

## Part Three – Elvira, Mad Again

“Hey, Mike, why aren’t you eatin’?” asked Chet, gesturing to the untouched bowl of Irish stew 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 lunch bowl, and got up from his seat. He headed to the bay, pausing in the doorway to observe his engineer.

Mike was leaning forward against the wall, his hands braced against the bricks. His head lolled between his outstretched arms, his eyes closed. He grimaced, and opened his eyes. “Shit,” he whispered, as he dropped his right arm from the wall and clutched it to his stomach. He folded his left forearm against the wall and pressed his forehead against the back of his left hand, then breathed shallowly through his mouth.

Hank moved over to him, a frown creasing his brow. “Mike, are you okay?” he asked in concern.

Startled, Mike whirled to face his captain. “C-Cap,” he stammered. “I’m fine,” he muttered.

Hank looked at him, his expression skeptical. “Doesn’t look like it to me. What’s up?”

Mike took a deep breath and sighed. “I’m fine, really. Just a bit of an upset stomach. Nothing to worry about.”

Hank quirked his eyebrow. “Granted, Chet’s Irish stew is enough to give anyone an upset stomach, but you’ve been like this all day long. Did you take anything for it?”

Mike shook his head. “It’ll pass...”

Hank opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the station’s alarm.

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

Mike flashed Hank a weak grin, meant to be reassuring, as the captain rushed to the radio. *Man, I must have the flu or something. I haven't felt this sick in a long time. This must be pretty big to send two stations. Better check the location on the map. Last thing I want to do is get lost on the way to the run.*

Johnny looked at the county map, over Mike's shoulder as the engineer traced their route with his right index finger.

"Take Cabot Road, here. It's not the most direct route, but I'll never be able to keep the engine on the road with the number of twists and turns on the first part of Stillwater Canyon Road, especially with the rains we've had lately. We can cut over to Stillwater after a mile and a half," Mike indicated, then turned to head to the engine.

Johnny took in Mike's flushed face and dropped his hand to the engineer's arm, surprised to find it hot to the touch. He stared up at Stoker, frowning slightly. "Are you all right, Mike?" he asked.

Mike shook off Johnny's hand. "I'm *fine*," he growled, bunching his fists in irritation. "Hurry up -- we've got to get to a fire," he snapped, striding to the engine.

Hank winced as Mike slammed the door. He turned to his scowling engineer. "Mike..." he started.

Mike closed his eyes, heaved a weary sigh, and started the engine. "Please, Cap -- just leave it. I'm okay," he muttered. He opened his eyes and regarded his captain, who had raised an eyebrow again.

"If you're sure..." said Hank. "Let me know if it gets to be too much. Flu?" he asked.

Mike cracked a smile, and wiped his brow. "Yeah, I guess so. Sorry," he said. He put the engine in gear, then pulled out of the station, following the squad. *Just leave me alone, everyone. I'm fine!* he thought, putting his focus on the job ahead.

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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!"

Roy pulled Squad 51 to a point just beyond Squad 16. To their right was a corral, housing a petting zoo. Further on the right in the recreation complex was a large duck pond, between the petting zoo and a sizeable campground filled with brightly coloured tents. To the left, across from the petting zoo and duck pond, was a garishly painted converted barn. Swirling motifs of hot pink, lime green, and banana yellow against an electric blue background assaulted the eyes. A bright neon sign at the barn doors flashed 'The Barnyard -- disco and restaurant' in large fluorescent green letters. A large silo, painted to look like a giant barber pole, connected the Disco barn to another, slightly smaller barn. The second barn bore 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.

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.

Mike reached up to lift the hard sleeve from the side of the engine. Paul O’Keefe, the engineer from Station 16, came over to give him a hand. Together they fitted the sections of non-collapsible five-inch hose from the intake valve on Engine 51 to a floating dock that the crew from Station 16 had set up when they had first arrived on the scene.

“How’s it goin’, Mikey?” Paul asked, with a grin – he *knew* Stoker hated being called ‘Mikey’.

Mike paled as he leaned over to engage the engine pump. “It’s goin’, I guess,” he muttered. His jaw dropped open and he breathed shallowly through his mouth, fighting back the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. *What the hell is going on? I’ve never felt this bad with the flu before. Peggy must have brought some weird strain of Asian flu from the school. I just want to curl up and go to sleep.* Mike grunted involuntarily when he straightened up.

“Whatsamatter, Mikey, out of shape?” joked Paul.

Mike curled his lower lip over his bottom teeth and expelled his breath in a slow whoosh. “Just a really bad case of the flu, I guess. My gut’s really trying to kill me this time,” he said.

Paul gave him a curious look. “Must be pretty bad, to hear you complain. A *building* could fall on you, and you wouldn’t say a thing about it. Anything I can do to help?”

“Naw, I don’t think so -- thanks for the offer.” Mike turned to the control panel. *C’mon, Stoker, get a hold of yourself. Your buddies are counting on you. Take a deep breath and get on with it.* He adjusted the governors which set the pressures for the two hose lines, then charged Chet and Marco’s line when he saw that they were ready. *Okay, the toggle is set at half-flow for a three-inch, or full flow for an inch-and-a-half -- no more, no less... recite the manual, Mikey, it’ll get your mind off your gut and back on the job, where it belongs.* He shrugged his shoulders, then crossed his arms across his chest, pulling his turnouts taut. *Man, these seem heavier than normal today. As soon as I get home, I’m going to take a nice, hot bath, and let Peggy take care of me.* A fleeting grin flitted across his face as he thought of various ways his wife could make him feel better. His daydream was interrupted by a shrill shout from one of the passing thespians that Roy and Johnny had evicted from the burning theatre.

“Vlad! Look! It is him! It *must* be him -- he bears The Master’s name!” shouted a triumphant soprano.

Mike whirled around, causing another wave of nausea to wash over him. *What the hell...?*

A shapely woman, dressed in a skin-tight, low-cut black dress held her hand over her mouth in surprise, an expression of hero-worship on her face. Her long black tresses framed her artificially pale visage. She took a tentative step toward Stoker, her hand outstretched. Then she took another step, reaching for him.

The man accompanying her stared at Stoker, his eyes overly bright and burning with zeal. His voice was soft and compelling. “You’re right, Elvira. He bears the Master’s name. Surely he is a true descendant of The Great One.”

Mike turned to look at Vlad. *Holy cow, he looks just like a vampire!*

Vlad was a tall, thin man, dressed in a flowing black cape with a red satin lining. His face was chalk-white, and his long black hair stemmed from a pronounced widow’s peak. He stared at Stoker, his expression eager. He closed in, his outstretched hands reaching toward the engineer. “Yes, he is the Chosen One!”

Mike took a step backward, then another, then another until his back was next to the panel. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said. “You should go join the others at the campground.” A fine sweat broke out on his forehead as the woman moved closer to press her advantage.

Elvira licked her lips seductively, an expression of unholy lust on her face. “Bite me, Master. Give me the kiss of eternal life!”

“Get the hell away from here!” warned Mike. He grimaced and braced his left hand on the panel, pressing the heel of his right hand against the right side of his waist.

Elvira moved closer to Mike's right side. "Master!" she beseeched. She tilted her head to the right, reached behind her neck with her right hand, and pulled her long hair to the side, exposing the left side of her neck. "You are 'The Stoker' -- descended from the Greatest One, Bram Stoker. I beg you, Master, bite my neck... make *me* a vampire like you, that I may better serve you." She threw herself to her knees in front of him and stretched her arms up as if in prayer, while Vlad clutched at Mike's chest.

Mike flattened himself against the engine, startled. "Get away! I'm not a vampire!" he cried, thrusting his arms up to knock the actors away from him. He doubled over in agony, falling against the governor that regulated the hose pressure from the engine. He slid to the ground and curled on his left side.

Paul O'Keefe peered around Engine 16. "Hey, Mikey, what's going...." he broke off, aghast.

Mike gasped, "Call...Captain...Stanley..."

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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 a 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?" he demanded of his fellow engineer, fending off the two actors who were watching Mike's writhing in fascination, as if he were a piece of performance art.

"*What!!?*" Hank barked. He spoke into the radio. "Squad 51, belay that -- get over to the engine, pronto. Stoker's collapsed."

Roy threw the hose he'd been carrying to the ground and hastened after Johnny, who had taken off for the engine at a sprint.

Johnny pulled off his gloves and tossed them to the ground, followed by his helmet. He knelt next to Stoker. "Mike, where does it hurt?" he asked. "Mike?" he repeated, reaching for the engineer's wrist. He laid his hand against Mike's forehead and was startled at the emanation of heat. "Jeez, Mike, you're burning up! Where does it hurt?"

“Ungh,” grunted Stoker. He thrashed, and moaned. *What’s wrong with me? Why do I feel like someone’s driven a stake through my belly? Did they think I’m a vampire and miss the chest?* Unbidden, an image of his face danced before his eyes -- only it wasn’t *his* face. This twisted version had an evil grin and started to laugh, showing fangs that were dripping with blood. Mike gasped in horror as his pain-ridden mind conjured up another hallucination -- Elvira was lying at his feet, blood streaming from her freshly-savaged throat. She smiled in unholy glee and kissed the demon Stoker’s feet. ‘Thank you, my Lord, for the gift of eternal life.’

“NO!” cried Mike in desperation, trying to pull back from his vision.

Vlad tugged on Johnny’s arm. “You must not touch the Chosen One!” he admonished, giving Johnny a rough shove. “He is ‘The Stoker’ -- surely a descendent of The Great One.”

Johnny twisted away from Vlad. “Move it!” he commanded, turning his attention back to Mike. “Oh, crap,” he muttered, all too aware what the gagging sounds the engineer was making meant. “Hang on, Mike,” Johnny soothed, positioning him so that he wouldn’t block his airway when he threw up.

Mike gasped for breath, then vomited. Roy grabbed Vlad and Elvira by the arms and dragged them away from the retching engineer. Johnny supported Mike’s shoulders as he continued to vomit, and lowered him back onto his left side when the spasms ended.

“Get them away from here!” Roy shouted to a couple of actors who had stopped to watch the goings-on.

Johnny attempted to palpate Mike’s abdomen, drawing a groan of pain from Stoker.

Roy grabbed Mike’s flailing legs and said, “It’s okay, Mike. Just lie still.”

Johnny caught his partner’s gaze, his expression grim. “He’s guarding. I’m not sure about rebound tenderness -- he keeps moving around. I think it might be his appendix, or an ulcer. He’s responsive to pain, but not really to voice.”

Marco 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, and 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.

Mike issued another moan, then slumped into unconsciousness.

"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, fellahs. 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.

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Mike stirred, agitated, as Johnny loosened the waist on the engineer's trousers. "Nay, foul villain! I'm *not* a vampire -- thou shalt never prove it," hissed Stoker, struggling feebly against Johnny's efforts to examine him.

Johnny stared in disbelief at his crewmate. "*Vampire*?! Mike, listen to me. You've got to calm down and let me take a look at you," he said.

“Remove this infernal stake from me! I command it!” ordered Mike, rolling his head from side to side, his eyes half-lidded.

“Let me examine you, Mike. Then I’ll take the stake out, all right?” cajoled Johnny.

Paul tossed four pairs of wire cutters to the ground behind Engine 16, then came over. “Can I help?” he asked Johnny.

Johnny nodded. “For some reason, he seems to think he’s a vampire. If you can hold him down so I can examine him, I’ll be able to get a report to Rampart when Bellingham gets back with the equipment.”

Paul pursed his lips, then nodded as a possible explanation dawned on him. “I think I know what he’s thinking. Before you got here, those actors were convinced that he was related to Bram Stoker. Isn’t he the guy who wrote ‘Dracula’?” he asked, as he knelt next to Mike.

Johnny replied, “Yeah, that’s right. See if you can get him to make any sense -- I need to know as much information about the pain as possible.”

“You bet,” acknowledged Paul. “Mike,” he said, reaching over to grip the other engineer’s shoulders. “We’re going to have a little quiz. What do you have to remember when you set up the hose bed for an accordion load?”

Mike closed his eyes and answered mechanically, “The coupling placed in the hose bed... should be located to the rear of the bed... and can be put to either side if the bed is not split.”

“Right,” replied Paul. “How about another one, Mikey?” he asked. He continued to fire questions at Mike while Johnny took the engineer’s vital signs.

“Mike?” asked Johnny, after a minute. “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty awful, Johnny,” Mike gasped. “What’s goin’ on? It’s... it’s not the flu, right?”

Johnny’s face was impassive as he answered, “That’s right, Mike. How long have you been feeling ill?”

“Um.... about two days, I guess.... I thought it was just the flu,” Mike replied.

“What does the pain feel like?” Johnny asked, jotting down Mike’s vital signs in his notebook.

“Like a sharp stick... in my gut,” Stoker asserted.

Johnny placed his hands on either side of Mike’s ribcage. “Breathe in as deeply as you can, and tell me if it hurts any worse.”

Stoker complied, and shook his head. “Not really -- I just can’t breathe deeply...at all.”

“Are you taking any medications?”

He licked his lips, his eyelids drooping.

“Mike? Stick with me, here. Are you taking anything?” Johnny pressed.

“Just... a couple of aspirins.”

“Okay, Mike -- I want the truth on this one. When was the last time you had anything to eat? I know you didn’t have any lunch at all, but did you at least eat breakfast today?” Johnny asked in a mock-motherly tone.

“Um... I sort of had lunch yesterday... but not really anything since. I just wasn’t hungry.... the thought of food made me sick,” Stoker admitted.

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “Apart from a couple of minutes ago, have you actually thrown up?”

Mike shook his head. “No. Jeez, Peggy’s *never* gonna... let me forget this. She wanted me... to go to the doctor...*Yesterday*.”

Johnny said, “Okay, Mike, I’m just gonna take a quick look at you here. I’ll be as careful as possible, but it’s still gonna hurt a bit.” He observed Marco, who was sitting on the ground, leaning wearily against the engine. “How’re ya doin’, Marco?”

“*Marco?!*” gasped Mike. He clutched at Johnny’s arm. “What... happened?” he demanded.

Johnny flashed Marco a warning look and shook his head. ‘Don’t tell him about the hose,’ he mouthed.

Marco nodded in compliance. *You’ve got enough on your plate at the moment, Mike, without knowing the full story of what just happened. We’ll fill you in later, when we’re all joking about how bad the hospital food is.* “The loft collapsed. My shoulder’s out... and my collarbone’s broken, I think.”

“Ow!” protested Mike as Johnny lightly palpated his abdomen. “What about.... what about Chet?” he whispered.

Johnny and Marco exchanged glances, but didn’t answer.

“Where’s Chet?” asked Mike, an expression of anxiety replacing his grimace of pain.

“Uh...” began Marco.

“What happened?” repeated Mike, struggling to rise. *Tell me! Did I do something?*

“Mike! Calm down!” said Johnny in alarm, as he felt Mike’s already-elevated pulse rate soar higher. *Man, we’d better tell him before he goes through the roof. I don’t like the look of things, Mike. I don’t have any idea how close your appendix is to bursting, and this stress isn’t gonna help at all.*

“He got hit with a roll of barbed wire when the loft collapsed,” Marco admitted reluctantly, while Johnny scribbled some more notes.

Bellingham plunked the biophone and drug box down next to Johnny and took the trauma box over to work on Marco.

Marco shifted against the engine and clutched his right shoulder.

“Okay, Marco,” Bob said, “let’s see what I can do to make you feel better. First things first: we gotta get your turnouts off.” He produced a rude but on-key rendition of *The Stripper* as he undid Marco’s coat and slid it off his left arm. As he eased Marco’s right arm from the sleeve, Lopez gritted his teeth.

A small moan escaped from Marco’s tightly clenched jaw. *Wow, that feels awful! How can a joint injury hurt that much?*

“Sorry about that, Marco,” Bob apologized. “I’m gonna immobilize your arm, and it’s gonna hurt. But, you’ve gotta long ride ahead of you, and you might have a long wait in the ER. It’ll hurt a helluva lot worse if I don’t do this now.”

“Yeah, I know,” agreed Marco.

Bellingham placed some padding tightly under Marco’s arm and bound it into place. “What happened, Marco?” asked Bob.

“Er...” hesitated Marco, reluctant to reveal the full nature of events while Mike could still hear him. *I don’t want Mike to know what happened. He’ll hate himself...*

“C’mon, Marco, I need to know,” insisted Bob.

Marco sighed, and dropped his voice to a whisper. “We were workin’ on the fire in the barn, and the hose pressure doubled suddenly. We couldn’t control it, and I dropped the hose. I was thrown, and landed on my shoulder... I heard the collarbone crack...”

Mike moaned softly, “It’s *my* fault.”

“Mike...” began Johnny.

“No,” replied the engineer. “It’s all my fault that Marco and Chet got hurt.” He closed his eyes and kept muttering, “All my fault.” A single tear trickled from the corner of his eye.

“Bellingham,” said Johnny, “get on the horn to Rampart.”

“Right,” replied Bob, saluting Johnny irreverently. A quirky smile crossed his face as he adjusted the frequency before trying the connection to Rampart. *What do you bet, Animal, that this setting works right off, first time? Not like earlier...* “Rampart this is Squad 16, er, Squad 51. Rampart this is Squad 51, how do you read?” As Dr. Early responded, Bob shouted triumphantly, “Bingo! Rampart, we have three victims. First victim is a 28-year-old male, suffering from a probable dislocation of the right shoulder, and a right clavicle fracture, from a heavy fall to the ground. Vital signs: pulse is 80, strong and regular, respiration is 18 and regular, blood pressure is 120/80. Patient is in considerable pain. There is no sign of a head injury. Apart from assorted scrapes and bruises, there are no other injuries. His arm has been immobilized for transport,” replied Bob.

“10-4, 51. Administer an IV of Ringer’s lactate, and 5 mg MS, IV,” answered Early.

“10-4, Rampart. IV of Ringer’s and 5 mg MS, IV. Stand by for vitals on the second victim.” Bellingham carried the biophone to Johnny and thrust the handset into John’s outstretched hand. He started Marco’s IV, administered the morphine, and set up two more IVs.

Johnny clicked the transmit button on the handset. “Rampart, our second victim is a 32-year-old male suffering acute abdominal distress -- possibly appendicitis. Patient is guarding, and there is rebound tenderness, although there is no rigidity at the moment. He has not had anything to eat for about 26 hours, and had one prolonged episode of vomiting. There are no other injuries. Vital signs are: pulse is 100, weak and rapid; respiration is 24, shallow and slightly laboured; BP is 100/60, down from a reading of 118/74 ten minutes ago. Patient is feverish and in extreme pain. He has been feeling ill for two days, with acute pain for three hours, and severe pain for about half an hour.”

Joe kneaded his right palm with his left thumb. “10-4, 51. What’s your ETA?”

Johnny grinned in relief as the ambulance pulled up behind the engine. “Rampart, our ETA is approximately twenty-five minutes.”

“51, start an IV of Ringer’s lactate, and administer 10 mg MS, IV. Keep a close eye on him. I want updated vitals every five minutes. Can you take his temperature?”

“Affirmative, Rampart. Stand by,” responded Johnny. He turned to the ambulance attendant. “Hey, Rudy. We need to transport him lying on his left side. Jake,” he addressed the driver, “we need a lot of speed on this one.”

“You got it, Johnny,” answered Jake, as he and Rudy lifted Stoker to the stretcher and loaded him into the ambulance.

“Rampart, this is Squad 51,” said Johnny. “We’re transporting the second victim now. The first and third victims will be coming in with Squad 16.”

“10-4, Squad 51,” replied Joe. He turned to Dixie and said, “Dix, alert the OR -- looks like we’ve got a really hot appendix coming in. All the information is there. They’ll be calling in every five minutes with updated vitals.”

“All right, Joe. Any idea just what happened out there? That’s *four* people from the same incident,” Dixie commented.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Dix. It doesn’t help that they’re nearly half an hour away, either.”

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“Rampart, this is Squad 51. Patient’s vital signs are unchanged. His temperature is 100.7. Our ETA is now approximately fifteen minutes,” reported Johnny.

“10-4, 51. Keep us advised,” answered Joe.

“We’re nearly there, Mike,” encouraged Johnny. “Only another few minutes.”

“Yeah, sure,” answered Mike, despondent.

“Mike, you heard what Captain Steele said. If the accident with the hose hadn’t happened, Chet and Marco would probably have been right under the loft when it went,” soothed Johnny.

“Great,” replied Mike. *Man, I feel dopey -- at least it’s not as painful as it was earlier...* He stifled a yawn. “You know what the worst thing is?” he asked.

“No, what?” answered Johnny. He frowned slightly as he rested his hand lightly on Mike’s abdomen, noting the growing rigidity. *It’s a good thing that morphine is working, Mike, ‘cause I **don’t** like the way your gut is stiffening up.*

“Having to tell.... Peggy that she was right,” Mike admitted with a half-hearted sheepish grin

Johnny laughed. “Not likely to let you forget you were wrong?” he joked.

“Oh, she might... in about fifty years or so....’M sleepy,” Mike slurred, his eyes closing.

“You go ahead and sleep, Mike,” said Johnny. “We’ve still got another 15-20 minutes to go.” He nodded in satisfaction as he checked Mike’s vital signs again. “Rampart, this is Squad 51. Updated vitals: pulse is steady at 90, respiration is now 18. BP steady at 100/70. Patient is now unconscious,

probably because of the morphine.” He paused, and added in a reluctant voice, “His abdomen is becoming rigid.”

Joe frowned. *Damn*. “What’s your ETA, 51?”

“We’re about fifteen minutes out, Rampart,” Johnny answered.

“10-4,” replied Joe. “Dix, advise Dr. Anderson that, assuming Stoker’s still stable by the time they get him here, we’ll be sending him directly to surgery.”

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Roy’s disembodied voice came over Johnny’s handie-talkie. “HT 51 to Squad 51.”

John 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.

“See ya there,” replied Johnny. He noted Mike’s vitals once more, then picked up the handset to the biophone.

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When they were five minutes away from the hospital, Jake shouted, “Brace yourselves!” He pulled the ambulance abruptly to the left, and then slewed it violently to the right. “You idiot!” yelled Jake. “Red lights, sirens -- what possessed you to back out of your driveway now?”

Mike’s eyes flew open; he groaned, and, drawing quick gasps of air, started heaving.

“Shit!” said Johnny fervently. “Rudy, get a basin.” He took another set of vitals. “Double shit!” he swore. “Rudy, see if you can get an axillary temperature. Rampart, this is Squad 51. Patient is conscious and in considerable pain. His abdomen is now fully rigid. Pulse is now 120 and thready. Respiration is 28 and gasping, and the BP is now 90/40. Stand by for temperature.” Johnny looked at Rudy, anxiety etching his face into hard lines.

Rudy removed the thermometer from Mike’s armpit and examined it. “102,” he pronounced.

Johnny reported, “Rampart, axillary temperature is 102. He is also vomiting. ETA is now about three minutes.”

Joe sighed. “10-4, 51. Bring him right into Treatment Three. We’ve got the OR prepped and ready.”

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Dixie met the ambulance at the entrance doors. “Treatment Three,” she advised.

“He lost consciousness again about a minute ago, Doc,” related Johnny as they lifted Mike’s limp form to the gurney in the treatment room. “He was in a helluva lot of pain before he passed out. He was retching, but I don’t think there was anything left in his system to come up. You need me any more, Doc? I want to call his wife and Chet’s wife.”

Joe shook his head. “The orderlies should be here any minute to take him up to surgery. He’s stable, as far as that goes. They’ll have to irrigate, and there’ll undoubtedly be a full course of antibiotics.” He waved at the two orderlies who came into the room. “Take him up to OR 4.” He clapped Johnny on the shoulder. “You, my friend, look like you could use a cup of java.”

Johnny clenched his jaw and replied, “Yeah. I’ve got a long wait ahead of me until Captain Stanley gets here with the squad. I’ve got two more friends on the way in, too. I wonder how Chet and Marco are doing.”

Joe rubbed the palm of one hand with his other thumb. He knew the kind of stress that the paramedic was normally under, but with half his shiftmates needed immediate medical attention... that went *well* beyond the norm as far as he was concerned. “You wanna talk about it, John?”

“Might as well. By the time I tell you everything that’s happened, the others will be here. It was the stupidest thing....”

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Johnny met them with a wheelchair for Marco 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 right now. 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...."* 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.”

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Sandi Kelly grabbed Peggy Stoker’s shoulders and propelled the pacing woman into a chair. “Peggy, you’re driving me crazy. It’s just like watching Johnny. Sit down before you wear a hole in the floor. They should be here with news any minute now. It’s been over an hour since he went to surgery.”

Peggy sighed and brushed back her curly bangs. “You said Chet and Marco are gonna be fine, right?”

Sandi smiled. “Yeah. Chet’s gotta stay overnight for observation because of the concussion. They thought it best to keep Marco overnight too, since he’d only be hanging around the hospital waiting for news, anyway.”

A small wiry man in scrubs came into the waiting area. “Mrs. Stoker?” he said tentatively. “I’m Dr. Anderson.”

Peggy gulped and pushed herself from the chair, her legs trembling. “I’m Peggy Stoker. How is my husband?”

Dr. Anderson smiled. “He’s doing fine. He’s in recovery right now, and then he’ll be moved to a room. We’d like to keep him here for a few days, just to make sure that we combat any infection that might occur.”

Peggy heaved a huge sigh, her answering smile a ghost of the doctor’s. “Is that likely to happen?”

Sandi gave her a hug and whispered, “Looks like this is my cue to leave, Hon. I’ll go visit the boys, and see you later. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Sandi. Tell the boys I said to hurry up and get well.”

After Chet’s wife left, Peggy turned back to the doctor, who gestured her to a chair. She asked, “How likely is it that there’s be an infection?”

Dr. Anderson’s lips formed a thin line as he shrugged. “Any time an appendix ruptures, the abdomen is compromised. We irrigated his abdomen very thoroughly while in surgery, and he’s on a strict course of antibiotics. Only time will tell if an infection has set in. The odds of such an occurrence are pretty slim, but we want to be ready for every possibility. We’ll know for sure in a few days. He’s resting as comfortably as could be expected right now, and he’ll be sedated for the next few hours. Do you have any questions?”

“How soon until he can come home, and what sort of things will we need to do for his recovery?”

“That will depend on the next few days. We’ll deal with the specifics when the time comes,” he answered. “I’m sorry if it seems like that’s not really enough information for now, but we do have to wait and see how he reacts over the next while.”

“How long will it be before he can go back to work?”

“Once again, that depends on how long it takes him to heal. He’s going to be very sore for a while, and from what the others who know him have told me, he’s going to be a bit impatient and frustrated while he’s healing, so you need to prepare for that.”

“Doctor, I’m a grade two – I’m used to dealing with temper tantrums.”

His eyes crinkled and he nodded. “I’d hesitate to apply the term ‘temper tantrum’ to a firefighter, but you certainly know your husband and his moods better than I do. If it helps, you can always tell him any restrictions on his activities are only there to help him heal faster.”

“Thanks, Doctor. When can I see him?” Peggy asked, her expression a mixture of anxiety warring with relief.

“I’ll send a nurse to get you in about twenty minutes. He’s going to be quite doopey from the sedatives, so he might not wake up.”

“That’s okay. I just want to be with him, to make sure I know he’s all right. Then I have just eight words for him,” Peggy answered.

Dr. Anderson looked confused. “Eight words? Usually it’s three words ‘I love you’ or ‘Get well soon’. Just as a matter of curiosity, what *are* the eight words?”

Peggy smirked. “I love you, and I told you so.”

*FIN*

*Author’s note: This story was originally written about fifteen years ago, and each part was hosted at a separate site, as a response to a challenge featuring a different secondary character: Craig Brice, Chet Kelly, and Mike Stoker. I realize there’s a bit of repetition as the stories weave back and forth, and each one can stand alone, but I kind of liked putting them all together in one setting. I also did some major surgery when I joined them, as the original versions were rife with a lot of unnecessary adverbs. I added a few extra scenes as well, as one does when in ‘editor’ mode.*