

Part Two – The First Cut is the Deepest

Chet ladled his steaming concoction into several bowls. "Lunch is ready!" he announced to the other firefighters.

Marco scooped up two of the bowls and deposited them on the table. Roy took two other bowls, and Chet picked up the remaining bowls.

"Eat up," Chet urged, "or we'll be *sure* to get a run."

Marco grinned as he sampled Chet's latest creation. "Now you've jinxed us, Chet. At least *this* version of your Irish stew is edible. Not like the last time...."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, Marco. I'm not going to mention your last batch of enchiladas, or the corn bread that self-destructed..." Chet trailed off, smirking.

"Hey, is it *my* fault that we had that we had an apartment fire and were gone for eight hours? It's always worked out before," complained Marco with a shrug of his shoulders.

Johnny's eyebrow lifted as he took a dubious glance at his bowl. He spooned up the mixture, then let it drip back into the bowl. "Marco, are you *sure* it's not poisoned? Roy and I've been runnin' all morning, and we'd like to be able to have a bit of a break. Last thing we want to do is have to treat a bunch of sick firefighters," he joked.

"Ha, ha, Gage. At least I'm not afraid to try new things occasionally, unlike *some* I could mention," needled Chet. "Try it. You'll be pleasantly surprised."

"Chet, the only thing that would surprise me about your cooking is that I'll live to tell about it. Roy, you ready to deal with having to revive us all?" said Johnny with a wink.

Hank interrupted, "All right, you two. That's enough for now. Sit down and eat, Pal," he said to Johnny, as he tasted the stew. "This is pretty good, Chet."

"See?" taunted Chet.

"Oh, all right," replied Johnny. "I guess I'll have to take my life in my hands. Roy, stand by with the biophone to Rampart."

Roy shook his head and started eating. "This is really good, Chet," he commented, ignoring his partner.

Johnny shrugged, and tried the stew.

"Well?" demanded Chet.

"Okay," admitted Johnny grudgingly, "I guess it's not going to kill me." He proceeded to polish off the stew in his bowl, and went to the pot for seconds.

"Hey, Mike, why aren't you eatin'?" asked Chet, gesturing to the untouched bowl in front of the engineer.

"Not hungry," answered Mike in a curt tone. He pushed himself away from the table and stalked out of the room.

"Nice goin', Chet," said Marco in disgust.

"What did I say?" asked Chet indignantly. He shrugged. "Alls I did was ask him why he wasn't eating. Why is that a crime?"

Hank said, "Because he hasn't been acting himself all morning, you twit." He dropped his spoon into his bowl of Irish stew, and got up from his seat. He followed Mike out of the room.

"What's up with Mike today?" mused Johnny. "Maybe we should take a look at him?" he asked Roy.

"Cap's gone to check him out. If there's anything wrong, he'll let us know," answered Roy. "Who's on dishes today?"

Johnny groaned. "Me, who else? Why does it always seem that I get stuck with the dishes any time there's a pot involved with lunch?" He grinned and jogged to the bay as the alarm sounded.

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

Marco tossed his spoon onto the table. "I *told* you that you were gonna jinx us, Chet! A structure fire with injuries, in the country? We'll be there for hours," he groaned, as they scrambled to the engine bay.

When they got there, they saw Mike pointing out the route on the map to Johnny. Marco watched curiously as Johnny grabbed Mike's arm and said something to him. Marco nudged Chet as they saw Mike pull his arm from Johnny's grasp and lean over the paramedic, his brow furrowed and his fists bunched. His face was red as he snapped something to the younger man, then swung to get into the engine.

"Hey, Chet, did you see that?" asked Marco, astonished at Stoker's attitude.

Chet gave a slow nod. "Man, Cap's right. He's *really* not himself today."

They climbed into the rig, and glanced at each other as Mike slammed the door. Chet rolled his eyes, and drew his hand across his brow, then shook off imaginary sweat.

Twenty minutes later, the vehicles from Station 51 arrived at The Barnyard. Bellingham waved at them and shouted, "Captain Steele's over by the far barn!"

Johnny waved in acknowledgment. "Looks like they've got one already, Roy. I don't like the way that barn with the disco is burning. If it spreads back to the silo, we could have *real* trouble."

"That's for sure," answered Roy. "I'm going to park it just over here. The engines are going to need access to that pond. No way will there be enough water in the tanks if all the buildings become involved." Roy stopped the vehicle just beyond Squad 16, beside a corral housing a petting zoo, on the right side near the entrance to the complex. An assortment of tame goats, chickens, sheep and ponies milled around behind the fence, making gentle noises.

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. He examined a site map on a billboard by the entrance to the petting zoo, while he donned his air tank. "Johnny, that barn across from here is the disco/restaurant building. It's connected to the silo on the south side. The theatre/museum barn is connected to the silo on the north side. There's a duck pond over where Engine 16 is, and just to the north of that is a campground."

Johnny tested the seal on his mask. "That sounds like a good place to send the actors. They can keep going east if the north barn catches."

"Sounds good to me, partner," replied Roy.

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

Captain Steele looked up from his fire ground plan, pulled out his handie-talkie, and spoke to Hank. "Engine 51, get some water on the north barn, where the theatre is. We just took a man from the museum, and there doesn't seem to be anyone else inside. We haven't checked out the theatre yet. I've sent your squad to take care of evacuation, then they can man another line. There's supposed to be about a dozen actors in there -- there's a fellow here, Kevin, who can let you know if they're all accounted for. We'll keep working on the disco and restaurant in the south barn."

"10-4," acknowledged Hank. "Mike, you should be able to draft from the pond. Drop two hose lines, and pull up beside Engine 16."

Mike nodded and used a reverse hose lay from the barn with the theatre to the pond beside the petting zoo, where he pulled alongside the other engine. Nobody saw him grimace in pain as he hauled on the steering wheel while parking the engine.

Hank swung down from the engine. "Squad 51, once you've evacuated the theatre, pick up the extra line..."

A tremendous explosion from the silo interrupted Hank. Smoke and flames poured from the top of the silo, spreading in an instant to the roof of the theatre.

"Chet, Marco, move!" bellowed Hank. "Take an inch-and-a-half and get it on the theatre roof. Start at the museum section; that's where it's adjoined to the silo."

"You got it, Cap," replied Marco. He and Chet ran toward the end of the hose, picked it up, and headed toward the museum.

Roy and Johnny burst through the doors to the theatre and gaped at what they saw. Twelve actors, dressed in clothes that looked as if they had come from the 1960s' 'hippie' era, were huddled on the stage. They were giving their full attention to a tall, thin man who was dressed in a flowing black cape with a red satin lining, the word 'Director' emblazoned on the back of the cape in white, lightning-like letters. The director was delivering an emphatic commentary, oblivious to the fire.

"Jeez, Roy," muttered Johnny, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"Hey!" shouted Roy, his voice muffled by the breathing mask as he and Johnny ran toward the stage. "Get out of here -- the building's on fire!"

The director swung toward them. His unnaturally pale face was emphasized by the widow's peak of his long black hair. "Please! I'm *trying* to conduct a critique here. Wait your turn, Mister."

Roy rolled his eyes, huffed in exasperation, raised his mask and strode toward the knot of performers. "Conduct it outside at the campground, then. The building is burning. *Look!*" He pointed to the roof where flames were starting to beat a path through the worn roof.

The director's gaze followed the line of Roy's finger. He blanched and commanded, "Right. Good point. Let's go, people, out to the duck pond."

Roy shook his head. "No, go to the campground. We need the duck pond to pull water for the fire, and we don't need anyone getting in the way."

"Oh, very well, then," snarled the director. "The campground. Let's get moving, people -- we don't want to get in *someone's* way, after all!"

Johnny grabbed the director's arm as he shoed his actors out of the theatre. "Listen, sir, is there anyone else in here?"

The director scowled, but counted the members of his troupe. "Just Kevin and Randy are missing. They were in the museum..."

"That's okay, sir, they're already out. Thanks," Johnny replied. He released the director's arm, glanced at Roy, and shook his head. "Actors!" he scoffed, then pulled out his handie-talkie. "Engine 51, this is Squad 51. The theatre has been evacuated."

"10-4. Grab that second inch-and-a-half and cover the east section of the theatre," Hank replied. "Chet, Marco, concentrate on the west side, in the museum. See if we can't knock it down before it gets to the loft. Once that goes, it's going to be practically impossible to save the barn."

Roy picked up the nozzle of the hoseline and started dragging it toward the east side of the theatre.

Johnny protested, "Hey, how come *you* get the nozzle?"

Roy smirked at him. "Because *I'm* the senior partner... besides, *I* got to it first."

"*This* time," Johnny scowled.

Roy laughed and took up his position, Johnny backing him up on the hoseline. "You ready, Johnny?" he asked seriously.

Johnny nodded "Ready."

Roy flipped the nozzle open, bracing himself for the water pressure. To his astonishment, a mere trickle of water came from the hose. "What's goin' on?" he mused. Johnny looked over his shoulder toward the engine, but it was out of their line of sight.

Roy closed the nozzle, and opened it again, fully. He shook his head at the lack of water. Johnny picked up his handie-talkie. "Squad 51 to Engine 51."

Hank answered, "Engine 51, go ahead."

Johnny replied, "Cap, we're not getting any water here."

"Stand by," Hank replied. He frowned and headed toward the engine. "I'll check into that..."

They heard a murmur of voices in the background, then... "*What!!?*" Hank's voice over the radio was incredulous. "Squad 51, relay that -- get over to the engine, pronto. Stoker's collapsed."

Roy and Johnny looked at each other, stunned, then bolted. Roy tossed the nozzle to the ground outside the barn as they ran toward the engine.

Chet directed a wide fog spray at the ceiling, where the flames licked at the top of the barn. As Marco nudged him and pointed at the edge of the silo, Chet nodded and narrowed the stream several notches. He flashed an exuberant grin over his shoulder at his partner, and turned back to the business at hand.

Marco chuckled. *Glad you're enjoying yourself, Chet. You've still got to cook tonight, remember? And I'm **not** cleaning up the kitchen this time, either.* The smile faded from his face as he heard an ominous creaking from the loft overhead. His gaze strayed up and he stared, mesmerized, as the joists under the floorboards of the loft splintered before his eyes. "What the hell?!" he shouted as a sudden increase in water pressure caused the hose to rip itself out of his hands. As he fell backward, he warned, "Chet, watch it!"

With an unbelievable acrobatic move, Marco managed to twist in midair and narrowly avoided landing on his air tank. He crashed heavily onto his right side, the full weight of his body and equipment forcing his right shoulder out of its socket. He heard his collarbone snap an instant before the pain registered.

The nozzle whipped out of Chet's hands. As he made a frantic grab for it, the nozzle crashed into the left side of his face, displacing his breathing mask. Chet staggered and fell onto his back, the air tank propping him in a grotesque arch. He lay there, stunned, then toppled over onto his right side, the air tank acting as a wedge behind his back.

Marco struggled to his feet, wincing at the pain in his right shoulder. He cradled his useless right arm. "Chet! Chet, are you okay?" he shouted, fear for his partner pushing aside his own pain.

Chet gave a slight groan, but didn't move.

Marco stared, transfixed, as the hose writhed in an obscene dance, far too powerful for only two men to control. *What the fuck are you doing, Mike?!* he thought in fury. An ominous creaking and roar from above caught his terrified attention. "Chet!" he screamed, willing his partner to move, to no avail. "Move! Now!"

The support beams under the loft gave way abruptly, dumping their contents of hay, farming equipment and barbed wire to the floor below. Marco threw his left arm above his head, deflecting three hoes that seemed to have targeted him as they cascaded. "**SHIT!!!**" he swore as he felt more muscles on his right side tear with the sudden reflex movement as he forgot his injuries and tried to block the missiles with both arms.

Chet screamed in agony.

The colour drained from Marco's face as he beheld his partner. "Madre de Dios," he whispered. He hurried as fast as he could over to Chet.

A roll of rusty barbed wire had fallen directly onto Chet. Wicked-looking barbs, like jagged diamond-shaped razor blades were threaded on one wire, which was twisted around a plain wire. About thirty barbs had pierced through his turnout coat, and were embedded in both upper arms, his chest, and his left side. More worrisome, a double coil of the wire had punctured his neck, just under the edge of his breathing mask.

"Chet, don't move," Marco ordered. *What am I gonna do? I can't get that off him, and I can't leave him here for the fire to finish him off. That wire has got to be strangling him, too.*

Chet's eyes were wide with horror and pain. "You got it, partner," he whispered.

"I'll be right back, and we'll get that off you, don't worry," Marco said.

"I'm not going anywhere. Just hurry it up!" implored Chet.

"No problem, Pal. I'll be right back with the cavalry," replied Marco. He staggered out of the barn, his scowl like a thundercloud. "Cap!" he shouted, heading toward the engine.

Hank was leaning over Johnny's shoulder as the paramedic tried to examine the engineer, who was struggling against the two paramedics trying to keep his thrashing movements from doing further damage. Hank held up his hand to forestall Marco. "What is it, Johnny?" he asked, his worry evident in his intense tone.

"I don't know, Cap. We're gonna need an ambulance, though. I think it might be his appendix, or a perforated ulcer. I'll let you know," answered Johnny.

Hank spun toward Marco. "Where's Chet?" he demanded.

"*That* explains it," Marco breathed, peering around Hank.

Hank looked at Marco, an eyebrow raised as he questioned his lineman. "Where's Chet?" he repeated, looking more worried. "Are you all right?" he asked. "What happened in there? Why are you holding your arm like that?" Hank demanded.

"Cap, the loft in the museum collapsed. Chet's buried under a bale of barbed wire. Some of it's stuck in his neck, so I didn't try to move him." Marco hissed, clutching his upper arm.

"Shit," replied Hank. "Hey, Bud!" he called Captain Steele over. "We've got a man trapped under some wire in the theatre, and two more down out here."

"We're on it, Hank," answered Bud. "Carling, Miller! Drop the line and get out here, now! 51's got a man trapped!" He switched the frequency on his handie-talkie and called the dispatcher. "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.

"Marco, go over and sit down by John, Pal," advised Hank, his tone more gentle. "We'll get Chet out." He studied his senior paramedic. "You're in charge on this one, Roy. What do we do?"

Roy released his hold on Mike's now-still legs, and took a deep breath. "I hate to say this, but I think we're gonna have to bring him out with the roll of wire still on him. We *have* to get him out before the fire gets to him. But, with the wire embedded in his throat, we can't take the chance of just lifting the roll off him. I figure that once we get him out here, we can cut away most of it. We'll have to leave what's around his throat until he gets to Rampart. Let's move, fellas. Bellingham, can you get the biophone, trauma box and drug kit from our squad?"

"Sure thing, Roy," acknowledged Bob.

"O'Keefe, we're gonna need as many wire cutters as you can get," said Captain Steele. He, Captain Stanley, Carling and Miller joined Roy as they ran toward the barn, pulling on their gloves.

They made their way into the smoky structure, following the snaking line of the still writhing fire hose. Hank gasped as he saw his younger lineman lying still under the rusty wire. He kicked aside some rusted farm tools, clearing their exit route.

"Hang on, Chet," called Hank as the five firefighters approached the injured man. "We'll have you out of here in a jiffy."

Roy directed the others. "Captain Steele, Captain Stanley, you take Chet's legs. Miller, Carling, take his arms. I'll take his head. We're going to have to lift him on the count of three. Make sure that the wire doesn't roll off him. One of each pair should concentrate on lifting, the other on keeping the wire in place. Is everyone ready?"

The four men nodded.

Roy said, "Okay. Chet, this is gonna hurt -- I'm sorry. We'll be as gentle as possible, but we *have* to get you out of here quickly. Are you ready?"

"Yeah," gasped Chet.

Roy nodded. "On the count of three. One....two....three!"

They lifted Chet up, Carling and Steele steadying the bale as it wobbled. Chet moaned.

"Okay, let's move!" barked Roy.

They walked as quickly as they dared, conscious of the smoke and fire, and the additional damage they might be doing to Chet. When they reached the open ground near the engines, they lowered Chet carefully to the ground.

Steele said, "Miller, Carling, take the hose to the silo. Hank, you and I can cut the wire off Kelly. DeSoto, you'll direct that aspect. Bellingham, you handle communications." He turned and looked at the now fully-involved complex. "Damn." He thumbed his handie-talkie. "LA, this is Station 16. What is the ETA on the additional companies?"

"Station 16, LA. ETA of Station 45 is twenty minutes. ETA of Station 18 is thirty-six minutes. ETA of Truck 127 is eight minutes."

"10-4, LA. Station 16 out." Steele looked speculatively at Stanley. "How long since you've been on a hose line, Hank?"

Hank huffed. "Not too long. I'm gonna need something to distract me, and keep me out of these guys' hair, anyway. Let's get Kelly unwired, first. Where do we start, Roy?"

Roy pursed his lips, considering. "We can cut off all the wire below his neck, but we'll have to leave those two strands in place, I'm afraid. Sorry, Chet, but without a sterile environment, we can't take the chance on those ones. Judging by the barbs, it's gonna hurt when we cut. We should be able to remove the barbs from your arms and chest, since they're not deeply buried."

"I understand," gasped Chet. "You know what's funny?"

"What's that?" asked Roy.

Chet gave a rueful snort. "The make of this wire is 'Kelly Factory Common'. I recognize it -- I've only got a small piece in my collection."

Roy smiled. "We'll be sure to save some more of this for you, then," he joked, bending to his task.

When they had finished cutting away as much of the wire as they could, Roy carefully cut away Chet's turnouts. A sudden voice behind him made DeSoto whirl around.

"Oh, thou side-piercing sight!"¹ intoned a short, scruffy-looking young man dressed in a psychedelic tie-dyed shirt. He brushed his long dirty-blond bangs out of his eyes. "Gotta hurt, man!"

Roy frowned at the interruption. "Get out of here. We told you to wait at the campground."

"It got boring, so we came over here to see what was goin' on," sulked the actor, kicking some pebbles away.

Roy gritted his teeth. "Hang on, Chet," he whispered. He stood up and towered over the small actor. "You're in the way here. We really need you to go over to the campground and stay out of our hair. Please," he stated in a very firm tone.

"Okay, okay," pouted the actor. He spun around and stalked away. He sang as he departed, "*The first cut is the deepest.*"²

"Oh, great," muttered Chet. "An actor with a sense of humour -- just what I need."

"Hold still, Chet," murmured Roy. "Rampart's ordered an IV, and a painkiller for you. Not as strong as we'd like, but we think you might have a concussion from the hose nozzle, so we can't give you morphine. Sorry."

"Anything will help, Roy, anything," whispered Chet.

"Don't try to talk, Chet. I'm gonna put some dressings on most of these cuts in your arms, then I'll start the IV. The ambulance should be here in about five minutes," Roy answered. "When they get here, we're going to have to put you on a backboard, and immobilize your head. We obviously can't put a collar on you, so we're going to have to put some sandbags on both sides of your head, and tape you down that way."

"Sounds like fun," grunted Chet. "How's Marco? And Mike?"

"Mike and Johnny went in the first ambulance. We think Mike's got appendicitis. Marco's probably got a broken collarbone and a dislocated shoulder. He's going to be coming in the ambulance with you. Bob's taking care of him at the moment. Now, will you please be quiet?" Roy asked with a reassuring smile.

Chet gave a weak smile, then grimaced. He closed his eyes and mumbled, "I'm doing this under protest, you know."

Roy gave him a steady look. "It doesn't matter *why* you're being quiet, Chet, just as long as you don't try to talk." He finished applying the bandages to Chet's arms.

Chet swallowed carefully, aware of his deadly necklace. *Heh -- I told you how nasty this variety was, didn't I, Sandi? Another piece of the Kelly family history for my collection...never thought I'd run across a sample this way -- finding it at auctions is a lot more fun -- and safer, too...Shit, my head hurts!* He cleared his throat. "Roy," he said weakly.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 6, line 86

² "The first cut is the deepest." Cat Stevens, 1967

"Chet, don't try to talk," repeated Roy. He tore open the bag containing the D5W and swabbed down the inside of Chet's left elbow.

"Roy...head hurts," gasped Chet, grimacing in pain.

"Hang in there, Chet. Let me start this IV, and then I'll give you the painkiller. The ambulance should be here in a couple of minutes, then we'll get you and Marco off to the hospital. Does it hurt anywhere else besides your head and where the wire cut you?" inquired Roy.

"No," groaned Chet. "Why? Isn't that enough?" he joked feebly.

Roy flashed a smile. "Hold still. The ambulance just got here. Don't talk and don't move."

"You're...enjoying my....enforced silence... aren't you?"

"Not as much as Johnny would if he were here," quipped Roy, as he gestured to the ambulance crew. "We'll need sandbags and a backboard!" he called over.

"On the way, Roy," replied the driver.

"Get Bob over here, too," added Roy.

The ambulance crew took up positions at Chet's hips and knees, and awaited Roy's direction. Bob trotted over and grabbed the backboard. Roy held Chet's head firmly but gently in alignment.

Roy said, "All right. On the count of three, roll him slowly onto his right side, then hold him there. Bob, you slide the board in underneath him. Then, when I count to three, roll him slowly onto his back. Is everyone ready?"

"Ready," answered the others.

"One....two....three," chanted Roy.

The three men rolled Chet onto his right side. Roy held Chet's head in alignment with the rest of his body. "Watch out for that IV tubing, Bob," Roy advised.

"Board's in place, Roy," commented Bob, as he slid the backboard along the ground. He held the IV bag up high, keeping the tubing clear.

"Okay, now we're going to lower him. Is everyone ready?" asked Roy.

"Ready," they repeated.

"One....two....three. Great job, guys. Bob, can you strap him down and get those sandbags in place?" Roy directed, as the driver and attendant went back to the rig to get the stretcher.

"Sure, Roy. By the way, Marco's gonna be all right -- I've got his shoulder and collarbone immobilized, and he seems okay, apart from a nasty collection of bruises," replied Bob, as he attached Chet to the backboard. Once he'd fastened the sandbags on either side of Chet's head, he patted Roy on the shoulder and headed back to Marco.

Roy picked up the handie-talkie. "HT 51 to Squad 51."

John's disembodied voice answered. "Squad 51. Go ahead, Roy."

"We've got Chet on the board, and we're loading him and Marco into the ambulance now. Advise Rampart that our ETA is twenty-five minutes. I'll get you some updated vitals once we're underway," reported Roy.

"10-4," replied Johnny.

"How's Mike?" asked Roy.

Johnny laid the back of his hand against the engineer's forehead and gave a soft curse. "He's gettin' worse," he replied. "He's unresponsive, and his fever is going up. His abdomen's stiff as a board now. To top it off, we're still about fifteen minutes away from the hospital. Listen, you're starting to fade here -- I can barely hear you. Do you want to call Dispatch to set up a relay?"

Roy shook his head and replied, "Naw. I'll keep in touch with Brice, and relay any information over to him -- he's still got 16's biophone, and we'll be leaving about the same time." Roy sighed. "See you in half an hour," he said. He deposited the handie-talkie on the stretcher, then helped Marco climb into the back of the ambulance. "How are you doin', Marco?" he asked.

Marco blinked, his eyelids drooping from the painkillers Bob had administered. "Been better," he mumbled. "How's Chet?"

"He should be okay, once we get that wire off. Can't chance it out here," answered Roy.

Their conversation was interrupted by a soft giggle from Chet. "*The first cut... is the deepest... Baby I know...*," he sang, his voice drowsy.

"Chet!" admonished Roy. "I thought I told you not to talk."

Chet blinked slowly. "You didn't say...nothin'....'bout singin'..."

Johnny met them with a wheelchair at Rampart's emergency entrance, as the ambulance crew pushed the stretcher bearing Chet through the doors. "Treatment Four for Chet; Treatment Two for Marco," he announced, moving to assist Marco into the chair.

Marco grabbed Johnny's arm with his left hand. "How's Mike?" he demanded.

Johnny tightened his jaw. "He's in surgery. They're pretty sure his appendix ruptured on the ride in. He regained consciousness for a minute or two...." Johnny exchanged a quick glance with Roy, gave a slight

shake of his head, and omitted mentioning Mike's agonized scream in the ambulance as they had rounded a particularly hairy corner, five minutes away from Rampart. He also didn't tell the others about the harrowing remainder of that journey. "They'll have to do an irrigation, for sure, and give him some pretty heavy-duty antibiotics to ward off infection. I've already called his wife and Chet's wife. Is there anyone you want me to call, Marco?"

"Yeah -- call my sister, Maria. If you call my mother, she'll only panic," answered Marco. "Take it easy, Chet," he said to his partner, as they reached the treatment rooms.

*"Send me your love by wire...Baby, my heart's on fire.... If you refuse me, Honey, you'll lose me, then you'll be left alone.... so, Baby, telephone, and tell me I'm your own....,"*³ Chet's weak voice trailed off as the door to Treatment Four swung closed behind him.

Marco snorted. "Oh, I think 'The Phantom' should stick to jokes and not singing."

Roy pushed open the door to the treatment room, and chuckled. "Yeah, I think you're probably right about that."

"How're ya doin', Marco?" Johnny asked pushing the chair next to the examination bed. He set the brakes, and helped Roy ease their injured crewmate onto the stretcher.

"Been better, been worse. Mostly, I'm glad that we're here. Are you sure they're gonna be all right?" Marco grunted as he shifted his injured arm.

Roy reached for the knots on the sling. "Here, let me see if I can make that more comfortable." He supported Marco's arm and retied the sling.

Marco nodded. "Thanks. Still hurts like hell, but it could be worse." He nodded at the doctor and nurse as they entered.

Mike Morton said, "Good. Make my job a lot easier. Carol, let's get him to x-ray as soon as possible. Collarbone, shoulder, upper arm – the works. Are you hurt anywhere besides the arm?"

Marco shook his head, grimacing. "I don't think so. Maybe some bruises to the ribs, but it's mostly the shoulder."

Morton pursed his lips, tapping his pen on the clipboard. He made another notation on the chart. "Better get a chest x-ray, too. We don't want to take any chances."

Johnny cleared his throat. "You still need us, Doc?"

Morton shook his head. "No, we've got this."

Johnny gave Marco a wave. "We'll see you in a while. We're gonna check on the others, okay. Take it easy."

³ *"Hello, ma baby."* Joseph E. Howard, Ida Emerson. 1899

Roy added, “Yeah, hang in there.”

As they left, Roy blew his breath out. “Man, I could sure use a cup of coffee about now.”

“Right behind ya, partner,” Johnny agreed, clapping his partner on the shoulder.

Hank Stanley slid behind the wheel of the Squad, and tossed his helmet onto the passenger seat. The white captain’s stripe seemed to mock him as he put the vehicle in gear. His thoughts swirled on the long drive to Rampart, thoughts he tried to suppress and failed, just as he felt he’d failed his entire company today.

*How did this happen? What did I do wrong? Three men down, and I should have been able to do more than react. What was wrong with my fire-ground plan? I know we weren’t first due, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that my **entire** engine company was wiped out. What could I have done differently, that wouldn’t have me driving the Squad – the **Squad**, for crying out loud! – to pick up the only two members to have made it through unscathed?*

*No, not unscathed... they had to perform treatment on their own crew – a crew **I’m** supposed to protect. Some protection! Some captain **I** am! Why didn’t I insist Mike get to the hospital? Why did I send Marco and Chet in when it wasn’t safe?*

He stopped at an intersection, driving on auto-pilot. He gritted his teeth, clenched his jaws, balled his hands and thumped his fists on the steering wheel. “Dammit!”

It wasn’t until the car behind him started blaring its horn that he realized it was time to move on. He looked around, surprised at how close he was to the hospital. He turned down the next side street and into the hospital’s entrance.

*Yeah, move on... act like everything is just fine... and it’s **not** fine. Hell, I don’t even know how they are. What’s the next shift gonna be like? Will I somehow manage to **kill** someone this time? I’ll be working with a completely new crew – for how long? Will we make it through all right? How will we work as a team? A team, yeah, right – who’s even gonna **want** to work with a captain who lost his entire crew at one incident? Ah, c’mon, Hank – right now, it’s not about **you**... it’s about **them**. Focus on your men, and how they’re doing. You can feel sorry for yourself later. Time to man up.*

He pulled into a parking spot near the entrance to Emergency, turned off the engine and just sat, trying to calm down. He leaned his elbows on the steering wheel, his forehead resting against his palms. He closed his eyes and swallowed against the bile threatening to overpower him. He clenched his jaw again, curling his fingers into fists and took a deep breath. *Quit stalling, Stanley, and get your ass in gear! You gotta check on your men.* His eyelids snapped open and he swung his head, startled as Bob Bellingham rapped the door.

“You okay, Cap’n Stanley?” the paramedic asked, his tone much more subdued than was normal for him. He opened the door, extending a hand to the other man. “C’mon. We can go in together.”

Hank clasped Bob’s hand as if it were a lifeline. Flustered, he snatched his hand back as soon as he was out of the vehicle. “Er, thanks, Bob,” he mumbled, more embarrassed than he cared to admit.

Bob cleared his throat, pretty sure what was bothering the other man. He tugged the captain's sleeve. "Look, it wasn't your fault, you know. It wasn't *anyone's* fault. Sometimes, crap just happens. Don't beat yourself up about it."

"But..."

Bob shook his head. "But, nothing. *You* didn't cause the ceiling to collapse on Kelly and Lopez, the *fire* did. You didn't cause Stoker's appendicitis. You've already got Gage worryin' 'bout that, figuring somehow it's *his* fault that those idiots went after Stoker. You know what? It might seem like one of those days that everything that *can* go wrong *does* go wrong, but at the end of it, they're all still alive, and they'll be better soon. That's what ya gotta focus on, Cap, 'cause if you don't, you'll drive yourself nuts.... Sir."

Hank gave a soft snort. "You always this candid when someone's acting like an ass?"

Bob guffawed. "Look who my partner is, Cap! How else could I be and still stay sane? Seriously, you didn't do anything wrong, and your judgment isn't bad... sometimes, things are just beyond our control."

Hank shook his head. "Part of being captain means being in control..." he began.

Bob gave him a skeptical look. "Do you think that applies only to captains? Don't you think everyone in a fire is in control? I know we may act like kids or outta control teenagers when we're not on scene, but we manage to put that aside when it counts. Trust me, Cap, I *know* what the scene was like in that barn." He shook his head. "Nobody made any mistakes, but I'm sure we'll be covering that ground over and over for months."

Hank exhaled slowly, and nodded. "Okay."

"Besides, do you think Cap'n Steele isn't thinking exactly the same thing right now?"

"You're right... and we've gotta get back there." Hank straightened, forced an optimistic expression on his face, and strode forward.

"Tell Craig I'll be waiting in the Squad," Bob called.

Hank nodded. "Thanks, Bellingham."

Roy nudged Johnny's arm as Hank came into the doctor's lounge. They'd been pleased to have the refuge away from the busy emergency department while they waited for news. Roy sketched a wave. "Hey, Cap," he said, his tone relieved as Joe and Kel entered the lounge just after.

"How are they?" Hank asked, fear and hope warring within him.

Kel grinned. "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 -- we want to keep him overnight, just to keep an eye on those wounds in the throat, but he should be cleared for duty in a shift or two."

Hank cupped his hands around his nose and mouth, breathed a silent prayer of thanks, and gave a genuine smile. “Thanks, Doc – you have *no* idea how good that sounds right about now. Any chance we can see them for a minute before we leave?”

Joe shrugged. “Well, you can see Chet and Marco – for better or worse, we put them in the same room. I think that’s best for everyone concerned, especially the nursing staff. Mike’s in recovery right now, but you can visit in a few hours.” He shook his head. “I have to admit, that was a bit closer than we like, but he should be fine. It was touch and go for a bit, but he rallied well. He’s in great physical shape, so that ought to speed the healing process.”

Craig stood up, rinsed his cup, and placed it back precisely where it belonged. “I’ll go let Bob know. I presume he’s waiting with the squad?”

“That’s right.”

Craig nodded. “I’ll see you all back at the scene, I suppose. Lots of overhaul with three buildings and a silo, even if the fire is out.”

Johnny groaned. “You had to say it, didn’t you, Brice?”

“Standard procedures, Gage. Standard procedures.” He pushed his glasses up his nose, and left the lounge.

Hank raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture to his paramedics. “We’ll go back, *after* we see Chet and Marco.”

Joe gave a hearty chuckle. “Don’t worry about Craig. He’s all rulebook on the outside, but he and Bob have pulled off some pretty amazing rescues. You wouldn’t think their personality types would mesh so well, but they do. Craig sorta calms Bob down, and Bob kinda lightens Craig up.” He rubbed his nose and gave Hank a wink. “Seems like that with a lot of partnerships, doesn’t it?”

“Hey!” Johnny protested. “You’re not comparing *us* to *them*, are ya, Doc?”

Joe’s eyes twinkled. “If the shoe fits...”

Roy snorted. “I’m no Brice...”

“And I’m no Bellingham, either,” Johnny interrupted.

Kel quirked his eyebrow. “Frankly, if I was in an accident somewhere, I’d feel a lot better if one of you four were responsible for my immediate care. Or just about everyone else we’ve put in the field. But there’s no doubt that some partnerships just... click. Kind of like partnerships on the hose line, right?”

“Or the ER,” Joe added.

“What’s the problem? You’re all good paramedics, aren’t ya?” Hank asked, clapping a hand on each paramedic’s shoulder as he urged them toward the exit. His own shoulders relaxed for the first time in hours, as he remembered Bellingham’s offhanded words of comfort. *You’re all more alike than you think, boys, and we’re all a lot better for it.*