

DISCO INFERNO

By [Margaret-Anne Park](#)



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Part One – I Don't Like Spiders or Snakes...

"Station 16, Station 51. Structure fire with injuries, The Barnyard; two miles down Stillwater Canyon Road off Highway 405. Time out, 1218."

"Station 16, 10-4. KMG 117," responded Captain Steele. "Okay, boys, let's get rolling!"

"Must be a barn or something," said Bob Bellingham, scratching at his armpit and sniffing his fingers with speculation. He pulled out the map, and fired a series of directions to his partner, Craig Brice.

"Actually, Bob," corrected Craig, "it's a hobby farm with a campground, where some of the barns have been converted into a disco, restaurant and theatre complex. They perform all styles of theatre, but *this* summer they're putting on a Shakespeare festival. They're pretty good, especially for a company of only a dozen actors," he admitted.

"So, you already know how to get there?" Bob asked, folding up the map and stuffing it back into the glove compartment. He glanced at his partner, his grin broad. "Funny, you don't *look* like the type to be into barnyard humor."

A pink flush covered Craig's cheeks. "It wasn't exactly my idea. My girlfriend had her heart set on three of the performances, so we spent last weekend camping and going to plays." His lips twitched in a brief grin. "It was a really great weekend, too. We even got in a bit of dancing. The plays were sort of a bonus."

Bob's eyebrows rose. "That sounds interesting. Care to give me the lowdown?" he leered, winking.

Craig's cheeks reddened, as he turned down Stillwater Canyon Road, remembering the last time he'd driven here. "A gentleman never kisses and tells," he said in a decisive tone, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Bob chuckled. "One of these days, I'll get you rip-roaring drunk, and I'll make sure to have a tape recorder. Think of the blackmail opportunities," he snickered.

Craig pointed ahead out the windshield. "Look, Bob."

Bob's face sobered as he beheld a tall column of black smoke on the horizon. "Wow. If it's that size from a mile away, I don't think we'll be saving *that* barn today." He reached for the radio mike. "Engine 16 from Squad 16."

Steele replied, "Go ahead, Squad 16."

"We've got a pillar of black smoke showing from about a mile away, Cap," said Bellingham.

"10-4, Squad 16. Full turnouts and masks," ordered Steele. "And wait for the engine to arrive before you go anywhere near there."

Craig pulled the squad over beside the corral housing the petting zoo, immediately on the right near the entrance to the complex. There was an assortment of tame goats, chickens, sheep and ponies milling around within the fence. Brice picked up the microphone. "Captain Steele, there is smoke showing from the middle of the silo. The silo is connected to two barns. The one on the south houses the disco and restaurant; the one on the north houses the museum and theatre complex. There is a campground beside the theatre, and a pond between the campground and the petting zoo. We're stationed at the petting zoo, just inside the grounds."

"Thanks, Brice," replied Captain Steele. He turned to his engineer, Paul O'Keefe, as the rig arrived at the complex. "There," he pointed at the silo. He swiveled in his seat and smiled grimly at the sight of the pond. "Good. You should be able to draft from the pond. It looks like a good size."

After Paul had pulled the engine up at the pond, Steele stepped out of the rig and jotted his Fire Ground plan in his notebook, then addressed his crew. "Okay. Miller and Carling, help O'Keefe set up the drafting platform in the pond, then get a line on that silo. Remember to maintain that perimeter. Brice, Bellingham, I want you to check in the theatre barn for any victims. Then check out the disco/restaurant barn. Right in, right out, got it?" said Steele.

"Got it," replied Brice. "Let's go, Bob," he said, slipping his SCBA into place.

A disheveled man ran at them, his movements frantic. "Thank God you're here! My name's Kevin. My friend and I were trying to get some of the antique machinery out of the barn, and Randy got his arm caught in an auger." He tugged at Bellingham's sleeve. "Hurry! He's bleeding somethin' awful!"

"Where is he?" asked Bellingham, his voice and demeanour calming the panicked man.

"That way," gestured Kevin, pointing a trembling finger toward the barn at the furthest end of the complex.

"Is there anyone else here?" asked Captain Steele.

"Um, just the actors -- they're in the theatre somewhere. The restaurant and disco are only open on the weekends, so there's nobody there at the moment. C'mon, Randy's trapped and we have to get him out before the fire spreads!" said Kevin, his voice rising in pitch and volume.

"Get him out of there and get those people out of the theatre," ordered Steele.

The far barn was clad in a false front of white and brown timbers in a mock-Tudor pattern, with a large sign proclaiming 'Ye Olde Shakespeare Festival' in large gothic letters.

"In the theatre?" demanded Brice.

"No, no," replied Kevin waving his hands in impatience, his voice exasperated. "Over there, in the museum!" he indicated a small, weather-beaten door in a grayish section of the barn wall, next to the elaborate design around the entrance to the theatre. A smaller sign over a rusty screen door bore the legend 'Antique Farming Equipment Museum'.

"We'll get him," replied Bellingham. "Just stay here, out of the way, okay?"

"Sure...sure thing," answered Kevin.

Brice led the way into the museum. "Randy?" he called out.

"Over here!" came a strangled voice from a darkened corner under the far side of the loft.

Bellingham looked up at the loft, which ran along the side of the wall where the barn adjoined the silo. Bales of hay, old rusted hoes and rolls of barbed wire lay near the edge of the raised platform above him. *Jeez, I hope that fire doesn't spread over here. The hay will go up in a flash, and take the rest of this building with it.* He followed Brice over to the trapped man.

"What happened, sir?" asked Brice, his voice devoid of emotion. He examined the machinery that had trapped Randy's arm, while Bellingham assessed Randy's injuries.

The man's arm was caught between the rusty blade of an auger and the wall of the chute. A large, jagged fragment of bloody bone had pierced through Randy's skin just below the level of the auger's blade. The skin at the site of the blade was bruised so deeply that it appeared nearly black from the tissue damage. Blood oozed from jagged cuts at the edges of the bruised tissue.

"We were just trying to get some of this equipment out of the museum in case the fire from the silo spreads." Randy grimaced as Bellingham eased his fingers alongside the protruding bone. "I put my arm in here to lift this thing, and the blade rotated..."

Bellingham glanced at his partner over the patient's head. He mouthed, 'As soon as we get him free from this machine, he's going to need some MS and pressure dressings.'

Craig nodded once, reached into his turnouts, and held up a large dressing in such a fashion that Randy couldn't see it. 'MS is at the squad. We're going to have to get him away from this machinery -- he might fixate on it, and it's best to remove him from the possibility of fire,' he whispered to his partner, his lips barely moving.

Bob cracked a smile and shook his head slightly. 'One step ahead, as always,' he mouthed.

Brice pulled out the handie-talkie. "HT 16 to Engine 16."

"Go ahead, Brice," answered Steele.

"Sir, we're going to need the combination tool to get him out of this machine. I think that if we cut the auger above and below the injury, and use the spreaders on the chute, we should be able to get him out of here. His arm's just trapped, not actually twisted, so that should work."

"10-4. I'll send it over with O'Keefe." Steele glanced at his engineer, who nodded, seized the equipment and hastened over to the museum.

Brice used the cutting section of the combination tool to sever the bar of the auger, and the tips of the hydraulic spreaders to push away the side of the chute.

Randy groaned and sagged against the machine as the pressure on his arm was released. Beads of sweat covered his forehead and began to run down his face. His breathing quickened and he gritted his teeth.

As Craig removed the blade that had impaled Randy's arm, Bob slapped the dressing on the injured arm above the site of the fracture. He tightened it as the blood from the gaping wound welled to the surface and started to flow freely, now that the auger blade no longer acted as a dam for the severed blood vessels in the injured arm.

"Can you walk?" asked Bellingham, sliding his arm under Randy's good arm and assisting him to a standing position.

"Yeah, I think so," replied Randy through gritted teeth, cradling his wounded arm.

"Good. We'll get your arm splinted when we get back to the squad, but we'd better get out of here, pronto," said Bellingham, casting an uneasy glance up at the rickety loft.

"Let's get going, then," declared Brice, picking up the combination tool and gesturing Bob and Randy out of the building ahead of him.

As they passed Engine 16, Bellingham shouted, "Cap, we're gonna need an ambulance!"

"All right, Bellingham," responded Captain Steele. He changed frequency on his handie-talkie and reported, "LA, Engine 16. Respond an ambulance to our location."

Brice and Bellingham hurried with their patient over to their squad. They lowered Randy gently to the ground. Brice pulled off his gloves and tucked them neatly into the pocket of his turnout coat, which he shrugged off and tossed over the rail near the Petting Zoo. He didn't see it slide off the post, into the corner of the yard. He bent over their patient, easing the injured man's position.

Bellingham trotted to the squad and removed the trauma box and biophone. He brought it over to their patient, and waved at Johnny and Roy as Station 51 arrived on the scene. "Captain Steele's over by the far barn!" he called, pointing the way.

Brice gave a curt nod to Roy and Johnny as Squad 51 passed them.

Roy parked the squad just beyond Squad 16. As Johnny slammed the door and donned his turnouts, he shouted, "Brice, you guys need any help?"

Craig replied in a clipped tone, "Everything's under control here, Gage. There's nobody else in the museum. We didn't get a chance to check the theatre, however. There are apparently about a dozen actors in there that need to be evacuated."

"Thanks, Brice," acknowledged Roy, with a wave. He extended the aerial on the handie-talkie. "Engine 16 from Squad 51. Squad 16 informs us that there are still people in the theatre. Do you want us to evacuate them?"

"Squad 51, that's affirmative," replied Steele. "Use your SCBA -- we don't know what kind of smoke we might get if that silo blows again."

"10-4," acknowledged Roy.

"See ya," said Johnny as he and Roy hurried to the theatre.

Brice opened the trauma box and removed a handful of pressure dressings. "Bellingham, contact Rampart, and then set up an IV," he said curtly, as he pulled an arm splint from the box. He checked the dressing on the wound above the open fracture, then added another one of top of the now bloody gauze. "How are you feeling, Randy?" he asked. He turned his focus to the other wound, placed a dressing loosely over the protruding bones, then applied a ring bandage around the fracture and tied it into place. He reached for the splint. "Randy?" he repeated.

"Mmm?... Yeah, whaddya want?" slurred the injured man. His eyes unfocused, the lids drooped closed.

"C'mon, Randy," urged Bob, as he hooked up the biophone. "Stay with us." He shot his partner a worried glance, and retrieved the drug box from the squad. "He's getting really shocky, Craig."

"I am aware of that," Brice sniffed. "Randy, open your eyes," he ordered.

"'kay," mumbled Randy. He shifted slightly and moaned. "Man, my arm *really* hurts!"

"We're getting in touch with the hospital, and as soon as the doctor authorizes it, we can give you something for the pain. Do you hurt anywhere else?" asked Craig.

"Naw, just the arm, but it's really killing me." He grimaced.

Kevin, who had been hovering by the fence to the petting zoo, trying not to get in the way, asked, "Is he gonna be all right?"

Bob turned and flashed Kevin a reassuring grin. "He should be fine. Why don't you go over to the campground and join the other actors?" he suggested.

Kevin snorted in disdain. "Randy and me, we're not *actors* -- we do *real* work. We're the stage crew for this happy little bunch. Take it easy, Randy -- I'll stop by the hospital later," Kevin leaned over and patted Randy's shoulder. "I'd better go make sure that Vlad, the 'great' director, can handle things over at the campground."

"Thanks, Kevin," answered Randy, giving a listless wave at Kevin's retreating back.

Brice finished tying off the splint, then inflated the blood pressure cuff on Randy's uninjured arm.

"Randy, do you have any allergies?"

Randy shook his head. "Nope. No allergies, no medications, no medical conditions -- that's the drill, ain't it?" he grinned. "I remember from my brother's training. He's a first responder up in 'Frisco, on a Search and Rescue team."

Brice smiled in return. "That's right. Just lie still and let us do the work."

Bellingham frowned in annoyance, then made an adjustment to the biophone. "Rampart, this is Squad 16. How do you read me?" he said. He drummed his fingers, impatient at the delay, glanced at Craig, and shook his head. "Nothin'," he replied in disgust.

"Try it again, Bellingham," urged Brice. "We're gonna need authorization for an IV and a painkiller."

Bob nodded, twisted the dial to a different frequency, and attempted to raise the hospital on the radio. "Rampart, this is Squad 16." He beamed as Mike Morton's voice answered.

"Squad 16, this is Rampart."

Bob took the clipboard and read Craig's meticulous notes. "Rampart, we have a 32 year old male, whose right forearm was caught in an auger. He has an open fracture of the right radius and ulna, proximal to the wrist, and severe lacerations from the fracture site to just below the elbow. We have applied two pressure dressings to the lacerations, and the bleeding is now under control. The arm has been splinted. Patient is shocky, and in quite a lot of pain."

"10-4, 16. What are his vitals?" asked Morton. He scribbled down the information that Bob recited.

"Rampart, pulse is 98 and strong, respirations are 24 and shallow. Blood pressure is 110 over 80. His skin is pale, cool and diaphoretic. There are no other injuries," reported Bob.

Morton paused to consider. "10-4. Start an IV, D5W, and administer 5 mg MS, IV," he ordered. "How's the distal circulation in that arm?"

Bob held up the receiver and wiggled it at Craig, in an unspoken prompt.

"Distal circulation is normal," announced Craig as he started the IV.

Bob repeated the information to Dr. Morton.

"10-4, 16. Has the ambulance arrived yet?" Morton asked.

Bob shook his head, "Negative, Rampart. When it arrives, our ETA will be approximately twenty-five minutes."

"10-4, 16. Keep us informed," responded Morton.

Bob replied, "10-4, Rampart." He whirled at the sound of a tremendous explosion. "Jeezus, what was that?" His question hung in the air, unanswered. The flames leaping from the silo to the roof of the theatre needed no explanation. "Oh, crap," he muttered.

Brice stared at the flames, then tapped Bob's arm. "Go, Bellingham. I'll handle it here. Looks like they can use every pair of hands we've got."

Two of the actors came over to Craig and Randy and peered at the injured man. "Hey, man, is he going to be all right?" asked a thin, lanky young man with shoulder-length, dirty blonde hair, who was wearing a bright tie-dyed tank top. "Hi, Randy, how's it goin'?" he asked, leaning over Brice's shoulder to take a look at his friend.

"Hey, J.G., I think I'll survive," replied Randy, his voice dopey from the morphine. "How's it hangin', Rich?" he asked the other actor.

"Cool, man," replied the other actor. He blinked his eyes slowly, then took off his wire-rimmed granny glasses and wiped them on his 'Save the whales' t-shirt. He flipped his wavy black, waist-length hair over his shoulder, replaced his glasses, and looked over at the animals in the petting zoo. "Wow, man," he said, his voice dreamy, as he watched a goat nibble the lining of Brice's turnout coat.

Their attention was drawn by another explosion from the silo. The two actors watched the fire spread rapidly along the side of the barn that housed the disco.

"Wow, man," repeated Rich, with a goofy giggle. "Burn, baby, burn!"

"***Disco inferno!***"¹ shouted J.G., with a loud guffaw, pleased at his own cleverness.

Randy gave a weak snort of laughter, then groaned.

"I'm a little busy here, gentlemen," snapped Craig. "Please go wait with the other actors over at the campgrounds."

J.G. looked at his companion and shrugged. He said, "Take it easy, Randy," and walked away.

Rich examined the splint and bandages on Randy's arm. "Man, that must hurt!" he observed with a foolish grin. He placed the back of his right hand on his brow, gave a theatrical sigh, and said, "Ouch, man."

Brice bent to take Randy's pulse again. *Get away from here! I *hate* actors that can't seem to know when they're off-stage. Boy, does that bug me!*

The actor ambled over to the fence that enclosed the petting zoo. He watched in bemusement as the goat gave Brice's turnout coat one last shake, and dropped it to the ground. The goat trotted over to Rich, and butted against his hand, looking for a treat. "Sorry, fellah. I don't have anything I can give you."

¹ "Disco inferno," The Trammmps, 1976.

The goat snorted, then galloped to the far side of the pasture.

Rich stared at a stream of insects that seemed to find Brice's turnouts fascinating. A whole family of termites crawled into a hole the goat had ripped in the lining, followed by a number of spiders. Some grubs took up residence in the darkness of the fingers in Brice's gloves. Rich cleared his throat and addressed the paramedic, "Hey, man, you gotta know..."

Brice gave a long-suffering sigh, his patience eroded. "Look, I'm *trying* to help your buddy over here. Just go and join the other actors at the campground, out of our way," he commanded, as he wrote down Randy's vital signs.

Rich shrugged. "Suit yourself, man. Better you than me," he replied, and sauntered off to join the other actors. He placed a hand in the middle of his chest, thrust his chin fiercely into the air, and boomed in a sepulchre voice:

"What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That *beetles* o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness?"²

Brice looked up, startled. *Why is he quoting from Hamlet?*

Bellingham skidded to a halt in front of Captain Steele. "Can you use an extra pair of hands, Boss?" he joked, giving the captain a mocking salute and flourishing bow.

Steele raised an eyebrow. "Always, Animal. We're gonna need another line on this fire. Grab an inch-and-a-half..."

"Captain Stanley! I need you over here – Stoker's down!" shouted Paul O'Keefe. "Oh, Jeez! Mike! Mike, are you okay?"

Mike Stoker, 51's engineer, was writhing on the ground beside Engine 51, gasping for air, trying to push two of the actors away from him.

Randy stirred. "What's happenin'?" he mumbled. His eyes were glassy, and his eyelids drooped.

Craig finished making a notation in his notepad. "Just take it easy. The ambulance should be here soon." *Where is that ambulance, anyway?* He reached for his handie-talkie and picked it up, only to hear Steele's voice.

² Shakespeare, William. Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 4, lines 72-77

"LA, Station 16. We have a Code I times three. Respond a second alarm and two additional ambulances to this site."

"Station 16, LA. 10-4," responded the dispatcher.

Brice dropped his handie-talkie in alarm. *Code I times three?! What the hell happened? Who is it? I wish I could lend a hand...* He fretted at his inability to help, due to his commitment to his patient. He picked up the radio again and mechanically thumbed the mike. "HT 16 to Engine 16. Captain Steele, what is the nature of the other injuries?" inquired Craig. "We need to prioritize the order of transport for the ambulances when they get here."

Steele stared at his handie-talkie and shook his head, a wry grin tugging the corners of his lips, though what had just happened was nothing to smile about. *Typical Brice -- everything in order, even during the unexpected...* "Stand by, Brice. As soon as their conditions have been determined, we'll let you know."

"10-4," Craig replied. He put his handie-talkie down and scowled at it. *Damn -- what's going on over there?* He turned his focus once again to his patient. "How are you feeling, Randy?"

"A bit better," mumbled Randy. His eyelids fluttered closed again.

"Just hang in there. We'll have you out of here soon," said Craig. He stood up and walked to the back of the squad. He squinted down the entrance road, looking for any hint of an approaching ambulance. *Nothing yet. It's been twenty minutes since we called for the ambulance. By my calculations, it should take about twenty-five minutes to transport to Rampart, which means the earliest I could hope to be back here is at least an hour from now. Of course, if one of the others is hurt more seriously than Randy, he'll get the first ambulance, which will delay my return even more.* He craned his neck, looking in the other direction, towards the fire. He saw five firefighters carrying what appeared to be a large roll of barbed wire away from the museum. *Why are they doing that -- oh, dear Lord, there's someone under that wire!* He unconsciously took a step toward the injured firefighter, his instincts driving him to help someone seriously injured, when a groan from Randy diverted his attention back to his patient.

Randy shifted, a grimace of pain creasing his face.

"Wake up, Randy," urged Craig.

"Mmm?"

"Open your eyes, Randy," commanded Brice. *Damn it, Randy, don't do this!* He knelt down beside his patient and took another blood pressure, then relaxed a fraction. *It's the morphine, not the shock. I suppose you're more comfortable being out of it.* Craig picked up the handset of the biophone. "Rampart, this is Squad 16. Patient has lapsed into semi-consciousness."

"10-4, Squad 16. Keep us advised," replied Dr. Morton.

A grim-faced Bellingham raced over to Squad 51 and hauled out the biophone, drug box and trauma box.

"Who's hurt?" asked Craig.

Bellingham slammed the compartment doors. "Lopez, Stoker and Kelly. Lopez has a broken collarbone and dislocated shoulder, Stoker's got an acute abdomen. Kelly's been clobbered by a bale of barbed wire -- he looks like a shish-kebab. The wire's pierced him in dozens of places, including his neck."

Brice pursed his lips. "Stoker, then Kelly, then Randy, then Lopez," he stated without emotion.

Bellingham nodded. "You're probably right. See you in a bit, Craig," he called over his shoulder as he headed back to Engine 51 with the equipment.

Brice extended his handie-talkie's aerial. "LA, Squad 16. What is the ETA of our three ambulances?"

"Stand by, Squad 16," replied the dispatcher.

Brice fretted, automatically checking his patient's condition. *This is not good. Stoker **has** to go first, there's no question about that. If it **is** his appendix, it could rupture by the time they get him to the hospital. Let's hope that doesn't happen. I wonder how badly Kelly's hurt. He's irritating, but I certainly not happy he's injured. Randy's reasonably stable, even if his level of consciousness is decreasing -- that could easily be due to the morphine. Lopez can probably travel in one of the squads, or on the bench in one of the ambulances.* He started as the noise from the handie-talkie pulled him away from his thoughts.

"Squad 16, LA. The first ambulance should be there in approximately three minutes. The second and third ambulances both have an ETA of twelve minutes."

"10-4, LA. Squad 16 standing by," answered Brice. He listened and sighed in relief as the distant wail of a siren grew nearer. *Please be the ambulance!* Craig got up and stared down the road to the complex. He grinned as he caught a glimpse of the approaching ambulance, followed closely by another engine. He picked up his handie-talkie. "Engine 16, this is Squad 16. Captain, the first ambulance and Engine 127 should be here momentarily. What's the order of transport?"

Captain Steele replied, "10-4, Brice. What's the condition of your patient?"

"He's reasonably stable, but he's semi-conscious at this point, and in shock."

"Stand by, Brice," replied Steele. A moment later he said, "Brice, direct the first and second ambulances to Engine 51, and take the third one with your patient."

"10-4, Captain Steele," answered Brice. When the ambulance arrived and pulled over beside him, he stood up, shaking his head. He jabbed his finger toward the duck pond. "Go over to Engine 51 -- he's the first to go. We have four patients for transport."

The blond, long-haired attendant stared at him and blurted, "*Four?* What the hell happened?"

"We'll fill you in later, Rudy," snapped Brice. "Time really *is* of the essence."

Rudy waved to Craig in acknowledgment, and spoke to the driver, who backed up the ambulance and drove to the pond.

"Randy? How are you feeling?" asked Craig, taking another set of vital signs.

"Still hurts," answered Randy weakly, "but it's a bit more comfortable. Man, those are some good drugs..."

By the time the first ambulance pulled through the gates, carrying the ailing Stoker with Johnny in attendance, the second and third ambulances had arrived. Bellingham trotted back to Squad 16.

"Howdy, pardner," he drawled, then helped lift Randy to the stretcher. He spit on the ground, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Brice scowled and sighed. "Please don't do that, Bob. What's the situation with Stoker, Lopez and Kelly?"

Bob grinned. "Sorry about that, Chief! Stoker's probably got appendicitis; he's really out of it right now -- seems to think he's a Shakespearean vampire or something like that. Gage thinks Stoker's appendix might be close to rupturing. Lopez will be riding in with Kelly -- we've done about all we can for him here. Kelly got whacked in the side of his head with the hose nozzle, then had a roll of barbed wire fall on him. They cut *most* of the wire off him, but there's a really nasty piece that's impaling Kelly's neck in about five spots -- Roy didn't want to remove it in case one of the barbs has severed a blood vessel. Kelly's got about thirty or forty smaller wounds in his arms and across his chest. How're ya doin', Randy?" he asked their groggy patient.

"Kinda floaty," murmured Randy. His expression was dazed as he was loaded into the ambulance.

"Bellingham, can you bring my turnouts back in the squad?" requested Brice. He climbed into the ambulance with his patient and took the proffered biophone and drug box from his partner.

"Sure thing, Boss," nodded Bellingham. "See you at Rampart in about an hour. Captain Stanley's gonna bring 51's squad in to Rampart, collect Gage and DeSoto, and then we all gotta get back here, pronto. 45's on the way, but they won't get here for another five, ten minutes. That's when we'll head back with the squads, so you guys'll have to wait for us at Rampart. It's not like you've got any other way to get back, right? Get going... I've got a fire to fight -- for a few minutes, anyway," he remarked, then closed the back doors of the ambulance and thumped them sharply, twice.

After Captain Stanley and Bellingham arrived at Rampart with the squads, Brice walked back to Squad 16 with his partner, filling Bob in on their injured comrades.

"According to the doctors, assuming that peritonitis doesn't set in, or any other complications, Stoker should be all right in a few weeks. Lopez will be out for about a month with that shoulder and collarbone. Kelly's going to be fine -- they want to keep him overnight, to make sure nothing happens with those wounds. Randy's arm will be fine; they're releasing him tomorrow."

Bellingham grinned and replied, "Whoa, that's a relief. By the time we left, the fire was just about out. Your turnouts are in the squad, by the way. You might want to check them -- they'd fallen off the fence and the animals were playing with them."

"Thanks, Bob." Craig reached into the passenger side of the squad and picked up his coat. He rolled his eyes as Bob, smirking, slipped behind the wheel for the return trip. "Oh, very well... you can drive," Brice sighed. "Hmm, apart from a bit of dirt, it seems all right. Might as well put it on for the return trip. Nothing like being properly prepared. Where are my gloves?" he inquired, shrugging into his turnout coat, his hands braced on the door frame.

Bob shrugged. "I put them in the pocket, where else? You're not going to put your gloves on now, are you?" he asked.

"Just want to check them for rips. Last thing I want to do is find out the hard way, during a fire or a rescue, that there's a problem with my protective gear." Brice slid his left hand into his glove, then blanched and threw the glove to the ground in disgust. "*SHIT!!!!*" he swore. "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" He brushed his right palm several times over the back of the fingers on his left hand, as if to remove some unseen dirt.

"What's up?" questioned Bellingham in alarm.

Craig screwed up his face and shuddered. "Grubs. In the fingers. Slimy, squishy... grubs." He closed his eyes in disgust, then opened them and used his right hand to push his glasses up his nose.

Bellingham laughed, then stopped abruptly as Craig's eyes widened with terror.

"Get it off! Get it off!" Brice shouted, desperately trying to tear his turnouts off his back.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Craig?" demanded a bewildered Bob, as he rushed over to Craig and removed his partner's turnout coat. He dropped it to the ground, and stared at it as several insects scuttled out of the lining. Bellingham picked up Brice's coat and shook it, his face registering astonishment at the number of insects that were deserting their new home. He proffered the coat to a shaken Brice.

Craig shook his head vehemently, his eyes bugging out. "No! No! Take it away! I don't want to be anywhere near that!"

"It's okay, Craig," soothed Bob. "They're all gone now. Really -- I'll just put this in the compartment, okay?"

Craig gulped and nodded. "Thanks, Bob. Sorry about that -- I just *hate* arachnids." He climbed into the passenger seat, and leaned back, weary from the events of the day.

Bob raised an eyebrow, but said nothing on the trip back to the fire. Just as they neared the entrance to The Barnyard, he began to sing softly, "*I don't like spiders and snakes...*"³

³ "Spiders and snakes," Jim Stafford. 1974