

# The Best of Intentions

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## Part Three

# Chapter 10: Fine

Karen Stanley's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen and her cheeks were streaked with the silvery trails of dried tears, all of which scared the living daylights out of him. In the four years that he'd known her, she'd never been anything other than perfectly composed and in control, and he couldn't shake the mental image of exactly how lifeless Hank Stanley had looked when he'd been lifted into the ambulance.

"He's in Recovery," she hiccupped. She sniffed and blew her nose on a damp handkerchief. "They say – both doctors said – that the surgery went well and that he should make a full recovery, whatever that means. One of them, the second one, said that he was going to be fine."

Her expression and her tightly clenched left fist clearly said that she wouldn't believe that until she actually saw her husband with her own eyes.

"But I think his definition of fine and mine are very different."

He almost opened his mouth to explain the difference between 'fine' and '*going to be fine*,' but then his common sense kicked in so he nodded sympathetically instead.

"Just so you know," he said, trying for that reassuring tone that Cap used in these situations and pretty sure he was coming up short, "Roy DeSoto treated him on scene and I understand Dr. Brackett treated him in the ER, so he was in excellent hands."

She hiccupped again and pressed the handkerchief against her mouth.

"That bad, huh?" she said, voice wobbling a little and she huddled into her long cardigan as if she was cold.

He had no idea how to answer that. There was an unspoken rule for dealing with the wives of injured firefighters: reassure them but never outright lie to them, and there was no way he could do the first without violating the second.

"You're telling me that he was hurt badly enough," she stumbled on the words, "that he needed the best paramedic in the county and the best ER doctor in the state?"

"That's not what I meant..." he said immediately.

"Stop torturing him, Karen. He's trying to reassure you."

He didn't recognize the plump blonde woman who'd spoken up. Crammed full of the wives and other immediate family members of the injured firemen, as well as the extra seating to support them all, Brackett's office was stuffy and overly warm in a way that seemed more uncomfortable than the fire he'd not too recently left. The main ER waiting area was overflowing with off-duty fireman, from the rank and file up through at least one Deputy Chief, some of whom he recognized as he pushed his way through the noise and that particular concentration of testosterone and stifled anxiety that always accompanied a line of duty injury.

"Kathy Wozniak, Mike Stoker," Karen said, waving her hand between the two of them. "Mike is Hank's Engineer. Kathy's husband is..."

"Captain Wozniak from Station 22," he said, in nodding recognition. "Our other paramedic, John Gage, was the one that took care of your husband, ma'am."

"I don't want to be reassured," Karen said, voice firming into something recognizable. "No offense, Mike; I just want to see Hank. Actually, I'd really like for this entire day to be a bad dream. Do you know that Roy and John treated a friend of mine this afternoon? I still can't believe it; she's way too young for something like that," she shook her head, eyes widened in disbelief, "and I was so upset about Jackie the whole rest of the day and then...I mean I always knew it could happen but I guess I never *really* thought...." She swallowed and her expression slipped a little. "I need to see him, I need to hear my husband tell me that he's going to be okay, not some surgeon I've never met before."

"Me too," Mrs. Wozniak said fervently. "But, I wouldn't mind talking to your paramedic. I can't seem to get a straight answer about what happened to Dan."

And now he'd dug himself and Gage a hole that he wasn't sure they could climb out from.

He pushed his way from a crouch in front of Mrs. Stanley to his feet. "Let me see what I can find out."

And then because even if he wasn't the guy in charge of A shift, he *was* the second in command, he stepped carefully over handbags and the extended legs of people he didn't recognize – probably family members of the guys from 22s – until he reached Mateo Lopez, the eldest of Marco's siblings standing to the left of his mother's chair.

"¿Cómo es tu madre?"

"Preocupado. ¿Cualquier noticia sobre mi hermano?"

Mike shook his head and fumbled a little for the right words. "*Voy a ver qué puedo aprender.*"

"¿Es el fuego sigue ardiendo?"

He nodded; he hadn't heard any news in the last hour that would indicate otherwise and even when the upper floors were brought under control, that cable vault would burn for a while.

Mateo nodded back at him and Stoker knelt briefly next to Marisol Lopez who smiled at him with watery eyes and patted his cheek. He didn't need to say anything else since he knew she'd heard every word he'd said to her eldest son; he was just paying respects to the Lopez family matriarch.

The Kelly family was four chairs over and he made his excuses as he sidled sideways and over and through the family bunched into those chairs, and by Steve Ferrara who was hunkered down in front of a woman whose face was buried in her hands, long blonde hair covering both sides, shrouding her face from view. Kelleher's wife? Maybe his girlfriend; could be either. He'd heard Mattie Kelleher's girlfriend looked a lot like the wife from whom he'd separated, but he'd tried to stay away from the salacious details. Chet would know.

He nodded to Ferrara whose expression was not particularly encouraging and then reached Mrs. Kelly.

Wiry, nervous Eileen Kelly didn't quite look old enough to be Chet's mother until one actually met her eyes, which was difficult as they moved continually around the room, anxious and seeking. Her smile was a slight thing and her fingers fluttered in her lap, moving through the decades of the rosary and mouthing the words to prayers

she knew better than her children's names. The beads of it were Connemara marble, Chet had told him; a present he'd given his mother on the day he'd successfully completed his probationary year.

"Michael, is there any word? Any updates on my Chester?"

He ignored her predilection for full formal names; the only one who escaped it was Cap because she was more than happy to use his formal title instead.

"No, ma'am. I'm going to see if I can find out if there are any updates on Chet or the others, but wanted to check on you and your family first."

He pushed his way to the door of Brackett's office and through it to the relative coolness of the waiting room. Scanning the corridor, packed with more fireman than a standard First Alarm assignment, he sought and finally found someone in a white coat, standing next to John Gage who was leaning onto the counter where Dixie McCall usually held court.

"...though the severity of the tear is not entirely clear," Brackett was saying to Gage who was nodding. "We're going to have to wait until the swelling and inflammation go down before we determine whether surgery is required."

"Probably twisted or turned when the blast hit," Gage said as Stoker approached them.

Brackett shrugged. "There's really no way to know; at best we'd only be speculating. The head of Orthopedics will make the call but I think he'll try non-surgical treatment first, physical therapy and a knee brace, and continue monitoring." He grimaced. "Which would be fine for the average guy off the street, but knowing the physical demands of your jobs..."

"Yeah," Gage sighed. "You're talking months of trying a non-surgical solution and then probably a lot more months, maybe a year to recover if you have to do the surgery." He looked past Brackett and tried to paste on a smile that wasn't very convincing. "Hey, Mike. You're just in time for the latest updates. Chet's got an Anterior Cruciate Ligament tear in his right leg, meaning he *totally* messed up his knee without actually breaking any bones. He also has two broken ribs, first and second degree burns on his legs and right forearm and a ton of bumps and bruises."

So Chet was essentially fine except for not being able to walk or run or climb on his right leg, which was a prerequisite for doing his job. Months with no Chet Kelly at the Station loomed in his mind: quiet months, prank free, no Gage and Kelly sniping; it sounded dreary, it sounded awful.

Brackett sighed heavily and paced around the counter to the coffee pot where he poured himself a cup, but Stoker was conscious that his eyes never left them. He wasn't sure if it was the hollow look in Gage's eyes or the raspy voice but Brackett was eyeing his paramedic as if covertly diagnosing him.

"Marco's got a concussion; he lost consciousness for a couple of minutes and has some of the standard symptoms – headache, dizziness, light sensitivity, you know the list – plus a fractured ulna, bruising, muscle strain, and so on. The biggest worry is that he ate some of the smoke from that fire and the doc from Pulmonology is worried about his O2 Sats."

"Exactly how much smoke?" Mike asked carefully, trying to tamp down on his rising panic. "They were all wearing air bottles, you saw that, and I know for a fact Marco checks his gear as thoroughly as I do."

"The blast might have knocked his mask off, Mike," Gage said as he leaned further onto the counter, rocking gently back and forth. "You know that. Or perforated the hose. Who knows? We both know what chemicals were in the air inside there. Even a few minutes of breathing that air..."

Brackett stepped forward. "The paramedic on scene..."

"Eddie Shafer," Gage said.

"... intubated him as soon as he determined that Marco was showing a hint of upper airway edema. We did a bronchoscopy and saw a little inflammation, which we're treating, but it's confined to the upper airway. We don't see any in the lower airway passage or the alveoli. We'll continue to monitor it and his O2 sats, but for now he's doing okay."

Okay, but not fine, Stoker noted. Not even *'going to be fine.'*

"Their families want to see them," he said. "I'm not sure who talked to Cap's wife or Mrs. Wozniak but they have a lot of questions and I'd like to get some answers for them, but most of all, they want to see their husbands. When is that going to be possible?"

Gage stood up suddenly and spun around to face Brackett, almost colliding with the doctor's coffee cup. He immediately raised his arms, apology or just making sure he couldn't do any further damage, Stoker wasn't exactly sure, and then rested his back against the counter. Over his shoulder, he said, "Doc was about to give me the update on Cap when you got here, Mike."

Brackett drained the coffee cup and then replaced it by the pot.

"He came through the surgery very well."

"Endoscopy?"

Brackett shook his head. "No time, Johnny. Dr. Cleary did an exploratory laparotomy and ended up doing a splenectomy, surgically repairing a laceration in the liver and resecting a piece of the small intestine that had been perforated..."

"Did he have to do an ileostomy?"

"No need. There was enough healthy small intestine left to sew the ends back together."

Gage let out a deep breath, relaxing back against the counter. "Good, I'd hate to be the one who had to explain that to his wife."

"Somebody needs to," Stoker interjected. "Someone needs to tell her what's going on. I've never see her so..." He mentally flailed, searching for the right word, "...distracted."

"Well, of course she is," Gage said. "I mean, what kind of wife wouldn't be kind of scared, considering."

"Actually, she was fine," Dixie said from behind Stoker. She strolled up to the counter, raised one perfectly groomed brow and Gage straightened and backed away from her counter, coming around to the front of it where he belonged. Then she frowned. "Where's Roy?"

"Home," Gage said. "Mike dropped him off on our way here."

"He wanted to see his wife, let her know that he was okay," Stoker added. "He said he'd get her to drive him over, meet us here."

"Smart man," Dixie said.

"So how did Cap's wife go from fine to distraught?" Gage said, scratching the back of his head and then rolling his neck, loosening the accumulated tension of the last twenty-four hours.

"Well maybe fine is a little bit of an exaggeration, but she's obviously made of tough stuff and held together pretty well when Dr. Cleary talked to her about the abdominal surgery, even asked a few insightful questions about the long term risks of his spleen being removed..."

"So..." Gage said and was instantly silenced with a look.

"It was when Dr. Hickman from Orthopedics finished talking to her about Hank's dislocated shoulder, fractured wrist and the fractured metacarpals and phalanges in his left hand..."

Suddenly Brackett groaned and covered his eyes with his right hand. "Don't tell me..."

"Oh, you better believe I'm going to tell you," Dixie said sharply. "They had to cut his wedding ring off to set the fractures and that *idiot*..."

Brackett winced, obviously and almost exaggeratingly winced.

"...tossed the pieces of the ring in with the medical waste." She huffed and glared at Brackett. "Again."

"Uh-oh," Gage said, quietly.

"Dix..." Brackett said.

"It's a wedding ring, Kel," she spat out, teeth clenched. "What kind of idiot..."

"A *bachelor* kind of idiot," he immediately replied, and then softened his response. "I'll talk to him."

"Good," she said. And then she smiled, one with a slight edge. "And when he complains to you about how I made his scrub nurse sort through all of the medical waste to retrieve the pieces of that ring..."

Stoker finally released the breath he'd been holding and Brackett started to laugh.

"You didn't!" he said, between laughs, in a voice that said he darn well knew she had.

"You bet your ass, I did," she said. "And after I sterilized them, I gave the pieces of that ring to Karen Stanley so she could have it remade if possible. *That's* when she started to cry."

Stoker swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and all four of them looked away for the necessary second or two that it took to regain composure and some measure of professional distance.

Then he cleared his throat.

"So," he said, "as I mentioned a little earlier, Cap's wife and Mrs. Wozniak would really like to see their husbands. And Marco and Chet's mothers didn't say so, but I'm pretty sure they'd really like to see their sons. I'm guessing Kelleher, Ostrander and van der Heijden's families want to see them too. When is that going to be possible?"

Dixie glanced at Brackett who looked back at her and they both frowned.

"Mike's our acting Cap," Gage said quickly.

Brackett looked at Gage and then back at Stoker. "Well, I'm not the treating physician..."

"You're the head of ER," Stoker interrupted, politely, firmly.

"Okay," Brackett said, taking a step back and then giving Stoker an obvious once-over. "I'm not the treating physician for Captain Wozniak so I'm not up to date on his condition – other than some generalities that I'm not at liberty to discuss since you're not the acting Captain for his station – but the treating physician, Dr. Schroeder, and I can meet with Mrs. Wozniak, answer her questions." He took a breath. "Your Captain's still in recovery and he's..."

"Groggy," Dixie interrupted. "Still very groggy. I just came from there."

Brackett grimaced. "I don't know whether that's the effects from the anesthesia or if his concussion is a contributing factor, but the *when* is going to depend on him, on when he's ready to be moved to a room. Probably ICU, since what he's presented with has been fairly typical primary blast injuries, meaning we're going to need to monitor him closely over the next 48 hours..."

"There was *no* sign of lung injury," Gage interrupted. "And no apnea or bradycardia."

"No," Brackett agreed. "But there are classic blast pattern abdominal injuries and what initially looked like a TM rupture. It turned out to be a hemotympanum without perforation but we'll have an ENT specialist in later today and run another skull series, just in case. And of course, we'll need to monitor his lungs."

Gage caught his eye and Stoker nodded unhappily, understanding and agreeing. Waiting and watching for possible new, life-threatening symptoms to manifest was not something that would go over well with Cap's wife, and it sure didn't fit his definition of 'going to be fine.'

"Chet is in the process of being moved to a room right now. As soon as he's settled," Brackett and Dixie exchanged another glance and she nodded, "his family can see him. He's awake but in a lot of discomfort so I'm going to guess that his doctor would ask for the visits to be fairly short. Dix'll be able to tell you the room."

Stoker nodded, waiting.

Brackett shifted and his face went through a few expressions, finally ending in a sigh.

"Marco's intubated and is receiving high-flow humidified oxygen to displace the carbon monoxide from his hemoglobin. Do you think his family is up for seeing that?"

Good question, Stoker thought and glanced over at Gage who was obviously worried. It was never easy seeing someone you knew personally breathing through a tube. Bad enough when it was a colleague or friend, it had to be substantially worse when it was a family member, especially a child, even a fully-grown adult child.

"I don't know," he said. "But I think the Pulmonologist and I should talk to Marco's brother and let him make that call."

"Fair enough," Brackett said. "I'll give Rosenblatt a call, have him meet you down here."

It was as if a silent signal had been given. Brackett turned around and picked up the phone and Dixie walked away, purposefully, but he had no idea where she was going. Gage shrugged and walked towards Stoker.

"You know, I'm *not* acting Captain," Stoker said in low voice, just for Gage's ears.

"So?" he said with a shrug. "You're our Engineer and we all know that you're gonna make a hell of a Captain one day, Mike. That's close enough in my book."

And then he walked past, headed towards the Ambulance Only entry where Roy DeSoto had just arrived.

Stoker stood there and watched him, wondering once again exactly why everyone on his shift seemed to think that he *wanted* to be a Captain.



# Chapter 11: Costs

"Where's Joanne?" he asked, an honest question that also gave him time to run a quick evaluation of his partner.

Roy looked better than he had at the scene or at the station, a small subtle change that he couldn't quite categorize as a physical symptom or lack of one. His eyes were brighter and his expression was not as tight. He looked more like Roy and a lot less like some wax figure dummy version of his partner, which had about the same amount of animation as Roy had shown a few hours ago.

"She's parking the car," Roy said, with a look that said he knew exactly what Gage was doing. "You know, you could just *ask* me how I'm doing."

He shrugged. That would be a waste of time. "You'd just tell me that you're fine, when we both know you're not."

Roy sighed and then looked past him into the ER. "A lot of people here from the department. What's the word on our guys? Where are their families?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned up against the wall to wait for Joanne, realizing the second after he'd done so that leaning was the first step towards relaxing and one step closer to sitting, which would be a slippery slope that led directly to lying down and that if he wanted to stay in motion, he'd better not start on that slope. He forced himself to stand upright again with a sigh.

"Chet's wrecked his right knee, an ACL tear. That's gonna screw him up for months, if not longer," he said sourly. "Cap's out of surgery. The hemorrhaging was coming from his spleen, a lacerated liver and perforated small intestine, which explains a lot. And because he's been textbook primary blast injuries so far, they're worried about Blast Lung 'cause," he shrugged, "you never know." He then took a deep breath before moving onto the bad news. "Marco's carboxyhemoglobin levels are about 25%..."

Roy's mouth dropped open. "What the...?"

"Yeah, I don't know if he didn't have a good seal on his mask or if his breathing apparatus got damaged in the blast, but it's not good. The good news is that while there's some edema, it seems mostly contained to his larynx, not the lower airway or alveoli. He's on high flow O2 and we're just gonna have to wait and see if that clears out the carbon monoxide."

Roy nodded his head in the way he did when he was processing things, not actually agreeing with what had been said.

"Their families are Brackett's office because we have enough guys here..." he waved his arm to include the waiting room, "to practically send replacements over to the scene, and because, you know, they're a little shaken up and because every so often, some reporters come through to get reaction statements."

He'd overheard the hospital administrator - O'Neill? O'Connor? O'Rourke? Something like that – pestering Dixie about the fireman cluttering up the waiting room and the corridor. He hadn't heard what Dixie had said but he'd seen her face and the way the guy who definitely didn't look Irish reacted.

"I think the hospital's working on setting aside a conference room or office for the Department so they actually have room for patients and stuff."

Roy was giving him the reciprocal once over so he glared his recognition.

"What? You can do it to me but I can't do it to you?"

"Roy, I'm *fine*," he said, recognizing that the fact that his voice sounded like a rusty hinge probably wasn't his best means of convincing anyone of that fact. "I just need some more coffee or something."

"Or something," Roy agreed, turning to wrap his arms around his wife as she came through the doors.

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He woke, cramped and feeling as if his entire body had been tied into a knot and then baked in a 400-degree oven. There really wasn't any room to stretch his limbs either, since Brackett's office was still crammed full of people, some coming, some going, others holding court in the chairs they'd occupied since very early morning. And he didn't think he could actually stand up without assistance.

"About time you woke up," Roy's voice said from somewhere over his right shoulder.

He'd turn to acknowledge it if he could. If his right shoulder would slink back into its socket and let him turn his head.

His hands seemed to work though, and so did his fingers, so he rubbed his eyes and then the rest of his face as if he was rubbing life back into his skin.

"Wha time izzit?"

"Two o'clock," an unknown female voice from somewhere to his left replied.

It was a nice voice, a voice that definitely warranted further investigation, when he'd untangled himself and figured out how to move. And then he paused, trying to figure out if that was two o'clock AM or PM.

"Fourteen hundred hours," Roy said. "That's about four hours of sleep so you're right on schedule..."

His stomach growled, loud enough that a woman across the room looked up, as if to identify what on earth was making that noise or maybe hoping it was some kind of air conditioning unit turning on. He could have used a little A/C; he felt as if his face was burning.

"Yes sirree," Roy chortled. "Right on time."

Something else was making its needs known with an even greater sense of urgency, and Gage squirmed in his seat until his feet were flat on the ground. Then he tilted himself forward, out of the chair, grabbing the armrests at the very last minute to keep from falling and to help launch himself to his feet. And he managed to do all of that despite the quiet laugh that was being masked as a cough by his partner.

"Laugh it up, Roy," he said, not really recognizing his own voice.

Except Roy being Roy, didn't really laugh, not loud anyway; he snickered quietly instead.

He used his hands as much as his eyes, reaching out and grabbing the backs of chairs, muttering "hey, how are you doing?" to those both familiar and stranger as he made his way out of the oven that was Brackett's office and into the relief of the corridor and towards the men's room.

He really needed three arms, he'd decided: his left hand jammed up against the cool tile of the wall to keep him standing upright, his right hand to take care of the reason he was there in the first place, and a third hand to cover his eyes from the glaring brightness. Was it entirely necessary to light a men's room as if it was a surgical suite? Closing his eyes only brought partial relief because he could still see the glare, backlit in red, through his eyelids.

"That was a hell of an expensive rescue, Glenn."

He heard the voices as they came through the door but he didn't turn his head or open his eyes, assuming they were there for the same reason he was. It was impolite to actually, you know, really look at the other guys in the men's room.

"That rescue cost the Department seven experienced men, almost two entire Engine Companies including their Captains, for God knows how long, some maybe permanently. You know it's brushfire season, you know we're already shorthanded. What the hell were you thinking sending all of them in? Where do you think we're going to find replacements?"

Awkward, awkward, awkward, was the only word running through his head. That and a red flare of anger, as his brain stumbled into coherency from his all too brief four-hour nap. Those were not the voices of your average firefighters and this *really* wasn't where he wanted to be.

The other man said something quietly that Gage couldn't quite make out.

"No," the first, louder voice replied. "The civilian that Squad 22 went in after was just pronounced: carbon monoxide poisoning. Two men went in after a dead man, and then it was just compounded by multiple search and rescue efforts, sending in one team after another."

If his eyes weren't closed already, Gage would have closed them now. Instead he sagged a little against his left arm and finished up at the urinal. Now what? He couldn't just walk by the guys who were talking near the door, could he?

He thought about it for a minute. Yeah, he could.

He took his time about it though, gave the men at the door fair warning by detouring to the sink to splash water on his face. The cool water felt wonderful and he had to stop himself from filling the sink and submerging his head in it as he might at home or at the Station. Patting his face dry with a paper towel, he glanced into the mirror over the sink and saw the two men watching him, with narrowed and appraising glances.

As he walked to the door, Chief Miller, the quieter of the two men both wearing Chiefs uniforms, nodded to him.

"Gage."

Since he and Chief Miller weren't all that close, he assumed that still being in uniform and wearing a name badge had made the recognition a bit easier on the Chief, who had worked a shift at least as long as he had, probably longer, and looked it.

He nodded back. "Chief," he rasped. "Fire's knocked down?"

Miller nodded. "A little before 1300. Telephone Company's waiting to get in there, to start recovery operations, but the crews on the scene are still doing overhaul." He paused. "51s did good work, Gage. My prayers are with the men who were injured." His lips thinned. "And my wife is up in the ICU waiting room with some of their families. God willing, we'll have them back with us on the job soon."

Gage had never met the other man but his insignia was that of a Deputy Chief and he just nodded grimly in Gage's direction.

"Thank you, sir," he said, to Miller. And then because his partner wasn't there to stop him, he said, "Ferrara and Kelleher might have gone in after a dead man, but they didn't know it. We never do, but we go in and try to get them out. At least their families know that we tried to save them. Or him, in this case." He scratched his head and added a belated, "sir."

"Understood, Gage," Miller said.

Even he knew that was a dismissal so he nodded and slipped sideways between the Chiefs and through the door.

Back in the hallway, he took a deep breath as it occurred to him that he really had no idea who the other Chief was and he might have just done something Roy or Cap would consider incredibly inappropriate, idiotic even.

Sighing, he decided to go in search of something to eat and stuck his hand in his pocket to check for money.

"Johnny!"

He looked up and swung his head back and forth in the corridor, recognizing Stoker's voice but not seeing him.

"Hey, Gage. In the waiting area."

Of course. Hard to pick out one firefighter in a sea of firefighters. Even off duty, they tended to group together and somehow blend. Stoker was talking to a fireman slightly taller than him, dark-haired, mustached, grimy as if he'd just come off duty and vaguely familiar.

"Jack Haggerty, Johnny Gage," Stoker said. "Johnny, Jack is Snorkel 127's..."

"Lieutenant," Gage said, his brain finally firing and connecting the dots. He unleashed a real smile on the other man. "Hey," he said, reaching out to shake hands. "We owe you and your guys big time."

Haggerty grasped hands but shook his head. "Like I was telling this guy," he said with a nod towards Stoker. "Once you start that, you end up with 22s owing 51s and then 51s owing 127s and then 127s owing 51s since I understand you and your partner took care of my guys when they were stupid enough to eat some of that smoke and fall into a support beam and then who the hell knows who owes what."

"Nope," Gage said, still grinning. "I'm pretty sure we still end up owing you and yours for getting our guys out of there. How about you let me buy you a cup of coffee or something to eat in the cafeteria?" His left hand fumbled for the wallet he was pretty sure was in his back pocket and he saw Stoker smirk slightly in amusement.

"Another time," Haggerty said with a final handshake. "I just stopped in to check on my guys, who it turns out were already released, and check on yours. I'm pulling OT at 18s tomorrow so I need to get a nap, then some food and then some more sleep." His eyes shifted back to Stoker. "Keep me posted, okay?"

Stoker nodded and the two exchanged the kind of shoulder slaps that told Gage they knew each other pretty well.

"Hey, Mike," he said after a moment, and then he stopped and looked around and decided that maybe a little privacy was warranted. "How about you buy us some coffee and something to eat and I pay you back when I remember where I left my wallet, okay?"

In the cafeteria, over coffee and cheeseburgers, a side of fries and a slice of slightly battered blueberry pie, he told Stoker what he'd overheard and Stoker being Stoker, just listened and nodded at the right times.

"I'm glad I'm not a Chief," Stoker said when Gage was finally finished.

Stunned wordless, he over-poured the creamer he was adding to his coffee and it splashed onto the table.

"Shit," he said, under his breath because there were nurses and doctors and all sorts of people he didn't know sitting at the tables around them and he'd probably exceeded his quota for annoying people in positions of authority today. "See what happens when you go along and just say something so completely.... I don't know, out there, unexpected, not related. You know what I mean."

Stoker handed him a fistful of napkins and helped him blot up the cream.

"A non sequitur?"

"Yeah," Gage said, waving his hand in Stoker's direction in agreement.

"It wasn't actually a non sequitur since it was directly relevant to what you were saying," Stoker countered. "I don't know why Cap wants that job."

Gage blinked. Somewhere he'd lost the conversational thread, or maybe Mike had hijacked it.

"Well, I know why he *wants* the job, but every step away from the line just removes you from the actuality of firefighting. It becomes more about planning and deploying resources or ensuring you have sufficient resources to cover the fires. It's all about looking at the forecasts and run rates and where are the busiest stations and why are *they* the busiest ones and what do you do to distribute that volume of calls and manpower more equitably, and less about personally saving lives and property." Stoker shifted back in his chair and stretched his legs under the table. "I think the company officer is the boundary between fighting fires and managing firefighting. After that, you lose the hands on lessons, the immediate interaction with the people who depend on us."

It was, without a doubt, the longest bit of talking he'd ever heard from Stoker.

"Which, I understand is absolutely required," Stoker continued. "We couldn't do our jobs if we didn't have the necessary resources or had to cover a territory twice what we have, meaning double the calls or more. I just think when you spend so much time planning and allocating, you lose track of why we do what we do."

He nodded, mostly because he thought that's what Stoker was expecting. He was still processing the words and teasing out Stoker's underlying meaning.

"Plus, what else would we have done?" he said. "Not gone in after the guy?"

Stoker smiled at him, some kind of odd mixture of amusement and understanding, and then nodded. "You're right. From every point of assessment, the building was structurally sound, the search teams were properly equipped and trained, and it was about as safe as you're ever going to get at a working fire to send men inside. What else would we have done?"

Gage crumpled up the creamer stained napkins, tossed the wad onto the table and crooked an eyebrow. "And speaking of the search teams..."

"Yeah," Stoker nodded. "Forgot you slept through some of the updates. Why don't we head upstairs and I'll fill you in."

They shared space in the elevator with an older couple who were obviously fretting about whomever they were visiting, so they kept the conversation non-specific until the doors opened and the couple stepped out on the third floor. Mike stabbed the button for six again.

"Cap and Marco are on six, in ICU, so let's start there," he said as soon as the door closed behind the other visitors. "Cap woke up again, and this time he stayed awake long enough for Karen to spend some time with him, which is good because she's trying to do the Captain's wife thing and support Marco's and Chet's families but I think she's still pretty scared herself."

Gage stretched against the elevator wall, still unkinking his back and shoulders. "He had major surgery. Probably going to sleep a lot the next few days."

"Yep," Stoker said. "They've got Marco in ICU too, monitoring his lungs and blood gasses, which from what Roy said still aren't all that great."

"It takes time to clear out the CO," he said, an automatic reassurance that didn't do much to calm the stab of alarm he himself felt at the update. Carbon monoxide on its own was bad enough, but there were dealing with a whole slew of other toxic inhalants on top of CO.

The elevator doors opened and they both turned automatically to the right, all too familiar with the exact location of the waiting room for the ICU.

# Chapter 12: Two Minutes

"You don't sound so good."

Chet coughed again, hunching his shoulders and curling forward with each cough as if it would lessen the pain. Finally, he tilted his face towards Roy and glared. "Really? What gave me away?"

"Did they check your lungs?"

He was supposed to be visiting and reassuring but he couldn't help but worry. Chet had been inside that building when the fuel tank blew and was as much at risk for pulmonary injury as Marco or Cap.

"Every freakin' hour," Chet said, wincing as he leaned back against the pillows stacked up behind him. "If it's not a blood test, it's blowing in some damn tube or some other doctor I've never seen before, and probably won't ever see again, sticking an ice cold stethoscope thingy against my skin and asking me to take a deep breath or six. With broken ribs!" Wide-eyed and put upon, Kelly batted his eyelashes in a way that probably bought him some sympathy from the less experienced nurses and even elicited a mild twinge from Roy who knew better. "And they keep checking my pee," he moaned.

Roy laughed. He couldn't help it, and then tucked his chin down into his chest to quiet down. Alex van der Heijden was sleeping in one of the beds on the other side of the four-bed ward near the room's only window, which streamed late afternoon sunlight onto van der Heijden's wife. She glanced over at Roy, puzzled and possibly slightly annoyed that anyone could find humor in this situation.

"I keep telling them that I'm the knee guy," Kelly said, gesturing at his right leg, propped up and immobilized, the knee puffy and swollen under the bandaging. "Not the lung guy."

"Yeah, well you know how it goes with blast injuries."

"Forty-eight hours." Kelly sighed. "Well, it's not like I'd be walking outta here in less than that anyway." He morosely waved a hand in the direction of his right leg. "Or walking at all, any time soon."

"You don't know that," Roy said, in a practiced and professionally reassuring tone that worked pretty well on most of his patients.

Chet Kelly blew his lips together derisively.

"Hey, Roy, give me a little credit here. Even if I didn't have a little anatomical knowledge from my first aid training, I read the papers, especially the sports section. I read all the time about these types of injuries ending a guy's season, and sometimes his entire career."

Roy leaned back in his chair and let his lips relax into a smile.

"You're right," he said, absolutely straight faced. "You'll probably never play football in the National Football League." He felt his expression twitching behind his control. "But once the swelling goes down and the orthopedic surgeons re-evaluate your knee..."

"Yeah, yeah," Kelly said with a heartfelt sigh, looking away to his left, toward an empty bed. "Tell me the latest on Marco, Cap and the guys from 22s, okay?"

Roy nodded, understanding Chet's unspoken request.

"Marco's still intubated, still getting high flow O2 and there's been some improvement in his carboxyhemoglobin levels..."

"But not enough," Chet interrupted. "Right? That's what Bobby Harrison and some of the guys visiting Ostrander said. What about a hyperbaric chamber?"

Roy rubbed his face and sighed. "It's still too early to make that call, Chet. It takes time to displace the CO from his hemoglobin, especially when he probably also inhaled chlorine and some other toxins. The docs are treating him and he's making progress; just a little slower than any of us would like. There are complications sometimes with hyperbaric treatment. They don't want to use that unless they really have to."

Kelly's chin dipped towards his chest and he looked away every time Roy tried to make eye contact. Not good.

"So what else did Bobby Harrison and the guys visiting Ostrander say?"

There was a slight movement, just enough that he could actually see the distress in Kelly's eyes that he wouldn't freely admit.

"They said Kelleher's in bad shape," Kelly said in a low voice, pitched to not carry across the ward. "That he hasn't regained consciousness and someone overheard one of the doctors mention hypoxia."

Roy nodded, frowning. He'd heard the same news shared in whispers and undertones. Brackett's face had just twitched when pressed for an answer that he wouldn't give.

"I didn't hear that from any of the doctors," he said, trying to walk a line between acknowledging the element of truth and giving it some sort of official sanction by weight of his paramedical credentials. "But that's always a worry with a severe smoke inhalation case." He waited a beat. "Marco's been conscious since they got him to the triage area, you know that, right?"

Kelly nodded, looking unconvinced.

"They said both Captains were messed up pretty bad. That Captain Wozniak," he shot a quick glance towards van der Heijden's wife and dropped his voice even further, "broke his back, that he's paralyzed." A rapid swallow and an accusing glance. "And that Cap almost died on the way in."

Roy shifted in his seat, still unnerved and not exactly ready to talk about it. "Cap's going to be okay," he said. "He had some internal bleeding that meant we had to get him to Rampart right away, but the surgeons took care of it. He's going to be fine."

Kelly licked his lips.

"So why are they all in ICU?"

"Marco's intubated and they really want constant eyes on him while they monitor his progress, okay?" He waited for the reluctant nod. "Cap had that surgery and they're keeping an eye on his lungs because of the blast, same as you. He's passing his neuros, his chest x-rays look good; he should be fine. And I don't think anyone knows whether Captain Wozniak will be paralyzed; it's just too soon to tell."



"Roy," Kelly said, breathless with incredulity. "He broke his *back*."

"He broke a vertebra," Roy said. "People do that without damaging the spinal cord."

"And go back to work? Active duty for the Department?"

He didn't really have an answer for that so he let Kelly read it in his expression.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Kelly snorted. "Maybe he and I can sit next to each other working a desk at Headquarters. Or maybe since he's a Captain, I'll be the one fetching his coffee or answering his phone. I bet I'll be able to walk well enough to do that."

He sighed in exasperation. He was supposed to be the one with patience but between Gage and Kelly, he seemed to exhaust it on a regular basis.

"Kind of jumping the gun, aren't you, Chet? You think you can wait more than..." he glanced at his wristwatch, "seventeen or so hours before deciding that your career as you know it is over?"

Kelly shrugged. "Hey, an ACL tear is nothing to take lightly."

"Neither is a broken leg," Roy said. "Somehow Johnny went back to work after breaking his leg. Twice."

That was either going to generate a patented Chet Kelly rebuttal or silence. He waited a second, studied the narrowed blue eyes and mentally congratulated himself. He waited another minute or two to let Chet chew things over in his head.

"They let Ostrander go home?"

Kelly nodded, slowly, distractedly.

"Yeah, about an hour or two ago. Put his elbow back in place, splinted it up, gave him some good drugs and his wife took him home. He'll probably be out a couple of weeks, maybe even long enough to be home on Thanksgiving, or at least that's what his wife hopes."

And speaking of wives, Roy really needed to go check on his. She'd managed to get someone to pick up the kids from school and watch them so that she could stay here at the hospital for him and for the families of his injured shift mates. He'd left her in the ICU waiting room, splitting her time between Karen Stanley and Marisol Lopez.

"Two minutes," Kelly said in a murmur, as if he was saying it to himself.

He raised an eyebrow. "Two minutes what?"

Kelly looked up, met his eyes finally.

"Ostrander said that if they'd found Kelleher even two minutes earlier, that they could have gotten him out of the building before that interior wall collapsed. If they hadn't been trapped in there until we dug them out, maybe his smoke inhalation wouldn't be so bad."

Roy nodded. That two minute difference might have been enough that the rest of 22s crew would not have been injured, and 51's Engine crew wouldn't have had to go in after them.

"Yeah," he said, searching for some way to keep Chet from dwelling on his ACL tear and what-ifs. He scratched the back of his neck and thought for a minute. "Hey, where did you guys go after you put Captain Wozniak's Stokes on the Snorkel? I noticed that you weren't hanging around the window."

At the time, he'd been puzzled. After the explosion, after he'd had time to recall everything that had happened, he'd been stunned at how lucky they'd been, struck dumb with gratitude.

"Back to the Switch Control Room," Kelly said. "You know how long it takes the Snorkel to go up and down so Cap decided it was a good use of time to make sure that we weren't leaving any extrication tools inside, ours or 22's. We picked up 22s stuff..." his eyes slid away for a second, "and our halligan, which Cap gave me a little shit about, and were on our way back when that fuel tank blew." He paused and then met Roy's eyes. "I know what you're trying to say here, Roy."

"Two minutes," Roy said.

"Yeah, okay, I get it. If that fuel tank blew two minutes earlier than when it actually did, you're right. We would have been near that window, still loading the guys from 22s." He took a deep breath. "Heck, if Cap didn't make us go after those tools, we would have been standing there when it did go." He was silent for a few seconds. "Hell of a long way to fall."

"And if the fuel tank blew two minutes *later* than when it actually happened..."

Kelly frowned. "Wozniak's Stokes wouldn't have fallen 'cause you would've already moved him to the treatment area..."

"But you guys would have been *back* from picking up that stuff; you'd have been standing at that window."

Kelly shook his head roughly. "Don't think so, Roy. Snorkel's slow but not that slow. We'd probably have been riding down in the bucket, safe and sound." He paused and in the quiet, Roy could hear the screech of metal chair legs pushed across the floor, followed by the clacking of heels as van der Heijden's wife made her way to the door.

"It was a nice try though," Kelly said, with an encouraging shrug. "Things just don't line up that way; it's not like there's any logic to them."

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He would have normally taken the stairs from the third floor to the sixth floor but he was having a hard enough time lifting his feet the centimeters necessary to walk without tripping; stairs were beyond him right now.

The elevator chimed, the doors slid open and his penance for his laziness, for his exhaustion was standing in front of him.

"Hello, Karen," he said, as he entered that cramped space, filled by the emotional presence of the one person he hadn't specifically been avoiding but hadn't sought out either, and two men, one who looked vaguely familiar and the other a total stranger.

He glanced at the panel: the sixth floor button was pushed. Of course it was. Based on the shoulder purse she carried, she'd gone down to the cafeteria or maybe even left the hospital. Either way she was on her way back to ICU.

"Roy," she said. "I'm so glad we ran into you."

Her voice shamed him a little. She sounded happy and grateful to see him.

"Edmund," she said, "I'd like to introduce you to Roy DeSoto. Roy's the paramedic that brought Jackie in earlier..." she paused. "God, I mean yesterday. It's been a day already, hasn't it."

And then Roy was shaking hands with the stranger, a middle-aged man with who looked disheveled; his suit rumpled as if he'd slept in it, or had been wearing it for the last twenty-four hours, maybe more, maybe both. He smelled like burned coffee and stale cigarette smoke, as if both had soaked into his thinning hair or his suit jacket.

"Karen tells me that having a paramedic respond so quickly, having the medical knowledge to know that Jackie had to go to the hospital right away, well," he paused, cleared his throat and glanced away for a second. "It might make the difference."

His throat felt as it was closing up as he reached for the standard responses, his deferrals to the doctors making the calls at the other end of the phone. Then his gaze flickered over to Karen's face and saw an echo of his own exhaustion, of his own emotions.

He licked his lips and tried for more than the usual answers.

"What made the difference was that Karen realized that your wife needed medical help. Fortunately, we were nearby and it was only a few minutes to the hospital. How is she doing?"

They reached the fourth floor, the Cardiac Care Unit, before Jackie's husband could tell him anything more than what he already knew, so he shook the man's hand and then leaned back against the wall.

"She's alive," Karen said. "But she's still in the Cardiac Care Unit."

For now, he thought. Morton had given him the prognosis and it wasn't encouraging, despite the pacemaker that had been inserted.

The elevator bell rang and the doors slid open to the sixth floor. Roy put his arm across the edge, holding the door open and Karen shifted her purse over her shoulder and walked through, followed closely by the other man in the elevator, the one that looked vaguely familiar.

They all turned automatically to the right and as if she'd caught him wondering, she said, "I went home. I needed to see the kids. After we..." Her expression shifted slightly. "Well, anyway I kept the kids home from school today and Sam's wife, Donna, stayed with them. I can't call home, obviously, so Sam's been going back and forth to let them know how their Dad's doing, that he's going be okay, which worked for most of the day." She gave him a tentative smile. "I just needed to see them."

He bet they'd needed to see her too. From the breadcrumbs she'd dropped, he finally placed the familiar looking guy. Sam had some gray in his dark blond hair, but his features and eyes were similar enough to Karen's that the relationship was obvious, if you looked for it. Roy was pretty sure he'd met Karen's brother at some Stanley hosted barbeque a few years back so he nodded a greeting, which was returned.

"They want to see him themselves, of course, but Kate has a cold and even though Hank was already exposed to her germs, that was before he was hurt." She blinked away the sudden sheen of moisture in her eyes. "The doctors told me about the vaccinations and the antibiotics they're giving him because of his spleen. They told me about the risk of sepsis and other complications. I can't risk her getting him sick. Not now. And Jack's only twelve..."

"Thirteen next week," Sam said in a quiet voice.

"...and I didn't know if there's an age restriction for ICU. That's probably something that I should know..."

Roy didn't know either. Some hospitals were starting to change policies on the number of allowed visitors and whether children under a certain age were permitted in certain units but he'd been fortunate enough that he'd never had to worry about whether his kids could visit him, or other family members, in a hospital and he'd just as soon continue in his ignorance.

"...so I told them when he's moved to a regular room, assuming Kate's over her cold, they can come every day to spend some time with him."

"I bet he'd like that," Roy said. "Is he even up for visitors right now?"

He'd only seen his Captain once, briefly, since he'd left him in the Emergency Room almost sixteen hours earlier. Stanley had been sedated, pale and on oxygen, left shoulder immobilized after the closed reduction, left arm strapped into position across his chest with a plaster cast from mid-forearm to his splinted fingers.

He'd seen Marco twice, each for only a brief few minutes. Marco was still intubated: the O2 making slow progress against the CO, the Chlorine and the long list of toxins he might have breathed and while the red discoloration from the hemoglobin bound to CO was somewhat reduced, there was still far too much of a pink flush in his face and a blue tinge to his lips for the Pulmonologist to talk about recovery with any confidence.

At some level he understood that Cap's wife and Marco's mother and siblings needed the carefully parceled out bits of visiting times far more than he or the rest of 51's A-shift did but he had to keep reminding himself of that. The prayers from Marco's family were probably more effective than anything he could offer any way.

"Not really," Karen said, sighing and shifting her purse on her shoulder again. "He's sleeping so much I'm not sure he even knows if I'm there or not, and when he does wake up, he just wants to know if everyone's okay. I'm not sure what to tell him."

They made another right into a long straight hallway. A hundred yards further down on the left, just outside the double-door entrance to ICU, was a room furnished with uncomfortable plastic and vinyl furniture filled with anxious families. They walked towards it.

"You can tell him that Chet's already complaining and that Marco's doing better." That was the news that Cap would want first, they both knew that. "Tell him that one of the guys from 22s has already been released and another will go home tomorrow or the day after." Then he sighed because there wasn't really any good news left to share.

His eyes were drawn to the ICU doors opening, to Brackett, easily recognizable even with his back turned, in a white doctor's coat and the striped trousers that Roy supposed were fashionable, talking to an older bespectacled man in a Fire Department Chief's uniform.

"No, I wasn't." Brackett's deep voice reverberated down the hall, clearly audible even fifty feet away. "Fortunately I came to my senses and backed the bill. With the paramedic program in place, there are hundreds, probably thousands of people walking around who wouldn't otherwise be here. Without a highly-trained, competent paramedic able to administer IV fluids in the field, it's doubtful that Captain Stanley would have..."

Roy coughed, loudly, and then cleared his throat. It drew Chief Houts' attention immediately and Brackett's head swiveled, gaze focusing on Roy and then shifting to Karen. Roy glanced that way himself, not surprised to see that her face had gone chalk white and she'd stopped walking.

"Roy DeSoto here is one of the men who helped change my mind," Brackett said. "Frankly, without his efforts on behalf of the paramedic program, I don't think it would ever have come to fruition, much less had the success that we see today."

It was a skillful redirect of the conversation and a subtle way of 'introducing' an out-of-uniform Roy to Houts. They'd met before, of course, but Roy sincerely doubted that Houts remembered him out of all the firefighters he'd met over the years. He nodded in reply to the Chief's deeper nod of acknowledgement, surprised and unnerved that Houts was here. The Chief Engineer didn't show up for most line of duty injuries, usually just the really bad ones, the fatalities.

Roy stepped aside as Brackett and Houts walked down the hall, as Brackett introduced Houts to Karen, as they exchanged the appropriate words of reassurance and support. He liked Houts, or at least what he knew of Houts, and the Chief seemed sincere and truly attentive as he both spoke and listened to Karen. And he did so without an entourage or a single staff person.

The doors from the ICU opened again and Chief Miller emerged, looking closer to seventy years old than his actual fifty-two years.

Roy stepped away from Brackett, Houts, Karen and her brother and met Miller midway in the hall, attempting a surreptitious appraisal of his Battalion Chief.

"Stop looking me over, DeSoto, I'm fine," Miller said. "Or as fine as I can be under the circumstances with six of my men hospitalized and another ten treated and released."

Roy would have to agree, based on as much of an assessment as he could perform without actually taking the man's pulse or blood pressure. Miller's color and respirations seemed in the normal ranges, he just looked exhausted and drained. At a guess, Miller was going on thirty hours without any sleep.

"Sir, with all due respect..."

"Four men in Intensive Care, DeSoto," Miller said. The lines in his face were deep crevices, far more pronounced than usual, and his eyes were bleary and red-rimmed. "Two from 51s, two from 22s. I'll be better when I know they're going to be all right."

"Chief," he said, and then hesitated, unsure of a lot of things but not his familiarity with their injuries. "Trust me when I say that I know how you feel, but you should probably get some sleep. It's going to take some time."

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The waiting room was overflowing with people who looked up when he entered, hoping for doctors with good news or at least answers. More than one facial expression sagged when they recognized a fellow seeker.

He rubbed his eyes, feeling the lack of sleep. A four-hour nap earlier that day was nowhere near restorative, not for this type of bone deep and heartsick exhaustion.

The Lopez family occupied the far left corner, gathered around Marco's mother. Marco's father was on an ill-timed trip to Arizona to visit his hospitalized sister and was, at last contact, frantically trying to get a flight back home. Chet's mother was sitting next to Marco's mother, holding and gently rubbing her right hand. A priest was on Mrs. Lopez's left, leaning forward and speaking to both mothers in a voice quiet enough that it didn't carry.

Matt Kelleher's wife, or estranged wife, or soon-to-be ex-wife – Roy couldn't really keep track of the latest developments in that tempestuous marriage – was sitting in the far right corner of the room with an older couple, probably Matt's parents, and with Steve Ferrara who'd raised his head when Roy had entered and then slumped back in his seat when Roy gave an almost imperceptible head shake: no news. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, both with Matt's red hair and angled features moved restlessly in their seats next to their mother, leaning into each other to whisper.

In the middle of the room, Alva Miller, the Chief's wife, had one arm wrapped loosely around Kathy Wozniak's shoulders, neither saying a word, just grim faced and waiting.

He saw a motion from the left side of the room, Joanne rising from the collection of Lopez family members, and he turned in that direction, taking a seat beside her.

He wrapped his arms around his wife and let her draw him against her, found comfort in the familiar smell of the body lotion she smoothed on her skin, the smell of their shampoo in her hair and the quiet nonsense words that she was repeating in his ear as she rubbed his back. Even the plastic arm of the waiting room chair pressed into his side could be ignored in favor of the momentary peace he found.

"What happened?" Joanne whispered into his hair.

He just shook his head and pushed his face into her neck, resting his head briefly on her shoulder.

"Roy?"

"Houts is here," he said, knowing she wouldn't understand.

# Chapter 13: Disruptions

A week of shifts - every third day in that particular weeklong stretch translated to Friday, Monday, Thursday - and each felt as if he was working overtime.

It was *his* station, *his* Engine, but each shift required adjusting to a different Captain with his own way of doing things. Every shift meant adjusting to linemen who didn't speak in the same shorthand references that Kelly and Lopez did. Firemen were supposed to be interchangeable; they moved from station to station over their careers, they swapped shifts and worked overtime away from their home stations all the time, but for all of that, there were routines he'd grown used to, grown to expect.

Before the start of every shift, after he'd made a drinkable pot of coffee and assuming the previous shift wasn't out on a run, he liked to check his Engine bumper to bumper, first the officer side and then the driver's side. Each time as he finished, as he reached the front bumper, Captain Stanley would emerge from his office with a raised eyebrow, silently inquiring about the status of the apparatus his crew depended upon. And after an equally silent reassurance, they would have a cup of the coffee that had just finished brewing.

Joe Pantone didn't know that routine on Friday. Neither did Barry Shepherd on Monday or, of all people, Dick Hammer on Thursday. Mike checked his Engine alone and he drank his coffee alone afterwards in awkward silence.

There were no Phantom pranks, no non-stop barrage of Kelly & Gage volleying words between them. Roll call varied, shift-to-shift, formal, informal, unpredictable. Pantone inspected uniforms like Hookrader inspected equipment. Shepherd was too busy playing catch-up on the area that they covered. And instead of feeling familiar, having Dick Hammer back just felt awkward, like running into an old girlfriend and remembering why you'd broken up years earlier.

Even the food was different; none of the replacements cooked with half the verve or blast of flavor that Marco brought to a simple egg dish.

He'd noticed that Gage and DeSoto seemed a lot less bothered by it all. More than half the time, the Squad went out on runs that never involved the Engine and their routine, their rhythm seemed unchanged, even if Gage skulked around the station missing his verbal sparring partner more than he'd admit.

Mike just couldn't seem to find his feet; the tasks he'd done automatically for five years now required conscious thought, a deliberate decision to connect this hose, pull this lever, charge this line for the interchangeable linemen who hauled them at each incident.

The next Captain's List wasn't due out for another ten weeks so there were no freshly promoted Captains who could take a long term albeit temporary assignment at Stations 51 or 22, or at Station 116, whose A-shift Captain had suffered an off-duty heart attack. The Department was struggling to fill the sudden and unexpected absences of three A-shift Captains; they had no one to spare to provide a consistent routine and with brushfire season in full swing, even 51's B & C shift Captains were allocated elsewhere when pulling overtime shifts.

He was checking the equipment on the Engine, one compartment at a time, frowning at the state of the nozzles when the Squad backed in after their fifth run of the day. It was quiet in the bay that afternoon. The rest of the Engine crew on today's shift was hanging hose in the back and Captain Hammer was in his office, where he spent most of his time.

"And then, man you are not going to *believe* what she said next," Gage was saying as the Squad came to a halt beside the Engine.

DeSoto twisted the key and the Squad's engine cut out. Stoker could hear the audible sigh and then, "I get the feeling that it's not going to matter whether I believe it or not."

Stoker smiled into the Engine's open equipment compartment, out of Gage's direct view.

"Roy, it's like sometimes you don't even hear me when I talk," Gage said, and then swung open the passenger door and pulled himself through it. Rubbing his eyes, and then shoving his fingers through his already disheveled hair, he pulled the door closed with a vehemence that he tempered at the last second, fingers clutching the door handle and closing it with a soft click. He gave a guilty glance around, as if Charlie might have installed cameras in the apparatus bay, and then meandered his way to the kitchen, still scowling.

"Trust me, I hear you," DeSoto said from inside the Squad. "I haven't figured out a way to not hear you and when I do, I'll be sure not to tell you."

He exited the Squad and nodded a greeting over its roof at Stoker.

"This the plan girl still?" Stoker said.

Roy nodded. "Yep, it's the plan girl alright." And despite his professed indifference, he followed his partner into the kitchen area.

It was like rubbernecking at an MVA, something that he'd always found inexplicable. He'd never quite realized what an irresistible compulsion it might be. Stoker closed the compartment on the acceptably but not perfectly cleaned nozzles and ambled in after them.

"....equated my relationships with women to our runs!" Gage waved his right arm in the air while his left hand clutched an opened quart of milk.

"Johnny," Roy said, holding up his steaming coffee cup with a meaningful glance at the milk container. "You think..."

"An encounter with a total stranger, which by its very nature is both transitory and extremely intense, lending it a perception of intimacy," Gage said, wild-eyed and waving the milk carton. "And then she said, just like on our runs, I never see or even think of them again afterwards. Can you believe that? *A perception of intimacy!*"

Roy visibly started and blinked. "Is that a direct quote?"

"Roaaaaay," Gage said, leaning toward him. "Does that really sound like something I'd say?"

Roy licked his lips and considered it for a moment. "If I say 'no,' can I have the milk?"

Gage thumped the carton onto the counter next to his partner and a splash of milk erupted out of the spout. Roy frowned down at the puddle on the counter and then turned his head and sent his partner a narrowed eyed glare. He poured milk into his coffee and walked away, taking a seat at the kitchen table.



It was times like this when Stoker kept waiting to hear the perfect Chet Kelly quip, or even a half-hearted Chet Kelly quip, the purpose of which could only be to twist Gage into a frenzy that would produce increasing levels of entertainment for everyone but Gage. Nine days after the Pac Tel fire and he was still expecting to hear Chet drop a perfectly timed verbal bomb in the dayroom.

"My dating life is not a MVA," Gage said. "Or a heart attack or a drug overdose or difficulty breathing or ..." He trailed off, sputtering.

"How about an unknown type rescue?" Stoker whispered as he slipped into a chair at the table across from Roy.

DeSoto turned away but his pretense at coughing didn't fool anyone.

"Heh, heh, heh," Gage said, eyes narrowed and face contorted into a scowl. "You're a real riot, Stoker.

"How about a panic attack at a dentist's office?" Roy said, fighting a smile.

Gage shook his head. "I don't even know why I bother."

"Panic attack at a dentist's office?"

"Uh-huh. You know that possible heart attack call we just went on?"

Stoker nodded.

"Teeth cleaning," Roy said. "Nervous patient." He grinned. "Doesn't like dentists."

"Roy," Gage interrupted. "Will you be serious for a moment?"

Stoker looked at Roy and they both started snickering.

"Wouldja look at that," said a voice from the doorway. "Hey Woody, did you know Stoker even knew how to laugh?"

"Oh, shut up, Wilson," Gage said in disgust and stalked out of the kitchen. He turned on the television with a jerk of its switch and then blinked at the screen, frozen in place by the unexpected sight of bodies entwined in satin sheets, a woman in full makeup saying something in a low, throaty voice to her lover.

"Soap operas," Roy said with a sigh. "You have any idea how hard it'll be to pull him away when the tones sound?"

"For your information," Gage said irritably, "I was looking for the latest news on the Pac Tel thing."

With eerie complicity, the phone rang and five pairs of eyes turned to look at the wall phone. None of them moved to answer it and after the second ring, it stopped. Stoker could hear the low murmur of Captain Hammer's voice from the office but not his words.

"You think we'd be used to that by now," Fred Wilson said, pulling out a chair on Stoker's far right with a harsh scrape against the floor that one of them was going to end up buffing out later. "Phone's been back on since Friday."

"It is here," Bert Woodhull answered, lifting the pot of coffee with an inquiring look at his fellow lineman. "Phone Company got emergency services - us, police, Sheriff's Department and hospitals - up and running by the weekend. Everyone else is screwed for who knows how many months, but I'm not complaining. It's going to save me a bundle since my wife can't call her mother in Florida and talk for two hours every Wednesday and Sunday."

The soap opera bedroom scene had ended and Gage was now flipping channels on the television looking for a news report.

Stoker leaned across the table so he could speak to Roy quietly.

"You guys hit Rampart this afternoon?"

Roy nodded. "No time for visits though. We brought the patients in, worked with the doctors and by the time we handed over all the paperwork and resupplied, Dispatch was asking if we were available again." He took a sip of coffee. "Chet had that appointment with the sports medicine guy today, didn't he? The one who takes care of the Rams players when they get injured."

"Yeah, and Marco's got that follow-up with the pulmonologist."

Roy nodded and glanced at the phone.

It was tempting. Ten days ago they'd have picked it up and called Rampart to check in on their guys without a second thought but with Disaster Protocols still in effect, it was supposed to be used only for official Fire Department business and emergencies. Pacific Telephone had set up banks of phones in multiple locations in Carson City, West Carson, Gardena, Torrance and Lomita, which could be used for personal or business calls at no charge by anyone whose phone service was out, as long as you were willing to wait in line for at least an hour, usually longer, and keep your call less than ten minutes.

Roy sighed and shrugged. "Maybe we'll get a run where we have a few extra minutes at Rampart, otherwise I guess we'll just see them tomorrow, see how everyone's doing."

Footsteps echoed in the apparatus bay, the solid, heavy tread of Dick Hammer out of his office, signaling undone chores or a surprise drill. Gage switched the television off and chair legs scraped against the floor as everyone rose. They were all standing in the kitchen looking at the doorway when he came in and Stoker's heart stuttered in his chest at Hammer's expression.

Hammer gave a heavy sigh, and then jerked his chin towards the table for them to sit. He pulled out the chair nearest the door and sat heavily.

"Come on, sit down. I don't want to do this standing up."

Stoker glanced around the room, gaze lingering on DeSoto and Gage, pretty sure their blank expressions and increased respirations mirrored his own body language as they all took a seat.

"There's no good way to say this so I just will," Hammer said with a grimace. "Kelleher's family made the decision." He hesitated and then plunged ahead. "They're removing all life support sometime today, not sure when."

Gage and DeSoto were probably the most affected, the ones who'd known him best from Paramedic training and Advisory councils, but there was such utter silence in the room that Stoker could hear the ticking of the wall clock above the blackboard, across the room. Knowing that this was probably going to happen, knowing that there was a definitive diagnosis of severe cerebral hypoxia brought on by carbon monoxide poisoning, that there was no measurable brain activity, didn't make the finality of it easier to accept.

"Yeah," Hammer said, as if concluding the conversation, but instead of getting up and going back to work, he slumped further into his chair

Stoker tried to think through the sudden waves of grief buffeting him. He knew, at some logical, dispassionate level of his mind that the news would be immeasurably worse if it was Marco or Chet or Cap. That would be life changing, a disintegration of his personal universe, but his mind could not comprehend how he could possibly feel more devastated than he did right now.

## Chapter 14: Disruptions, Part 2

There were multiple voices behind the door, real voices, not the voices he expected and not the filtered, professionally smooth voices one heard from a television set but the rough-edged murmur of men like those with whom he worked. It sounded much like the station did when he came in before the start of a shift, muted voices filtering from the bay or dayroom as he changed into his uniform.

He pushed open the hospital door. Two men were sprawled in armchairs that looked as if they'd been pilfered from an office or conference room. Or maybe the charge nurse on the third floor was a soft touch for firemen. Both looked familiar, their names elusive. He bet he'd know them in a helmet and turnout coat.

"It doesn't make a damn bit of difference, Hank," the one with a full head of gray hair was insisting. "If you'd done a top-down search and started on five, it would've taken you just as long to get to the fourth floor, and it wouldn't have made any sense to start on five when their last reported position was three."

He walked fully into the room and was hit with that all too familiar hospital room smell: a mixture of disinfectant-mopped floors, Betadine-soaked bandaging, unshowered patients sweating out medications and sagging floral arrangements. And like most times when there were visiting firefighters in the hospital room, there was a top note of smoke. In this case, it was the faint smell of burning wood, plaster and paint, hard to banish completely even after showering or changing to civilian attire.

"Hey, Cap."

Three men's heads rotated towards the door and the two that weren't Hank Stanley smiled a little sheepishly.

"Force of habit," said the man in the chair closer to the door, the one whose brown hair was only streaked with gray and whose squint lines weren't quite as prominent as the other man's. Worry lines, Captain Stanley usually called them, something that he swore he never had until he pinned the bugles on.

"Come on in, Mike," Stanley said with an easy, welcoming grin. "You know George Higgins and Marty Cunningham, don't you?"

And with names to go with faces, Stoker nodded. Higgins was 95's A-shift Captain, Cunningham was 28's; he and his crew had fought the fire with them. They stood and he shook hands with both men.

"Pull up a chair and join us," said Higgins, the most senior of the three Captains in the room.

There was a visitor's chair on the other side of the two-patient room, on the far side of Marco's bed, which was empty, sheets and blankets folded over midway on the bed. He carried the chair towards the gathering of off-duty Fire Department Captains and joined them.

"More X-rays and tests," Stanley said, answering the question Stoker had been about to ask. "He left about fifteen minutes ago, and then he has that follow-up with the Pulmonologist. Not sure exactly when he'll be back, Mike."

He placed his chair near Cunningham and Higgins so that Cap didn't have to shift position in the hospital bed to see all of them. Propped up by the inclined back of his hospital bed, Stanley looked better than he had two days ago, which was substantially better than he had a week ago, which still looked nowhere close to normal. At some point in the last few days, he'd traded the white hospital gown for a pair of dark green pajamas and Stoker wondered how someone had managed to get the pajama shirt on over the cast without destabilizing the shoulder.

"And yeah, okay, Truck 86 was an option, but I still don't think it was good one," Cunningham said, picking up a thread of the conversation that Stoker had interrupted. "That would've been a hell of a long way for you and your guys to climb down and based on how things turned out, you would have been on it when the fuel tank blew." He shrugged; words were not necessary to convey that probable outcome. "The Snorkel was the best available means of egress and waiting for it was the right choice."

Stanley frowned and Stoker wasn't sure if his Captain was even open to being convinced that he'd done everything possible to get everyone out safely.

"Look." Higgins heaved a sigh. "You know and I know..." He paused. "Stoker, this doesn't leave the room..." He turned a fierce gaze on Stoker who nodded, realizing that he'd been included in something that wasn't just a social visit. "We all know that if 22s had updated the IC when they moved to the fourth floor..."

"HT trouble," Stanley interrupted. "When we found them, Dan said he'd tried checking in a couple of times on four and got an earful of static every time."

Higgins shook his head. "You went up the same staircase and made contact on the fourth floor without any problem."

Stanley's shrug was an automatic response and he immediately grimaced, his right hand crossing his body to grip his immobilized left arm. "On different equipment. His might have had a low charge. Maybe the antenna connection came loose. Who knows? It happens."

"Hank's right," Cunningham said with a glance at Higgins. "Dan checked in more than once from the third floor. There's no reason he'd stop when they went up to four unless it was something outside his control."

Higgins leaned forward and rubbed both hands over his face and Stoker wondered how long they'd been at it, this unofficial postmortem. Cap usually led them through something like this at the station after a bad call to reinforce what worked well, pick apart what could have been done differently, how they could have achieved the same results with fewer risks, make sure they worked an incident both safely and effectively so that no matter what, everyone went home to his family at the end of a shift. No one ever wanted to have to carry their own guys out of a building.

"Okay, you're right, the both of you," Higgins conceded reluctantly. "Let me ask you something. When you took your men inside, Hank, how many HTs did you carry?"

"You already know what I'm going to say," Stanley said. "I had the only HT."

Cunningham groaned and slid down in his chair. "You really think the Department is going to spend the money to equip every man with an HT?"

"I think it should be raised during the inquiry. It's a hell of a hard way to make a point, but maybe this will be what it takes to get the Department to consider doing just that. If even *one* of the other guys from 22s had been carrying an HT, 51s would've gone straight to the fourth floor and we wouldn't be sitting in Hank's hospital room right now."

It occurred to Stoker that he might be the only one in the room that knew Kelleher had carried an HT. He opened his mouth and then hesitated, trying to remember who'd told him Kelleher had carried an HT. Ferrara? Wozniak?

"Too bad HQ will be interviewing Hank, not you, George."

"You're damn right it is. Hank, you're going to have to make that point for all of us when they come to get your statement for the inquiry."

Stoker recognized that particular shift of expression on his Captain's face but wasn't sure if the other two men would as well.

"Oh, hell," Higgins said. "I hope you stuck to the facts and didn't spend the whole time trying to figure out how you could have pulled off some goddamn miraculous rescue. Those guys'll come up with enough what-ifs on their own without any help from the guys who actually have to do the job. There's not a decision you made where I wouldn't have done the same damn thing myself, which is exactly what I'm going to say when we do the training committee review."

Stanley shifted on the bed and Stoker ran a quick assessment: the lines around Stanley's eyes were more pronounced and he was clenching his jaw as he moved, as if trying and failing to find a comfortable position. Mike glanced at his watch.

"It wasn't just staff guys," Stanley said. "Chief Conrad sat in on it and kept things focused on the facts of the scene, what information I had going in, my familiarity with the pre-plan..."

"That's 36's area," Higgins said. "Not 51's."

"...tools, safety equipment, manpower..."

"I know for a fact *that* wasn't entirely your call," Cunningham said.

"...location and extent of fire, layout of the third and fourth floors, special hazards, how the interior wall had come down, how we cleared it and packaged the guys from 22's." He shrugged again, this time using only his right shoulder. "Normal stuff."

It was the exactly the type of thing they'd review at the station after the more challenging calls, only this time someone had died, one of their own, and the expressions of every man in the room reflected that immutable fact.

"Chief Miller didn't sit in?"

Stanley shook his head and there was a long moment of silence as eyes flickered and the three Captains exchanged glances. Stoker leaned back in his chair, assuming that they were deciding whether to pursue that particular point with him in the room.

"They talk to Dan?"

Stanley's jaw shifted. "No idea. I tried to see him yesterday but the nurse said he wasn't up for visitors."

"Still?" Cunningham's voice conveyed the puzzled alarm that Stoker saw on Higgins's face as well. "Has anyone seen him? Besides his family, I mean?"

"The doctors won't tell me anything," Stanley said. "I did hear that the swelling's down and the cord is intact. He'll walk again, eventually, but that the fractured vertebra is hellishly painful, even with the brace." His expression twisted and sagged. "But with the news about Kelleher..."

Heads dipped and nodded.

"Still," Cunningham said, "you'd think if he'd see anyone..." He trailed off and sent a glance at Higgins, as if looking for support, but Higgins was looking at the floor, jaw tight, massaging his right temple.

Stanley sighed. After a few moments of staring in the direction of the empty corner of the room, to his left, he finally said, "Any word on the funeral?"

Higgins cleared his throat but he sounded hoarse when he answered. "Tuesday. "

Stanley chewed at his lip, gaze still distant, and Higgins and Cunningham exchanged a look.

Higgins cleared his throat again. "So, the doctors give you any idea of when you're going to get out of here?"

Stanley blinked as if thinking about the question, and then turned his head back to his visitors. "Monday at the latest. Possibly as early as tomorrow, depending on today's test results," he said almost absently.

Higgins raised an eyebrow and looked at Cunningham.

"Tell me you're not sitting there thinking about attending the funeral," Higgins said, in that firm but compassionate tone that Stoker assumed the Department taught in some kind of Captain's training class. "The Department's not going to want you riding the Engine, not on sick leave, and you're in no shape for all the standing that's involved in the procession or the service."

Stoker agreed wholeheartedly but unhappily recognized a familiar rigid set to his Captain's jaw, as if the decision had already been made. And while Stanley was no longer tethered to an IV and the nurses had him up and walking the hallway, a Department funeral was another thing entirely. Mike kept his silence, but he didn't like it.

"Dan's not going to be able to be there," Stanley said, as if that explained everything.

"But Harrison, Ferrara, Ostrander and van der Heijden will be," Cunningham said. "Along with half the department, representatives from every county in the state and a fair amount from surrounding states."

Stanley looked directly at Stoker, and Mike nodded.

"Yeah, Cap. Johnny, Roy and I'll be there, along with the guys from B shift."

He hoped that was sufficient representation from 51s. Everyone would understand if the three members of the crew who'd done their best to save Kelleher's life were not in attendance. He really didn't want to have to take this to a higher authority to convince Cap to sit this one out and for all he knew Karen might feel the same sense of obligation to be there that Cap clearly did.

The room door swung open and the pretty dark-eyed nurse who entered scanned the room and sighed.

"Three's too many," she said, but her tone was more amused than scolding. She unwrapped the stethoscope from around her neck and Stoker was relieved to see a small cup of what he hoped were Cap's pain meds in her other hand. "How about you gentlemen clear the room while I check on my patient and then two of you can come back and visit?"

Her voice lilted as if it was a question but her expression said that there was only one right answer.

Higgins and Cunningham immediately pushed to their feet.

"I need to get going anyway..." Cunningham said.

"Think about what I said," Higgins insisted.

Stoker followed them out to the hallway, surprised when they lingered: Cunningham unsure, hesitating, and Higgins sizing him up.

"Talk him out of it, Stoker," Higgins finally said in a tone of voice that left no doubt it was a command.

"Jesus, Mike, you were at the scene," Cunningham said. "When that fuel tank blew, I honest-to-God thought we'd lost Hank and the rest of your crew."

Stoker swallowed and couldn't find the right words so he simply nodded and let Cunningham read it in his eyes.

"Stop being such a girl, Marty," Higgins growled. "Stoker's going to think that your wife is the man in the family."

"Now, why would he think that? I made absolutely certain that she wasn't related to you before I married her."

He leaned against the hallway wall and watched the two Captains walk towards the elevator in companionable silence, as if they'd used up all their words.

It was quiet in the hallway, with less traffic than he'd expected for an early Friday afternoon. Halfway down the corridor, he could see one or two nurses coming and going from the nursing station like worker bees from a hive, but there was little other activity.

He'd expected more activity, more visitors. Every other time he'd stopped by, the room seemed to overflow with members of the Lopez and Stanley families, both immediate and extended, particularly but not exclusively in Marco's case. Cap's wife had been a fixture, a book or magazine in one hand and her husband's right hand in the other, as if anchoring him in place. Cap's parents and in-laws had been in and out of the room, along with his kids. But not today.

He spent an unknown number of minutes staring blankly at the neutral tone of the wall on the other side of the corridor, not thinking about anything specifically, just turning off his thoughts and letting his mind drift.

The door swished open again and the dark-eyed nurse smiled up at him, a real smile, not a strictly professional one.

"He should be a lot more comfortable once those meds kick in," she said.



Stoker blinked, coming back to awareness sluggishly and then he nodded, aware that she was expecting some kind of response but unsure what was appropriate. "Thank you," he said finally. "I bet that shoulder hurts pretty badly."

It was definitely not Gage-level repartee with a pretty nurse so he wasn't all that surprised when she just gave him a closed mouth smile and a nod and went on her way. Sighing, he pushed back into the hospital room.

The nurse had adjusted the back of the hospital bed to something less than a forty-five degree angle, which he took as a subtle hint that Cap was supposed to be resting, not entertaining.

"You know, when I asked you to call a plumber for me," Stanley said, "it was because I knew that bathroom sink was driving Karen crazy and my brother-in-law's a great guy, but a menace to indoor plumbing. It was *not* a request for you to fix it yourself."

Stoker noticed that the visitor chair he'd carried over had been returned to Marco's bedside and one of the armchairs had been tucked in the far left corner. Busy little nurse. He repositioned the remaining armchair to his own satisfaction and sat.

He shrugged. "You would have done the exact same thing I did if it was one of us who got hurt. Besides, Johnny helped too."

"Well, thank you for taking care of it. She'd been after me to fix that for a week and then..." He breathed in and out and settled back against the bed. "Hair?"

"Oh yeah," Stoker agreed, grimacing at the memory.

Stanley sighed. "Long haired females are a hazard to sink traps. Remember that when you eventually settle down and do the family thing."

Stoker nodded and then said, "You're never going to get your dress uniform jacket sleeve over that arm, you know."

Stanley glanced at his left arm, still immobilized against his chest, the cast on his forearm and the splinted fingers, and frowned.

"So we're back to that," he mused. "You're probably right, but Karen's got a seam ripper. I bet she could use that and then baste the sleeve to fit over the cast."

Or maybe you should just stay home and let your body heal so you can come back to 51s sooner rather than later, Mike thought.

"What did the doctors say?"

"Everything's healing fine, right on schedule. A couple of weeks at home and then I'm on light duty until this," he twisted his head towards his left arm, "completely heals."

He'd completely sidestepped the real question of course.

"When do you start PT?"

"Depends on the shoulder. I have an appointment next week and we'll see how that goes."

It was all stuff he wanted to know but it was also filler, chitchat.

"How's Marco doing? Everything okay?"

That was the right question to ask; Cap visibly brightened.

"Yeah, he's doing great. He sounds like hell, like he ate the smoke yesterday instead of last week, but from what he told me, the docs say his throat and lungs will be fine. He'll probably be back before I am."

Stoker let out a relieved exhale.

"And before you ask, he's planning on being there Tuesday too. He said he's going, AMA if need be, but his throat and his breathing are good and if his visit with the Pulmonologist today goes well, he might go home tomorrow too." Stanley paused and then said, "We'll all be there."

"Why?"

He hadn't planned on blurting it out; it was pure reaction. He'd already known that Chet was planning to attend the funeral; he wouldn't march of course, not on crutches with his knee in a brace. He wanted to say 'don't you think you guys did enough' or 'what else are you trying to prove' but it wasn't really about that. He felt a sudden surge of pointless and irrational anger at Kelleher for splitting off from Ferrara and not telling anyone he'd gone to the fourth floor.

Stanley's expression contorted, his brow furrowed.

"What do you mean 'why?' Why are we planning to attend?" Stanley sounded incredulous and then he paused, looking at Stoker in patent disbelief. "For the same reason you are. The same reason B-shift is going and as many guys from the Department who can be there. The same reason there will be representation from the rest of the state and all of the surrounding states."

Stoker sighed and opened his mouth but Stanley, slightly flushed, kept talking, leaning forward, his voice raised and edgy.

"Because Matt Kelleher was one of us. Because we go to honor his life and his sacrifice. Because we're there for his family, to show that his life had meaning and value as a Firefighter and as a man and we won't forget that or him. Because it could have just as easily been any one of us and we're there to acknowledge that too."

Stoker waited until his Captain stopped to draw breath.

"Cap, you know you did everything possible to get Kelleher out of there, right?"

Stanley's mouth snapped shut and his eyes narrowed. In the abrupt silence, Stoker was uncomfortably aware of his own chest rising and falling more rapidly than usual.

"Jesus, is *that* what this is all about?" Stanley's voice was still incredulous but now his expression was stunned. "You think..." he stopped and stared at Stoker. "I went over that search and rescue from every possible option, rehashed every decision, and I made my peace with it last week. We located 22's guys as quickly as anyone

possibly could have done and we got them out of there faster than most might've and into the hands of people who could and did provide the immediate medical intervention they needed. We did our job and we did it well, especially considering the conditions that we had."

Stoker drew a deep breath, relieved and confused in equal measure.

"But the..." he gestured at the chair that the nurse had moved to the corner and then at the door. "The stuff with Higgins and with Cunningham and with trying to figure out how it could have been done faster."

Stanley sighed and sagged back in the bed, his expression softening into something rueful.

"We got the guys from 22s out quickly and safely," he said in a quiet voice. His lips tightened and his Adams apple bobbed. "It was my own guys I didn't get out fast enough."

*Oh.*

Stoker felt himself slump mentally, fumbling for a response, a reassurance, but his mind had gone utterly silent, no words, no thoughts, just a vast emptiness. He swallowed. "Okay," he said. Higgins would be disappointed in him but that wasn't really the opinion that mattered.

Stanley leaned back against the bed. He looked tired, cheekbones in sharper relief than normal against eyes that looked bruised in the odd hospital lighting.

"You guys do the debriefing?" he asked. "The Critical Incident Stress thing?"

Stoker sighed in recollection and nodded. "Yeah. Last Thursday."

"Did it help?"

He knew what he was supposed to say and maybe it had helped and he just didn't realize it. He wasn't having nightmares or acting out, at least as far as he knew. As a matter of fact, he was sleeping fine, even getting more sleep than normal. He shrugged.

"Gage talked a lot but didn't really *say* anything." He inclined his head, eliciting an amused half smile and a nod of reluctant acknowledgement from his Captain. "And DeSoto didn't say all that much but he listened when everyone else talked and agreed with a lot of what was said."

Roy's expression had still looked raw and pained, as if things hurt too much to put into words. Even before Kelleher had died, Roy's eyes held the hurt close to him, as if it was a personal thing.

"They know Kelleher well?"

Stoker puzzled over the question. As far as he knew, Gage and DeSoto knew Kelleher like he knew some of the other Engineers in the county. They covered for guys who were out on vacation, occasionally attended some of the same specialized training seminars, but knew each other mostly through word of mouth and reputation. It wasn't as if they worked together. He frowned, and reconsidered. Gage and DeSoto could have worked with Kelleher on overtime for all he knew.

"They knew him, not sure how well."

Not that it mattered. It was more about the knowledge that it could have just as easily been one of them than it was about Matt Kelleher specifically. And of course for Roy, the knowledge that Kelleher had a wife and a couple of kids raised a mirror that no one really wanted to see. From the brooding expression on Cap's face, Roy wasn't the only one who'd looked in that mirror.

"Was it true that Kelleher had an HT?"

He didn't know why he'd asked that. It wasn't as if it made a difference at this point.

Stanley pursed his lips and seemed unsettled.

"I heard that he did. I didn't see one." There was a pause and from the distant look in his eyes, Stanley was mentally revisiting the Switching Control room, clearing the drywall and framing off 22s men, and searching for something he'd missed. "It was dark, there was a lot of debris. The smoke wasn't as bad as it was on three but it was bad enough. We were using our flashlights to see how badly they were hurt, figure out how to get them out..." He shrugged, again just one shoulder. "Kind of irrelevant at this point, don't you think?"

It wasn't, not at all. It was the type of thing that would definitely surface in the inquiry, even if the answer was not widely broadcast across the Department. Of course, that wasn't what Cap meant though, was it?

"Captain Higgins had a valid point," he said, stubbornly perseverant in the face of his Captain's hint to drop it. It wasn't irrelevant; not by a long shot, especially if it made the difference between his guys getting hurt or not.

"George usually does," Stanley said mildly. "I'm just not sure where you're going with this, Mike."

"I just..."

He wasn't all that sure where he was going either. The point he wanted to make was elusive, just a flash of a notion that vanished as soon as he tried to make it concrete, something he could explain or describe. When he previewed the words about to come out of his mouth, they seemed petty, throwing blame on the one person who'd paid the ultimate price for a mistake that might not even have been his.

"I'm not really sure either," he said in a small voice, gaze downward. "It's just that from what I can see, what I've heard, you – you, Chet and Marco – did everything right and it was the stuff that you couldn't influence... If Kelleher had an HT and used it to tell Captain Wozniak, or his partner, for Christ's sake, where he was going or if one of the other guys from 22s had an HT and used it to let the IC know they were up on four, or if we'd managed to keep that fuel tank cooler, longer..." He tried to rein in his rambling thoughts, tried to make something coherent out of them. "I don't think it's your fault that that you guys didn't get out before the fuel tank blew."

None of that came close to conveying the thoughts still flitting around inside of his brain but words weren't really his forte anyway and Cap knew it.

"It's not about fault or blame," Stanley said, slowly, as if he was still trying to figure out what Mike had been trying to say. "It's about responsibility. I am completely responsible for the safety of my crew, especially when I take them inside like I did at that fire."

A half-memory of overheard firefighter gossip, of pieces of a rumor so fragmented that it left far too much room for interpretation, surfaced in the churning sea of his thoughts.

"But you didn't make the call to take them inside after 22s," Mike said. "That was Chief Miller."

And now he remembered. It was two guys from headquarters who had been talking in the back of the room where they'd held the CISM debriefing the previous week, and a lot of what he'd heard sounded like what Gage had overheard in the men's room shortly after the fire was contained.

Stanley sighed. "Don't believe every rumor you hear. It's Hausler's job to ask those questions."

Stoker tried to maintain a poker face that he knew didn't fool Cap for a second. It was no great secret that Deputy Chief Hausler was more of a micro-managing control freak than a leader in any sense of the word. He'd earned his rank but Mike couldn't name a single firefighter who'd willingly follow Hausler into a fire.

"So Hausler's not going to hang Chief Miller out to dry?"

Stanley frowned and was silent long enough that Mike wondered if he should just change the subject.

"It's a hell of a decision to have to make," he finally said. "We size up a scene and decide on a strategy and we send men inside who are trained and equipped to handle the fire or the rescue or the chemical spill and you don't always have the time on the scene to second guess the decision or even time to worry, but the worry's there, right underneath your awareness of everything that's happening." He paused. "And for all of that, the hardest decision isn't always to send men inside. It's unspeakably harder to make the call to *not* send anyone inside." He licked his lips and finally turned to look at Stoker. "Especially when the decision is to not send anyone *else* inside."

Stoker didn't know what to say. He finally just said, "Okay."

"I can tell you that if I'd been in Chief Miller's shoes, I would have made the same decision he did. The building was essentially structurally sound, and even though the fire wasn't contained, it wasn't encroaching on our position. The fuel tank was a known risk, but 127s had water on it. I would've made the same call the Chief made. I would have sent us inside."

There was silence again, the unspoken hanging heavily in the air between them, and Stoker remembered more of the overheard conversation from the CISM debriefing, remembered one of the HQ Captains bemoaning that he'd missed out on a "once in a lifetime fire."

"So we went in, we all went in. Ferrara and Kelleher after the missing employee, and then Dan and his crew after Kelleher, and then 51s after 22s, and in the end, it didn't make a damn bit of difference." Stanley sighed heavily. "What a fucking waste."

And Stoker didn't know if he'd meant the man that Ferrara and Kelleher had gone in after, or Kelleher himself. Could be either. Probably both.

"So, would you have done anything differently?"

Stanley smiled, a grim little twist of the mouth and shook his head. "Not a thing, Mike. Not a goddamned thing."

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*Finis*



# Chapter 15: Author's Notes

This story was partially inspired by historical events, magnified and dramatized for the world of Emergency! Fanfiction.

"In 1975, a fire of unknown origin swept through a switching center at Second Avenue and Thirteenth Street in lower Manhattan on February 27, 1975, causing the worst single service disaster ever suffered by any single Bell operating company. Starting around midnight in the cable vault under the eleven-story building's basement, the fire spread rapidly upward. Alert work by New York City firemen confined it to the lower floors and saved the building itself from destruction, but dense smoke from burning cable insulation suffused the unburdened parts of the building and virtually all the equipment in it was put out of service. By afternoon, when the fire was finally declared under control - with no loss of life to either firemen or telephone people- twelve Manhattan telephone exchanges, embracing three hundred city blocks and 104,00 subscriber lines serving 170,000 telephones, were out of service, and among the institutions bereft of working telephones were six hospitals and medical centers, eleven firehouses, three post offices, one police precinct, nine public schools, and three higher education institutions, including New York University." (See [privatelineDOTcom/issues/p.](http://privatelineDOTcom/issues/p.))

New York Telephone mounted a massive effort, 4,000 employees working 12-hour shifts around the clock to restore the 170,000 phone lines knocked out of service. Work that would have normally taken a year or more to accomplish was completed in twenty-two days, at a cost of approximately ninety million dollars (in 1975 dollars) helped by the fact that the entire building had not been destroyed and that there was spare switching capacity in nearby central offices.

While it was originally reported that there was no loss to life for firemen or NY Telephone company employees, sadly subsequent reports are that a dozen or so fire fighters eventually died from this incident, after the fact, as a result of inhaling massive amounts of toxic fumes which led to varying types of respiratory ailments and cancers.

I began writing with much of this story mapped out in my head but it would have not been written as is without the support and encouragement of a number of people. Special thanks to Kelmin for correcting my many technical fireground and EMS errors and very grateful thanks to Kelmin and The Delirium Threeman for beta work, especially on the final chapter with which I struggled.