

# Black Holes

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Summary: It's a slow fall into accepting the unthinkable when it happens

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A/N: Warning. This is a bit grim and it's clearly my subconscious working through some of the recent tragedies affecting Firefighting and Police personnel.

Rating is T for subject matter and a bit of bad language

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It wasn't a good idea. He knew it wasn't a good idea. Hell, *everybody* knew it wasn't a good idea but there was a time and place to open one's mouth and argue, and this wasn't it.

"Show me," she'd insisted. "I want to see where it happened. I want to see where he..."

He'd stared at her, mouth sagging open, mind utterly blank of actual words but all too proficiently supplying images that he knew she shouldn't see, that she didn't really want to see, images that her husband would most definitely have not wanted her to see. That fire was ashes now and the scene would just be echoes of what'd happened, but it was still a bad idea.

He forced lips that were dry and cracked to part, to move, to form words. Licking his lips, he pulled breath in to push the right words out.

"I don't think..."

"Don't tell me that it's not a good idea," she said, voice fierce, her body trembling with whatever it was that was holding her together. "I know it's not a good idea but I keep thinking..." She abruptly stopped speaking and looked around as if she'd realized that her volume had been rising outside the small circle of privacy given them. She panted a few open mouthed breaths, eyes darting around the overfull living room, skimming across the men and women huddled in somber low-voiced conversations, but not focusing on anyone or anything before finally returning to his face.

"I keep thinking," she said in a lower voice, for his ears only, "that he's going to come through the door," and now her voice was cracking slightly, "or the phone's going to ring and he'll have some incredibly good or not even remotely believable excuse why he's not here, why he's not home, but maybe if I *see* where it happened, if I see where he ..."

Her voice broke hard upon the word that would, if spoken aloud, rip the gauze from a fresh, gaping wound and made it real. It was a long few seconds before she finished. "Maybe I'll start to believe it's true," she whispered.

There were close to thirty firemen in and out of a house far too small to hold them, packed in amidst the family and close friends. Almost every gaze in the house was in near constant motion, seeking out the closer members of their fraternity as new arrivals pushed into the crowd, scanning for faltering family members in need of a supportive arm, and especially keeping an eye on the new widow. The kids were upstairs with their grandparents; cried out past the point of exhaustion but too distraught to sleep.

Any man there would do *anything* possible, and a few things that pushed the limits of possibility if it would bring the smallest margin of comfort to this family. He was the one being asked.

So he'd nodded dumbly, knowing that his expression was anything but willing. He'd do it because there wasn't much else he could do for her. Not now.

"What ever you want."

He saw the look his wife sent him across a room full of men who were red-eyed from smoke and private tears, tears shed with their wives and girlfriends, and among their brothers behind closed doors, but not in public and not in this home.

He mumbled a greeting to the Deputy Chief and the department's Chaplain who'd pushed their way through a crowd that parted and reclosed ranks. He hugged the still dry-eyed, shell-shocked widow before stepping back, removing himself from the obligatory discussion about the viewing and the memorial services, all of the events that needed to be planned and coordinated. It was too soon, in his opinion; too soon for planning. This day should just be for grieving and shaking the numbing cobwebs from their brains and hearts and accepting that it had really happened.

His wife grabbed him, fingers digging into his upper arm, tightening on the bone just above his elbow, a bit more than was necessary to get his attention, a bit too sharp to be a gesture of loving comfort or support. She pulled him around the sofa and into the interior corner of the living room.

"You cannot take her there," she whispered furiously, voice sliding between her teeth as her eyes darted around the room making certain that their conversation stayed between only them. "Not *there*. She doesn't need to see that, not that place."

The parts of him that weren't numbed by sorrow and anger agreed with her wholeheartedly. He'd driven to the scene himself but couldn't stand closer than a block away, stomach churning acid, lungs heaving back the grief that he had fought to contain.

"You think I don't know that?" he whispered back with just as much ferocity. "You think I want to go there? I don't, and I sure as *hell* don't want to take her there, not now, not ever, but what am I supposed to say?"

The swat was conditioned, an automatic objection that he'd known, at some level, was coming.

"Watch your language!"

His apology was just as automatic, and the familiar exchange took some of the edge off their emotions.

He sighed and felt his shoulders droop as he dipped his head, until their foreheads nearly touched. "Honey, I can't tell her 'no.' I can't bring him back, none of us can, but we'll do *whatever* she needs, whatever they need, even if what she thinks she needs is to go the scene, see it with her own eyes in order to maybe start to believe that it's real instead of just some horrible nightmare where's she's going to wake up and it'll be okay."

"Whatever she needs," his wife repeated back slowly, each word enunciated. "So if *you'd* gone through that floor..." And as he opened his mouth to steer this conversation in a less distressing direction, her eyes snapped up at him. "Don't you even say it. Is this what I should expect?" Her face was flushed and her lips were twitching at the effort of holding back the rising emotional flood. "A knock at the door, a chief and a chaplain, and then the knowledge that the department will do *whatever* I ask except for the only thing that matters?"

He pulled her tight against his chest, for comfort and for privacy, and she grabbed the lapels of his jacket, twisting them as she buried her face hotly against his left collarbone. Her shoulders were shaking and he stepped them backwards, up against the knotty pine paneling, out of the flow of the crowd and away from the new widow who'd trade everything excepting her children to be similarly comforted in her own husband's arms.

"It wasn't me," he muttered in the hair atop his wife's head, hair that she'd only had time to run a comb through before walking out the door to be here with him, to be here for this family, for their extended family.

Her reply into the rough suede of his jacket was garbled, but he knew she had said, "It could have been."

It would only grieve her more to tell her that she was right.

He hadn't been there, of course. After years of working side-by-side, years of silent, near perfect communication, of knowing exactly what the other man would do in any situation, especially the worst ones where it was too smoke-filled or just too dark to see, too loud to hear, and too hot to be able to think clearly, he'd chased a promotion out of their station and into another. The job was better, the money was better and his new crew was as good as any he'd ever met. He hadn't even been working the same shift, and if he had, he wouldn't have been called for a two-alarm warehouse fire in a different Battalion.

Which didn't make his wife wrong. He'd asked, of course; everyone was talking about it, out of a need to understand what could have been done differently, how they might have known the floor was unsafe. He could've been on that floor, any man could have been, weighted down with gear and with a fully charged hose when the floor gave away and spilled the men onto the loading dock a floor below.

He rocked back and forth on his feet, soothing with his arms and his body and his sheer physical presence the hurts that neither of them wanted to voice. Not here.

"I still can't believe it," his wife whispered into the base of his throat.

She'd given word to the emotions swirling inside his head, coloring every thought, every interaction, every conversation with a degree of disconnection, with an echo, as if he was a step out of balance, a singer in the wrong bar of music, out of sync and rhythm with a set of facts from a distorted version of reality.

She pulled away and brushed fingertips across her eyes to hide the tears.

"I'm a lot of help," she complained into his chest, inside the loosened but still protective and mutually comforting embrace. "Let me go see how I can be useful. I'm sure someone's organizing a schedule for meals and cleaning, and for picking up anyone coming in from out of town."

He closed his eyes and rested his chin atop the crown of her head, brooding over the knowledge that the wives could draw upon experience to organize what would be needed to cope after this tragedy.

He kissed the top of her head and mustered a lukewarm smile for her. "You do that, and I'll go talk to the guys, see what I can find out."

Her fingers tightened around his and she returned a smile as manufactured as his own.

With one hand on her lower back, he followed her toward the kitchen and then he veered left, just before the stairs leading to the second floor, and away from the low hum of voices in the living room and the smell of strong coffee brewing in the kitchen. He strode with heavy steps and heart into the quiet of a hallway that ran to the back of the house. It was as much a gallery as a means of traversing the house, a veritable collection of family artifacts beginning with the obviously staged engagement picture of a beaming couple who looked just barely out of their teens, up to and including this year's official school photographs. The floorboards squeaked underfoot and he added that to the mental list he'd started compiling of projects that needed doing. He'd worked construction in his youth, while waiting for the exam and the academy, and then afterwards on his days off, both for the money and the invaluable insight into structural engineering, electrical wiring, and roofs, all immediately transferable to his chosen profession. There were enough other firefighters with similar backgrounds and complementary skills that this home would never need to pay a tradesman.

The back door led out onto a deck he'd helped build; populated with scattered groups of men, some of which he knew well, others, by sight.

"Cap'n," someone said.

The rank was new enough that outside of his own crew or on duty, he hesitated before responding, certain that the salutation was meant for someone else, someone who wore the authority that came with the bugles with more experience and confidence than he.

He squinted into the blinding sunlight, shaded his eyes with the edge of his hand, and shifted his shoulders inside his jacket as he traded the stifling heat of an overcrowded house for the brisk air of a Southern California January afternoon. He nodded into the direction of the salutation and strode towards that group of men in the far right corner of the deck.

The cluster of burly men garbed in jeans and sweaters or jackets broke ranks to admit him; eyes scanned him in evaluation and then returned to the conversation he'd interrupted.

"I'm telling you, it was an effing bathroom," a thickset man from Truck 37 was insisting.

"Look," a guy from Engine 107 said, blowing out a breath of frustration, "the floor plans..."

"Fuck the floor plans," 37's truckie growled. "I walked through that scene *after* and I saw fixtures." He grimaced. "Pieces from porcelain toilets, cast iron sinks, copper piping, and fragments of a tile and sand-bed floor, scattered all over the loading dock right where that floor

came down. The floor plans were shit. Or out of date. That was a bathroom or a locker room or something up on two, right next to the offices.”

Silence reigned for a few painful moments as each of them considered the weight of the fixtures plus water on fire-weakened floor joists. Someone swore under his breath. It didn’t really matter who it was; he spoke for all of them.

107’s Captain pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboros out of his shirt pocket and tilted it outward, offering it around the group.

For a profession that spent far too much time eating smoke and nearly as much time trying to minimize the amount of smoke they ate, it was confounding how many of them choose to suck in tar and nicotine on a voluntary basis.

He accepted a cigarette and a light with a grateful nod, and took a deep draw on it, fighting down the cough that was pressing upward from his abused lungs. He took another, deeper inhale; let the smoke settle into his lungs and then drift upward, out through his nose. Tension drained from his shoulders and his neck for the first time that day, since he’d heard the news, and he was grateful for the comfort of the tightly wrapped cylinder between his fingers. He’d quit, years back, and temptation only came knocking at the oddest times.

“Saw you talking to the wife,” 107’s Captain said. “How’s she doing?”

He exhaled a rising plume of tobacco smoke and considered his answer. “She hasn’t cried yet,” he said, tightlipped and grim.

The other men winced and there was a sad and weary murmur that ran throughout the group, a gloomy consensus that the longer the stunned denial and shock lasted, the more devastating the actual comprehension of the loss would be when it finally hit. He wasn’t sure he agreed with the group; it was just as possible that she was holding it together for the crowd of communal mourners that had invaded her home.

Engine 107’s captain, aptly named Wasserman, a steely veteran with a lined face and kind eyes pulled him to the side nearest the potted geraniums and lowered his voice. “Look, I know you guys were tight, you worked together a long time, and you’re going to make sure that his family has everything they need. Just don’t...” Wasserman paused, grimaced and glanced towards the house. “Take my advice and don’t let her talk you into talking her down to the scene.”

He coughed on the cigarette and finally spat a tobacco-tinged ball of phlegm off the side of the deck. He raised a wary expression and just looked at Wasserman.

Wasserman nodded, and then let out a massive sigh. “The County doesn’t lose many men, not Line of Duty like this, for which we are eternally grateful. We lose them to injuries, early retirements because their bodies take a beating, and some guys just figure out that they’ve taken about as much physical and mental abuse as they’re gonna take, and they find a job that pays better and sends them home to their wives in the same condition they left and in time for dinner. Every night.”

He was grateful for the cigarette in his hand, as an object of focus and a reason to not have to answer. He sucked in another drag and simply nodded his agreement with Wasserman's words.

"But there have been some, over the years, thankfully fewer than some other departments, but it happens. Just don't let her fixate on the place he died. She'll get a mental picture in her head and she'll give herself nightmares for the next thirty years."

The shudder that wracked him was quick and violent, and he did a poor job of trying to cover it up.

Wasserman just nodded sadly. "That's not what he'd want and I didn't think that's what you'd want either. Plus, that building's gonna get torn down and something will eventually get built there and it'll be a constant ache if she's focused on that place. Redirect her to where he *lived*, their home, the station, the kids' school, their church, whatever works."

He compressed his lips tightly together as he tried to find the right words, dissatisfied with those that finally tumbled out. "Those are all going to be the places where she's going to miss him the most. They're not going to be the same without him there."

Wasserman nodded. "That's exactly right. But that's the life she's going to be living, and you or the guys from his station fixing the roof, or the water heater, or upgrading the electrical isn't going to change that."

He felt something unclench inside his chest, something that he'd boxed up and slammed the lid down upon, and he turned betrayed eyes on his fellow captain.

"Son," the older man said softly, "I know I'm asking a lot of you and it's way too soon to ask it, but you can't let her get stuck. For her and for those kids. You and the other guys can be there for her, and for the kids, but you're *never* going to replace him."

"I know that," he protested, with an unfamiliar flash of indignation, a welcome respite from the near constant buffeting of raw grief. "Jeez, God, that's..." he sputtered, flailing for words that would express the utter impossibility of trying to replace a man who'd filled a role beyond friend, beyond comrade and brother, as irreplaceable to him as he was going to be for his wife and children. "That's not it," he finally said, in incomplete conclusion, words soft, almost whispered. "I honestly can't believe it myself."

"You went to the scene," Wasserman said, with quiet certainty.

He nodded.

"Did it help?"

The broken doors and the charred and shattered interior of the warehouse filled his mind, and the remembered stench of char, soot and smoke filled his nose. The blackened shell of a building had been taped off, the fire crews gone, the warehouse and its contents consumed, destroyed, by fire and water and the tools that had ripped into its skeleton to expose and destroy any lingering threat. He'd been struck by the desolation, the barrenness of what was left.

He shook his head.

Wasserman inhaled slowly through his nose and then gave a sharp nod. "That's because he's not there. He wasn't there then, and he isn't going to be there if you take his wife to see the scene. That's the hardest damn thing to accept. When a man's gone, he's gone everywhere, except in our memories, so it makes no sense to go looking for him where he fell."

It made sense, a hard-edged and clear logic but too bright and brittle to accept just yet. But Wasserman had said the words as gently as possible, so there was little point in arguing or trying to rebut what he knew was genuine compassion, and possibly wise advice.

He sucked in the last drag of the cigarette, watching the red flame eat away at the tobacco leaves and paper wrapper until the heat of it burned his knuckles. He crushed it into the damp soil of the planter, along the other butts that had accumulated there this afternoon under the dried and curling red petals. As he turned back to Wasserman to acknowledge the man in some appropriate manner, he heard his name called. With a nod of gratitude to 107's captain, he made his way to his old crew, his physically battered and grief stricken family, with their shared stories and comparable pain.

Their greetings were physical, fierce hugs that both sought and provided solace, strengthening bonds that had been forged in fire and smoke, in organized chaos and crisis, and long years of days and nights in each other's pockets. He listened to their voices as they rose and fell, softer and more subdued than usual but weaving a familiar harmony, each man his own tone or pitch, together a series of audible cues that all was right with his word. Except it wasn't. They were just a heartbeat out of sync, off pitch.

Hours or minutes later, many of them spent listening for more than what was being said, he heard his name called again, in a familiar voice whose tone suggested it wasn't the first time, or the second, it had been called. Ignoring the mostly affectionately teasing remarks from his colleagues, both those he knew as well as he did his blood family, and those he knew only from working an incident, he pushed through the crowd towards the back door.

Somewhere in the previous minutes or hours, his wife had applied lipstick. It was a minor thing, but it nagged at him as he walked towards where she stood, one foot out the back door, watching his approach with some impatience.

"I promised Mrs. Rudiger that we'd pick up the kids by dinnertime," she said as her eyes searched his.



“Okay,” he said, recognizing a swipe of powder on her nose and cheeks. If she’d fixed her face, it was for a reason and he was pretty sure he found it in the faint traces of red rimming her eyes. She’d spent the afternoon with the wives, and he suspected they’d shared more than meal delivery schedules and the quiet, unspoken, awkward relief that their firefighter husbands been spared.

“And we need to tell the kids,” she said quietly, leaning into the arm he wrapped around her shoulders. “Before they hear it from someone or somewhere else, they need to hear it from us and I’m not doing it without you there. They’re going to need you there.”

He swallowed, and pulled her a little tighter against him before opening the back door to a house teeming with absence, with the black hole of unimaginable loss.

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He was slipping, hands flailing upward, reaching towards safety and grabbing only thick smoke. The air bottle on his back shifted his weight, tipping him so that he fell slanting ever backwards out of the vertical line where his boots would meet the floorboards if he was lucky, or the smoldering contents of the room below if he was not. He made a desperate grab, swinging both arms wildly out to the sides as if searching a room, gasping panicked breaths inside a plastic seal that wouldn’t protect him as he plummeted ever downward, virtually horizontal to what lay below.

A stream of consciousness, pure panic on the verge of hyperventilation chanted that this was bad, this was really bad. He shouldn’t have time to think, shouldn’t have time to do more than lunge for something solid that would slow his descent. Too much time meant too much distance. It meant a fall that he wouldn’t walk away from.

He wasn’t ready for this. He felt that in the thud pump of a heart that wasn’t ready to quit beating, and the whirl of desperate thoughts that shuffled through options, alternatives, seeking a plan, seeking the trained response to this scenario, finding nothing but abject terror. Gravity always wins, he thought bleakly and tried one final outward fling of his arms.

He connected with something soft, something that yanked at him, sent him tumbling sideways, landing with a groan and cry of pain on his right forearm and elbow.

Pain meant he was still alive, he reminded himself as he lay there panting, sore and scared, but alive. His heart was still racing, his breathing ragged and he wasn’t yet ready to open eyes that he’d closed during that last terrifying drop.

“Honey?” said his wife’s voice, somewhere above him. “Honey, are you okay?”

He opened his eyes.

He’d hit floorboards all right, the milled oak hardwood strips that he’d laid himself in his own bedroom.

He stared at the wood, at the reflection of the waning moon glinting off the matte surface of the wood expanse under a window that looked over the front yard. And then he started to shake, and when he closed his eyes he was falling again, plunging at an alarming rate, tumbling and dropping into a hole so deep that it wasn't black; there was no color, just an absence of color, an absence of everything except the grim realization that he wasn't going to escape this.

He heard a squeak and then a weight settled next to him. Warm flesh pressed against him, arms wrapped around his chest and wrestled him back into the room, pulled him against soft warmth and familiar skin.

He laid his head on his wife's shoulder and the sobs spilled out, in waves that broke over them both in a torrent of salt water, washing away the blackness and the terror, washing away everything but the fall.

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A/N: So, who was 'He?' That depends a great deal on the reader and who *you* saw in the story.

I most definitely had a Station 51 character in mind as the POV from which this story was told, but it may not be the character you think. The truth is that it could be the perspective of any one of the Station 51 crew and the LODD could be another member of the Station 51 crew. Or it could be someone they knew before or after their assignment at Station 51 in Carson, CA.

The primary POV character is married, as is the man whose death is the emotional core of this story, but the timing is not set. So I leave it to your interpretation, in acknowledgement of the intrinsically dangerous nature of firefighting and in recognition of the courage and dedication of the men and women who do it.

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