

Michael Stoker

(Hero Calms Tike)

Chapter 1

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It is raining, and I cannot breathe. Wait, I tell myself, just wait. This is not the first time I've had the breath knocked out of me, but it has been awhile. The last time was when my older brother threw me off of the top bunk in the claiming of his ultimate domination as "king of the hill." The feeling terrified me at the age of seven, and I've got to say, years later the panic is again licking at the edges of my big-boy brain. Finally, whatever atmospheric equilibrium my system has lost returns to allow that first desperate wheeze. Subsequent respirations kick in as if my lungs have not just betrayed me by forgetting how to inhale. My wandering mind considers this as a possible definition for "having the stuffing knocked right out of you". I lie still, reveling in the intake and out-whoosh of air. It makes you wonder at a baby's initial gasping moments after birth - what with first impressions being the strongest and all. Amazing that more of us are not scarred for life - then again, perhaps we are.

The most vital of body functions restored, Mike opened his eyes, only to have to squint against the rain. He considered the boulder-studded slope that angled up from where he lay. His fractured concentration worried at calculations of slope and distance: *fifty degrees? fifty-five? a tumble of... perhaps a hundred and twenty feet?* His mind stuttered and skipped away as it searched for an anchor. There it was: a *search, the fall...* something else nagged at him, something urgent, something... *THE CHILD!*

His head whipped around from side to side. Roy and John and several folks at Rampart would have his hide for moving after his recent sliding descent. He could envision his future clearly: probable concussion, no pain medication, full neck and spinal precautions. Well, sadly, the members of his own personal medical community were not present at the moment, but unless his "probable concussion" came with some pretty vivid false memories, the kid they were all hunting for was.

"Hey, Foster. You there pal?" Mike called as he twisted to locate the toddler who had wandered away from his parents and the picnic area two hours ago. This movement revealed he was lying flat on his back, on a rock ledge which was so narrow that if the child *had* been sharing it with him, he would have been crushed by Mike's not-so-graceful landing. He reconsidered the wisdom of flailing about. It was a narrow little shelf, the rain was making the entire hillside a slip-n-slide and his brain *had* just sent a cease-and-desist order in the form of a shower of black spots across his vision.

He experimented with a few more of those newly appreciated breaths, in an attempt to tamp down on his stomach's response to both the wave of dizziness and the agony radiating from his left shoulder. His stomach, never an obedient beast at a time like this, refused to be subjected to cerebral dictatorship. He rolled to keep from aspirating. His shoulder's protests reached new levels, which in turn sent him...

...waking at the base of the slip-n-slide. He looked up into the grubby face of a tow-headed boy who, he guessed might answer to "Foster", if only he could spit enough mud out of his own mouth to test the theory.

Or maybe not. The kid, upon making eye contact, crab-scuttled back into the brush like Mike had snarled at him. Maybe he had uttered something akin to a growl. In his defense, it was a totally visceral response to the klaxons sounding at the base of his skull, in competition with the warnings coming from his stomach, all set against the backdrop of thrumming displeasure his damn shoulder was adding to the mix. Mike thought the kid would be lucky if he didn't hurl all over him before this little adventure played out.

Poor kid. Although the rain had let up, he was wet and cold and at an age Mike's sister once described as having a fully developed sense of "stranger-danger". He was terrified of this moaning, puking, *unknown* adult. Go figure. Where was this finely honed sense of self-preservation when the grubby urchin first got the urge to wander off into a forest? A forest that was teeming with hazards, the mere imagining of which was whittling years off of his mom and dad's life expectancies. *Poor kid.* Mike needed to see about halting his parents' accelerated aging process by reuniting the happy family. *Where the hell did the sun go?* Dusk seemed to have fallen during his last inadvertent snooze.

It dawned on him that he could call with the HT that was poking him in the hip from where it resided in a turnout coat pocket. *Damn, I should have called first thing - sometime after catching my breath and losing my lunch. Huh, sitting up should not be taking this much concentration, and I sure-the-hell wish it didn't hurt this much.* "Hey, Foster, I know you're scared. It's okay, pal. My name's Mi...Mike. I'm just... gonna sit up here...and, and take out my HT and call for..."

... this time, he managed not to growl upon waking - in spite of waking to being poked in the cheek with a three-foot branch. At least the kid missed his eyeball. Foster was calling "My-Mike!" between each of his prodding efforts.

"Hey, buddy, I'm up. Why don't you put the stick down and...?" The toddler lurched to scurry away again but not before using the stick as a pivot point to turn his two-and-a-half-year old balance on. Mike was almost positive it didn't actually drill through his cheek. The kid did put the stick down, though. And he didn't disappear into the bushes, but stopped five feet away, turning to plop down on his overall covered butt. He then shoved not his thumb, but his two middle fingers into his mouth.

The child kept a watchful eye on the man lying in the mud; the silence between them broken by an occasional juicy slurp. Mike figured that if sheer determination and generated suction could draw comfort from a pair of fingers, the kid was entitled. His nieces were big fans of binkies. He himself had gnawed on the edge of a silky blanket until it mysteriously disappeared from his life at the age of four.

"Well, little guy, time to get off the stick (yeah, I know pretty pathetic, huh?) Let's you and I try that one more time. I'll sit up, and you stay put for a minute. 'Kay?"

Mike fumbled to retrieve the HT, "shit, Shit, SHIT! Pardon my mouth, little guy... 'shit' is a naughty word. Good boys don't say words like that." *No*, he thought to himself, *but they sure as hell can think them*. He indulged silently for several seconds while he fiddled with an HT that *had* been crushed by a not-so-graceful landing. "Shit! Okay, that one slipped out. You're gonna have to cut me some slack in the cursing department - these being extenuating circumstances and all." Apparently unoffended, the kid was currently grinning around the two fingers which were now hooked in ready-position over his lower teeth.

A flash of lightning caused a worried little pucker to form above a pug nose. With the follow-up thunder-clap, the concept of stranger-danger flew in the face of a greater terror and the fireman found his lap full of frantic toddler. There was no containing the noise that escaped his mouth as the child tried to climb his frame. The kid nearly toppled them both back into the mud before settling on pressing a sobbing face deep into Mike's neck.

Making what he hoped was a comforting sound through his clenched teeth, Mike rearranged various limbs so that he was supporting most of Foster's weight on his own out-stretched legs. Drawing an uneven breath, he began to scoot backwards towards the relative shelter of an overhanging rock.

This choice worried him, because he knew the guys were searching for them both by now, but the thought of holding an armload of terrified toddler in a thunderstorm eclipsed the logic of staying out in the open. Plus, it was getting fully dark and starting to rain again. The deciding factor was the return of the earlier trifecta of pounding head, swimming vision and belligerent stomach. Mike just wanted to get the kid calmed down enough to give himself time to come up with any version of a plan that didn't involve throwing up and toppling over in a dead faint again.

Which, Mike thought could very well happen sometime during this *tediously slow*, (scoot) *excruciatingly painful*, (pause to concentrate on *not* hurling all over the kid in his lap) *fucking frustrating*... he halted that train of thought before some of his silent, not-fit-for-tender-ears adverbial rant escalated into something audible.

That last little drop was only about five feet, so things are not nearly as bad as they might have been.

"That's me, by the way, little guy," Mike looked down at his passenger after he paused to cast a glance back to gauge his progress. 'Not really a 'cup half full' kinda guy, but 'never have been able to see it as 'half empty' either. Half is, well, *half*. Plus, at least I've got a cup." Mike ended his short, one-sided dialogue panting. He took a moment to again marshal control over various mutinous bodily systems and then continued his struggle to get them all - kid, self, systems - under some kind of cover.

He set Foster against the rock face and backed out enough to give a few hollers which, for what it cost in terms of his ratcheting pain level and the possibility of alarming the kid even more, produced less than the hoped for volume. He dug through his pockets for his two-cell mag light and flashed the top of the hill-side with a slow, sweeping pattern.

"Come here Foster. How 'bout you help me make some noise? Let's see, can you say 'meow' like a kitty cat?"

"eeow"

"And what does a puppy-dog say?"

Foster smiled, warming to this familiar game. "Bow-wow, wow-wow."

"Solid work, little man... Now I'm gonna be a wolf: ow-oooooooo." Mike gingerly tipped his head back in demonstration. "Wolves sing together. Come on now, let's hear your best wolf howl."

The toddler gave a tentative "ow-woo," at first, but eventually built to a pretty impressive volume for such a little guy.

Mike finished out of breath, out of strength and once again alarmingly light-headed after adding a yelp of "Hey, we're down at the base of the cliff."

He emptied his pockets and took inventory. A pair of gloves, the flashlight, a loop of nylon webbing, two wooden door chocks, a collapsible spanner wrench... Damn, he and the guys had only just started to search, in hopes they would stumble upon the missing child before darkness settled and the predicted storm descended. They hadn't stopped to equip themselves for any sort of outdoor survival, thinking they would be called in to regroup as soon as the SAR teams arrived. They'd been fanning out for over half an hour when he spotted what he thought could be small footprints. Following them to a ledge above a creek below, he was sure he had seen the toddler peering up at him. He'd stepped sideways to get a better view; the muddy hillside had started to move under his feet.

Making an exaggerated face, Mike shucked Foster out of his ripe diaper. "Phew-ie, kid you are rank." A quick check revealed a very muddy little boy who had somehow arrived at the base of the hill relatively unscathed. *The cup was definitely better than half full.* Passing the length of webbing through the back straps of Foster's overalls and tying a one-handed bowline, he formed a leash which Mike then cinched to his own right wrist. He left the overall legs unsnapped and tucked the child against his chest under his turnout coat.

Mike was sure he heard a whispery "shit" lisp from around soggy fingers as Foster's eyes drifted closed. This also worried him some. His sister would murder him if her girls ever picked up foul language from their uncle, so he automatically extrapolated that to mean this impressionable child's mom would take similar exception. *Still, out of the mouths of babes.* Mike gave in and closed his own eyes. Time passed; stars came out; the pair slept on.

Mike wrinkled his nose at the odor wafting from beneath his coat. Nothing for it, but now they both smelled like they had broken house training. Peeling back his canvas collar, he looked down on the sleeping kid. They were going to have to find a way to get noticed today, that or hike out... scoot out - whatever. He knew where they were, but had no idea if there was any sort of path leading from where they had spent the night. Retracing his earlier journey down the face of the hill was out of the question. He had yet to even make it to a standing position and decided it was high time he gave that a shot. His own bladder was beginning to set up a clamor so he eased his sleeping charge down to the soft, relatively dry dirt under the overhang. He had to pause after even that much effort. Sweat beaded his forehead as he leaned over the child.

Scoot back, rise to both knees, right knee up to plant a foot - a treacherous stomach rolls. Right hand braced on right knee, push up - head throbs. Gasp, retch, eyes stream. Fine. Half-way up and on his knees was just fine - a worthy and a *fine* goal. Shuffle to the side, fumble with fastenings, and at last: some relief, from some quarter. Then a glance sideways afforded a different sort of relief as a second stream joined his in imitation.

Mike felt his face relax from rigid pain-held lines into a shadow of a grin. "Good job, little man. Stay close now; we need to get back out in the open. Let's see who can stay verticle the longest."

The kid won. Mike had to make sure that when he crumpled, the heap he formed was not on top of his new sidekick.

"Phew-ie!" Foster declared with a final clumsy pat to his new friend's back, as Mike heaved bile into the muddy earth two inches below his nose.

"Yeah, buddy. You stink, I stink, we'll both stink together."

"I proclaim this an excellent spot to attract some attention. How 'bout it little wolf, ow-ooooo," Mike began weakly and smiled in encouragement as he was joined by a more robust cub-howl. It was a misty, colorless dawn, but now that the storm had passed, he figured the search would be gearing up again.

As it turned out, the fastest mode of travel he could manage was upright, shuffling on his knees. His left arm supported by tucking it into the front of his turnout, he tugged on the toddler's leash as they made their way to the stream edge.

Mike fashioned his sternest expression as they neared the flowing water. "That's close enough little man. Why don't you sit?" A gentle tug on the webbing brought the boy to the desired position. "Now, you stay here. Don't move. Stay put." Mike held his hand out in the universal "stop" signal as he backed away from the child, trying to judge if the kid would try to follow the last bit to the water's edge.

"Shtay." Foster murmured. The fingers were back in place.

"Yeah, good boy, stay." Mike wondered fleetingly if the kid would be wagging an invisible tail and in therapy after this little chapter in his life.

"I guess I lied, buddy. I don't really have a cup. Sometimes, you just gotta make do. It took him several minutes, but Mike managed to lower himself flat and position himself to stretch his good arm to reach the flowing water below. "There, my shoe runneth over."

He broke a sweat again as he scooted the four feet back to the toddler's side.

"Here like this," Mike demonstrated proper shoe-guzzling technique, which prompted a wave of pint-sized belly laughs from his attentive audience. Mike stopped after a small swallow, thinking he didn't want to break the current truce his stomach had honored for the past forty-five minutes. "Now your turn, little guy," Mike held the shoe while Foster drank. It looked to Mike like a fair amount got down the correct pipe.

"We'll both be on a round of antibiotics after this. Can you say 'giardia'?"

The boy looked him in the eye and announced instead, "My-Mike, I hung'y."

Mike sighed, "I know, little guy. I know. Help should be coming real soon." He tipped his head back to initiate another howl-fest, which Foster again joined with enthusiasm. Mike finished with as loud a "down here, hey, we're down here," as he could muster.

Foster echoed with his own translation, "Down hewr, we's hewr!"

His little sidekick was contentedly orbiting him, still tethered by the webbing-turned kid-leash. He seemed to have found his words because he was singing what Mike interpreted as a rousing rendition of *If You're Happy and You Know It*, complete with hand claps, foot stomps and head nods. When it came to 'doing all three', the kid landed for the umpteenth time on his backside, which was also Mike's current position. He seemed to have run out of steam after his water-gathering expedition.

His vision was going spotty again, and saliva was building ominously. He scooted further from the stream's bank, urging the day's catch to follow by reeling him in. Foster giggled at the new game and leaned against the webbed restraint, both chubby legs churning in place.

Mike finally got the squirmy kid close enough to recheck the knot. He almost smiled in spite of the jarring pain, as his little fish immediately ran back out the moment he was released, obviously expecting to begin the process again. The child turned around, only to be disappointed to find that his new playmate was taking another nap.

Foster cast a worried glance at the man who continued to lie curled on his side. He toddled over to stare intently and nearly toppled forward as he tried to pry an eyelid open. His buddy did not stir. He wandered to the edge of his tethered world and decided to play the howling game again.

John and Roy rappelled down the steep incline to join the muddy SAR dog as it barked in seeming encouragement. The shepherd-mix whirled away and disappeared through the brush.

A squealed, "Hi, doggy, come play with me!" rose from the forest floor below them. An "ow-wooooo" drifted upward a moment later.

John's eyes found Roy's across the distance, and his face broke into a joy-filled grin. "Told you no self-respecting wolf would make a noise like that," he called. They were unsnapping carabiners the moment their feet touched the ground.

They came upon the scene of a boy hugging the dog while he regaled the animal with his recent adventures in excited toddler-babble. Startled mid-tale by Roy and John rushing into the glade, he tried to hide behind their recumbent friend's back - their alarmingly non-responsive friend's back.

They slowed slightly, but still advanced as the panicky kid reached the end of the orange strap.

Roy squatted down by Mike's head, taking hold of the webbing to stop the jerking of Mike's right arm. "Hey there, Foster. It's gonna be alright. My name's Roy," He reached a hand back to search for Mike's carotid, "and this is Johnny." He nodded towards his partner as John knelt at Mike's side, hands already moving over Mike's body in rapid assessment.

"Sixty-ish and steady," Roy offered as he sighed in relief. He fished the HT out of a pocket. "Engine 51, this is Squad 51. How do you read?"

"We read you, Roy," Cap's voice immediately answered.

"Cap, we've got them. The child is alert and mobile, Mike is unconscious. We'll need both stokes, blankets, the backboard, and the equipment. We're about a hundred feet from the base of the lower cliff, over."

"Copy that, Squad 51: stokes, blankets, backboard, equipment. We'll be down with some extra manpower ASAP."

The boy had gathered enough courage to crawl back to kneel by his buddy. "Shhh!," he scolded in a loud whisper, "him's sleeping." A grubby, proprietary hand settled on Mike's head.

"I see that." Roy refrained from reaching toward the boy just yet. "How 'bout I check you out while Johnny helps Mike here?"

"We's hung'y." the boy announced to the men dressed somewhat like his friend.

"We'll work on getting something into your tummy as soon as we can get you back up that hill." Roy promised as the toddler allowed him to put a hand on his forehead and to take a pulse at the crook of his elbow. The paramedic shrugged out of his dark blue jacket to wrap it around the child. He reached to untie the webbing, but Foster struggled to be released and moved to squat by Mike's head. Before either paramedic realized what he intended, the boy was prying open Mike's left eye.

"I already checked that, kiddo," John lifted Foster away and handed him back to Roy, freeing Mike's wrist from the orange loop as he did so. "Equal, but sluggish," he informed them both as Roy turned to set the child down before helping him log-roll Mike to his back.

At Mike's moan, Roy leaned close. "Mike, can you open your eyes for me? Stoker! Open your eyes."

"Open you eyes!" A little parrot perched near his head chimed in. "Wake up, My-Mike!"

Mike squinted up into two sets of blue eyes, one pair hovered a disorienting two inches above his own, only to widen in surprise when Roy once again lifted their owner out of the way.

The kid would only settle down when they gave him the job of holding My-Mike's shoe and the length of orange webbing, and then only if they let him sit at Mike's side. He immediately set to trying to place the loop back around Mike's right wrist.

Roy noted Mike's hand moved to a better angle to help the determined toddler achieve his apparent goal of re-binding himself to "My-Mike." The father of two knew better than to hazard a guess as to how that moniker had evolved, but imagined the tale of what went on while Stoker and his small friend waited for rescue might be worth hearing. However the two had become best-buds, they were going to be hard to separate, and Roy did not relish the moment when they were going to have to force the issue. "Mike, do you remember what happened?" he asked, continuing to try and get a handle on the engineer's level of consciousness.

"He falled down." Casey offered softly as he settled into the circle of Mike's right arm.

"Mike, I need *you* to try and answer. Do you remember what happened?" Making a gentle shushing sound, Roy reached over to brush the toddler's mouth in a reminder not to help.

Roy figured he'd had more alarming responses than the upward twitch of a lip, and the "I falled down." that Mike delivered on an exhaled sigh.

The promised reinforcements arrived just as John was finishing the initial assessment.

The SAR team was reunited; dog and master were playing a celebratory game of tug-of-war off to the side. Marco hailed Rampart and relayed vitals and orders. Chet reached to peel the toddler from Mike's side, but halted at the nearly super-sonic wail that the kid immediately set up. Both Roy and John moved to try to keep Foster from burrowing under the yellow blanket they had just folded around the engineer.

Suddenly, the keening wail was cut short as the child was plucked up and untangled from the webbing. Roy threw his captain a grateful look as he turned to drag the stokes basket closer to position it at Mike's side. Cap set the shocked-into-momentary-silence child into the crook of his arm and firmly informed the tike, "That's enough, young man. We need to get Mike all tucked in and ready for his ride back up the hill. How about we head over here and get you bundled up and warm so you can go up and see your mom and dad? They are waiting for you right up there." Foster's eyes followed the gesture the giant in the white-striped fire helmet made toward the top of the ridge.

Cap had to stop short to avoid running into John's upraised hand which held a shoe, of all things. Before he could do much more than raise an eyebrow in consternation, the sniffing bundle of toddler-hood reached to snag the offered item, and clutched it close like it was a Teddy bear, proclaiming it "My-Mike's shoooo."

Johnny turned his head up with a crooked grin. "Why don't you keep it safe for him, pal; make sure it doesn't get lost or anything? I'll be over in a bit to help give you a ride in your own special fireman's rescue basket, just like your buddy, Mike here. We'll get you to your mom and dad lickety-split, okay?"

Foster nodded, bringing his fingers up to his mouth, which predictably, adorably caused him to slur the rest of his response. "Wan' my mamma." Cap used this moment of co-operation to stride away, one arm bracing the child, the other raising an HT to begin the process of granting that very wish.

"My-Mike!"

He'd somehow lost track of the actual number of times he had been awakened at the base of the hill by various toddler-tactics. Smiling, he wondered if Dr. Bracket could give the kid a part-time job doing hourly neuro checks on ER patients, because his small friend had a definite talent.

Mike opened his eyes when he heard someone rise from the chair at the side of the bed. His captain intercepted a cleaner version of his co-adventurer, just as the boy began an assault on the bed rails, trying for better access to his best buddy.

A young couple stood in the doorway gazing fondly at the pint-sized tornado.

"Hey, little man. I like your new overalls." Mike smiled into familiar china-blue eyes, as his captain held Foster suspended by the back straps, so the boy could deliver an enthusiastic, sloppy kiss.

"Cap, put him down before he tosses his cookies, I finally got my stomach settled, but I don't think it's ready for that type of not-so-subliminal message. Let him sit here." Mike indicated an empty spot on the right side of the bed.

The couple made their way into Mike's room. "Hello, I'm Daniel Wing, and this is my wife, Sandy." Smiling, the man reached to accept Mike's offered handshake. "We just dropped by to thank you for keeping our son safe."

The young woman who leaned over to place her hand on Mike's was the obvious source of the boy's tow-headedness. "Thank you." she said simply, before straightening to run a hand through her son's hair.

"Foster says this is yours. He slept with it last night." Mr. Wing lifted a paper sack and then turned to set it in the windowsill.

Mike waited for further explanation and wasn't kept waiting long.

"My-Mike's shoe!" the boy supplied with improved diction since his hands were busy running a Hot Wheels fire engine along the bed rail.

"He also wanted to drink from it...?" Sandy paused, both eyebrows raised in hesitant question.

"Well, Ma'am, you see, we didn't have anything else handy to use, and..."

"Of course, I meant no criticism. They told us how you took care of him even though you were injured. I was just curious." Sandy leaned back into her husband, whose arm encircled her waist. "It's not like you had a sippy-cup handy."

" 'm sorry about the antibiotics they put us on. I jus' didn't have a way to purify the stream water..."

Sandy noticed Mike was starting to slur his words and his eyes were beginning to blink owlishly with fatigue and medication. She reached to gather her son up, catching the grateful look Captain Stanley gave her. "Don't be. We are just glad you found him when you did. He barely has a scratch on him. You were the perfect guardian angel. You should rest now." The mother reached again to pat his good arm. "Your captain tells us you'll be here for another day or two, and that your shoulder will take a bit longer to heal than..." she paused with a twinkle in her eyes, "what he termed your 'incredibly hard, incredibly stubborn head.' Thank you again," she finished with a smile as she set Foster on his feet.

The lad gathered a fold of her pant leg in one hand and waved his Hot-Wheel-dedicated-hand toward Mike. Following his parents to the door, he called out a "Bye-Bye," and with what Cap could only describe as a proud grin, clearly enunciated in a sing-song voice, "shit, shit, shit." The hushed but shocked reaction of his parents could be heard as they moved down the hallway.

Hank snorted, and then wheezed as he struggled not to choke on his own spit. It had not taken any of his finely tuned, captain-ly super powers to deduce where the youngling might have picked up such a phrase. "Yep, that's you, Stoker, just a perfect angel," he teased, turning back towards the bed. He swallowed the unfinished ribbing that hovered on his lips, deciding it would have to keep. He rearranged the blanket that had gotten tangled during the boy's visitation and settled back into the chair at Mike's bedside. He was more than content to listen as his engineer settled into his own soft pattern of snorts.