish that job on anyone but he hoped that they'd asked someone with people skills, someone like Ben Stone maybe.

He heard the thud of boots against pavement and turned to see Gage trotting back towards the triage area, expression closed off and thoughtful.

Roy nodded in Stoker's direction. "He doing okay?"

Gage stopped, caught his breath and then turned a sharp-eyed gaze in his direction. "I dunno, Roy. Are you?"

DeAngelo was back by 0100 and the four of them manned the triage area, rinsing eyes with saline, providing O2 to firefighters who ate some smoke but not too much smoke, and applying silver sulfadiazine to burns that could be treated on scene. They took turns taking patients in to Rampart when the smoke inhalation, heat exhaustion or the burn demanded it.

Between patients, they watched the fire.

Two firefighters stumbled their way toward the triage area at about 0230 and he and Gage went out to meet them.

"He's got a burn on his leg," one of the men said, between coughs.

"Only because you knocked me into that support beam, you jackass," said the other, with more affection in his tone than in his words.

Both wore helmets that said 127, which carried a special, unspoken obligation, at least for DeSoto and Gage, not that they wouldn't have taken good care of them anyway.

"Okay, how about you take a seat over here," Roy said, steering the guy with the burn towards a blanket. "Johnny, you want to..."

"Yeah," Gage said, already reaching out a hand to the fireman with a bad cough. "Hey, why don't you grab a seat while my partner treats your buddy and let me take a listen to that cough you got going."

Roy reached for his shears automatically, running them up the fabric of the uniform trousers, wishing not for the first time that night that the crews on scene had gotten called out just a little later, late enough that they might have been wearing bunker pants rather than the blue fabric ones. He took the burn kit that DeAngelo handed him, draped sterile gauze over the burned calf and snipped the top of the saline bag.

He nodded a quiet thanks to DeAngelo who crouched down next to them, fingertips on the patient's left wrist.

"How's it going in there?"

It was sufficient to pull his patient's attention away from Johnny listening with a stethoscope to what sounded like a case of smoke inhalation on the other guy, which was at least partly Roy's intent.

"Bad," the guy from 127s said, lips tight slashes in a grim face. "Both back staircases are completely gone now, stairs, rails, platforms, you name it, all came crashing down. Useless except as chimneys, and they're a little too good at that."

Roy nodded, moving his saline stream steadily over the burn. He had heard the thunder of falling metal platforms and treads more than an hour earlier and Cap had predicted it at least ninety minutes before that.

"Fire jumped up the cable risers to the third floor. You have any idea how many insulated copper cables they have up on that floor?" the man demanded. "Try tens of thousands, maybe a hundred, two hundred thousand. Tons of fuel, almost no ventilation on that floor, not that we haven't been trying, you know. Cutting through those concrete walls is a bitch and a half. We've gone through every blade we brought and my Lieutenant went begging for spares." He shifted, unwittingly moving his bad leg, and hissed in pain. "How bad?"

"It'll hurt less if you try not to move it."

Roy waited until DeAngelo finished listening to the patient's lungs before he said anything else.

"It's not too bad," he said gently, "probably second degree, but it's over enough surface area that I'm gonna send you in."

He watched closely, waiting for the instinctive, almost automatic objection he expected, but the man took a deep breath and then sagged back. All the fight in him had been sapped by the fire.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "What about Sheridan? He all right?"

Roy looked to his right, where Gage had Sheridan on O2 and was talking quietly on the biophone.

"Something tells me you'll be sharing a ride."

He was certain now that while the walls of this sturdy little fort of a building might still be standing, its contents were completely lost. Someone in charge must have agreed because orders went given: at 0430, they pulled everyone out of the building.

He felt as if he'd been awake and in motion for a full 48 hour shift, maybe a 72. He'd heard some departments still did those but he couldn't imagine how their guys functioned. There was usually some sleep on a shift but it was never a guarantee.

He'd started wondering if 127's Lieutenant might have gotten it right when he said the fire might burn until Thanksgiving if they didn't get more water on it. He wasn't sure how much water this one was going to need. Would Castaic Lake be enough? How about Littlerock Reservoir? Maybe they should just redirect the Aqueduct system to this location.

And then someone walked into the triage area wearing a turnout coat and a Captain's helmet that said 51 and Roy accepted that he'd started to hallucinate, probably from exhaustion. He'd personally transported Captain Stanley to Rampart and had helped Brackett stabilize him enough for exploratory surgery. As of an hour ago, 51's Captain was still in surgery.

"DeSoto," the hallucination said. "Any word from the hospital on Hank, Lopez or Kelly?"

He stared at the helmet, trying to make sense of this figment of his imagination until gradually his eyes drifted down to the face under the helmet's brim.

Ben Collins stared back at him, pale blue eyes squinting, jaw shifting in a display of worry that Roy had never before seen from 51's B-shift Captain.

"Yeah, okay," Collins said with a look Roy couldn't quite interpret. "I just came from the IC. You and Gage are going to pack up here and take the Squad back to the Station. My guys will take over, resupply, whatever needs doing. They didn't want to pull the Engine from the scene because she's at the front of the relay, so my Engine crew came here instead. Dawson is going to give Stoker the keys to his car."

Roy nodded. He felt a presence besides him and he knew it was Johnny, which was good because Johnny rarely had a problem talking and for some reason right now, Roy couldn't seem to come up with the right thoughts or words, much less actually speak them.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get here sooner but with the phone system being down, it was hell to reach everyone. Dawson," Collins jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the B-Shift Engineer who was walking towards Engine 51, "and I ended up having to go out to their homes to roust Hagan and Cooper out of bed 'cause we couldn't get through." He looked at Gage. "Any news?"

"No news yet, Cap," Gage said, and Roy was shocked at how raspy he sounded, as if he'd been eating smoke instead of treating for it. "We took 'em in around midnight and I don't think Rampart was really prepared for how many guys we ended up bringing." He tilted his head towards the paramedics from 28s who were listening in but not participating. "Eddie Shafer did the last run to Rampart about an hour ago. Squad 36's guys had completed their breathing treatment," and he shuddered from his less than fond personal memories of those, "but our crew and the guys from 22s were still being treated."

"Okay, you guys can head out," Collins said and he looked them both up and down. "Assuming either of you two is fit to drive the Squad back."

"I got it, Cap," Gage said immediately, faster than Roy could open his mouth. For a change, he didn't feel particularly inclined to argue the point.

Collins didn't look entirely convinced.

"You're probably safe to get back to the barn; it's a short trip. I know you're going to want to head to the hospital after that but you need to get some rack time first. Just do it and don't even bother arguing with me. I'm not sure either of you is safe behind a wheel right now, and Hank'll have my ass if I let you try."

"I'll get them where they need to go, Cap."

Collins whirled; none of them had heard or seen Stoker coming up behind him. The B-Shift Captain focused on Stoker, evaluating him, and then nodded.

"Okay." He looked around and then relaxed his shoulders a little and gave them something that slightly resembled a smile. "Go on, get out of here. You're relieved."