

# Marco and the Man Upstairs

By NineMilesNorth

Published on FanFiction.net 10-13-12



It's hard when the one you are angry at is the person you need to turn to most. This story is the final story of the "Coping Trilogy".

**The characters depicted in Emergency are the property of Mark VII/Universal Studios, no copyright infringement intended.**

## Chapter 1

### December 18th

"So, Marco - last night was the second night of Las Posadas, how'd it go?"

"No quiero hablar de eso. Leave it alone, Chet." Marco punctuated this with a slammed locker door, before walking out of the room.

John and Roy turned to Chet for an explanation as they finished changing into uniform. "What was that about?"

"I don't know guys." Chet's gaze centered on the locker room door as it swung closed. "'Posada' is Spanish for 'inn' or 'shelter'. Las Posada is celebrated the nine nights before Christmas. It's a procession of people representing Mary and Joseph's search for a place to stay. There's been one on Olvera Street downtown since, like the 1930's." Chet brought a foot up on the bench to tie his shoe. "Marco's family's been going on the 17th of December since they moved here on that day back when he was a kid. It's a *huge* family tradition. If he has to pull a shift on the 17th, then most of them try to go a *second* time on his day off. I went with them last year. Man, I hope he didn't stand 'em up last night."

---

Captain Stanley paused in front of his men, clipboard in hand.

"John has made the suggestion that we purchase and/or procure donations of stuffed animals, specifically stuffed Dalmatian dogs to keep on hand for our youngest victims, in memory of Missy Chandler."

He paused to allow the men a moment as they chimed in all at once with their agreements and suggestions.

"Okay, pipe down. I'll take that as a resounding unanimous vote to pursue the project."

Hank pulled out a copy of a newspaper, and the subsequent "piping down" that was instantly accomplished did not surprise him in the least.

"Now, about the article in the special interest section of Sunday's paper highlighting a certain fire crew's off duty activities. There were *three* copies waiting on my desk, not to mention the phone call I got Monday morning from HR or the visit I got Monday afternoon from Chief McConnike or the packet of photos a neighbor sent me."

His men all moved to get a look at the photos their captain was waving, but each stepped back in line after catching the look on his face.

Hank paced a moment in front of his men. "Once on that roof was not enough for you fellas? Roy, I should have guessed that was what you wanted to borrow my tall ladder for. Who did you hijack the rest of the equipment from? And is that *our* Bambi sporting a red nose perched 'up on the rooftop'?"

"Gage had some of it and we borrowed a few harnesses and a spare roof ladder from the station...we did asked first. We followed safety procedures, and were real careful, honest, Cap. And you know he couldn't finish putting those lights up himself, what with his bum leg, and all. So we thought we'd help him surprise his wife, and besides, it *is* Christmas time..." Chet sputtered to a pause. "Bambi volunteered," he added helpfully.

"Okay, I appreciate what you men did, I really do. But I don't suppose you could give me a heads up next time - just so I could be prepared with a better response than 'Gee, Chief, *I dunno.*' And Kelly, show me in the training manual where it outlines the correct procedure for stringing Christmas lights or diagrams the proper placement of inflatable Disney characters. Maybe I could have a squad on standby whenever you men get the urge to mess around on an extracurricular roof, just to be on the safe side." Hank paused to let the seriousness of that statement sink in.

There was a single moment of silence before Mike asked, "Can I have a spare copy of the article for my mom?" The men broke ranks to crowd around, vying to have a peek at the pictures. Hank sighed, and fell to muttering as he took himself off to the kitchen for a bracing cup of coffee.

A few hours later, after chore assignments were done, the tones sounded and both paramedics rose in response with the rest of the crew. They sank back to their seats when the tones only called for the engine.

---

The men of Engine 51 found themselves dousing a smoldering mattress lying under the stairway of an abandoned-and-now-condemned apartment building.

Mike shut down the pump, and moved to lend Chet a hand rolling up the booster hose.

Marco took hold of a corner of the mattress to tug it out to the curb for garbage pick up. He whirled around just in time to catch the dervish that hurled herself at him. They went down together and Marco had to twist his body to guide her to the soaked mattress. He fell half on, half off with a "whoof" of exhaled air and cracked his elbow on the pavement. His attacker rolled away only to rise to her knees and throw herself on him again, shrieking, "My baby! Where is my baby? Help, help! He took my baaabee!"

Mike and Chet rushed to pulled her off, holding the struggling woman at arms' length due to the rank odor that was almost stomach turning even from that distance. Cap gave Marco a hand up as his lineman straightened, rubbing his elbow. "You alright there, pal?"

"Gracious, si, Cap. I didn't whack it that hard," Marco answered as he turned to move back under the steps.

"Ma'am, there's a baby? Where did you see it last?" Captain Stanley asked as he began to search the area where the mattress had been when they first arrived.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no! There was a fire?" The lady collapsed to her knees, sobbing. "My baby-my baby-my baby was burned in a fire!"

Cap and Marco started a thorough search for any signs of an infant. Chet joined in once he was sure Mike had the distraught woman contained. The men were methodical as they sifted through stacks of garbage-filled bags and cardboard boxes.

Marco eventually came up with a doll in a tattered footy night-gown. "Cap, do you suppose this is what she..."

The woman broke away from Mike's restraining hand and snatched the doll away. "Get your filthy wetback-beaner hands offa my baby!"

Mike took a step further back as if she had physically taken a swing at his head. Chet released a hiss from between his teeth and they both moved to stand between the distasteful woman and Marco, facing her with stony looks of disapproval.

Marco pushed between his crew mates. "Firefighter Marco Lopez, ma'am." He handed her the ratty diaper bag he had unearthed from a dark corner under the stairs. "Why don't we move out where the air is fresher for you and your baby?" He motioned with a jerk of his head towards the engine as he turned to grab a yellow blanket from a side compartment.

By the time Marco reached the rear bumper where Mike and Chet had parked his attacker, they both had their backs turned to the engine. Chet was studying the ends of his boots like they were engraved with next week's winning lottery numbers. Mike seemed to be calculating the angles of the crisscrossing vapor trails above his head. "Mom" was nursing her "baby" as she hummed a medley of lullabies. Cap was standing off to the side, holding the HT to an ear, deep in conversation. Marco deftly shook out the blanket to fold it over her shoulders. He reached into a side compartment to grab one of the larger shop towels and draped it over the woman's shoulder and the doll's head.

The contented mama beamed up at him. Marco happened to look over at Stoker and caught the engineer's narrowed eyes as he considered the towel Marco had chosen. Marco figured he would hear about that later, seeing as how the shop towel was one of those that Stoker brought from home to use to buff the engine, preferring their lint free absorbability. The mom and baby seemed to appreciate its extra softness. Marco stole another glance at Mike only to meet his gaze...yep, he was definitely gonna hear about this one. He turned back to the woman who had just given his turnout an attention-seeking tug.

"Perhaps you aren't a beaner?" she asked, peering up hopefully. She put the doll over her shoulder and vigorously thumped its plastic back.

"Firefighter, Ma'am. Marco Lopez."

He sat near her on the bumper. "Ma'am, have you and your baby been in the neighborhood long?"

The woman stood and began pacing with the doll still slung over her shoulder. "She's been having a lot of the colic lately."

Marco tried again. "Where were you staying before you ah, moved here? Is there someone we can call?"

A resounding silence met his questions. He waited for an answer from the pacing woman. He waited for the paramedics or whomever else Cap had called to come and take over, certain someone else, almost *anyone* else would be better equipped to deal with the woman. He realized part of his discomfort came from feeling a little guilty that he would be relieved to be finished with this duty and be able to take a deep breath through his nose. So they waited in what became an almost companionable, but not entirely comfortable silence. He stood and leaned a shoulder against the back of the engine.

Across the rear of the rig, six feet out, the tempo of her stride increased. She pivoted, retraced her steps yet again, crossing in front of Marco. The doll's back was taking one heck of a beating.

"'Bout a week now, me and Bethie have been all on our own - all alone. Don't need nobody, no-how. We surely don't need anything from those bossy folks over at the mission. Rules for every little thing, 'Time to eat.' 'Don't smoke, your body is a temple.' 'Time to sleep.' 'Wake up, Wake up, Wake UP!' 'Time to pray.' Does it really matter if you believe? No, it does not. Better pray if you are hungry, though. Hungry. Am I hungry? Why, yes - I do believe I could eat a bite."

She turned to rummage through the shopping cart Chet had retrieved from where she had abandoned it in the center of the street when she first mounted her rescue of her "baaabeee!" and triumphantly uncovered a partially flattened Chinese take-out box. She pulled a fork out of a cavernous sweater pocket and dug in, stopping once to offer Marco a bite of noodles dangling off the tines.

"There, there baby," the woman crooned, mostly between bites. Bethie remained silent, tucked high under an arm. It reminded a silent Marco of a football hold, except he thought a quarterback would probably have at least one hand on the ball, and not be eating whatever was being served out of that box. "We're never, never going back, don't cry, baby."

"Bethie, honey, listen to your mama. Some folk'll profess a great big faith when everything is all hunky-dory. Walking clueless, righteous folk. Bossy, bossy 'don't smoke in bed' folk."

"Now don't get me wrong; ain't nothin' wrong with having a faith." The woman's face took on a fervent look, and tucking the paper carton deep in the shopping cart, she turned to face the mostly empty street and flung her arms wide. Bethie, still clutched by an arm, swung wide too and Marco caught himself before he reached out in reflexive alarm.

"People of the jury. When life gives you lemons, do you buck-the-fuck-up and bloom where you are cast out?" Her voice rose and fell in pitch and volume. "Do you hide yourself under a basket? Do you pull yourself up by the bootstraps?"

A lone pair of women crossed to the other side of the street a block away.

The impassioned orator paused to mutter "Got no boots," as she bent to examine the sad state of one of her sandals.

"Oh ye of little faith," her strident voice rose again to address her retreating congregation. "When life dumps a load on you, do your convictions flee? When you have been hurt, hurt deep, *then* will you look us in the eyeballs and be able to say you still trust your God?"

Her gaze snapped to the disheveled doll she still held at arm's length. "That'd be the kind of faith you could respect, baby girl," she ended in a quiet voice as she cuddled the doll close again to straighten the shop towel.

"Here, I need you to babysit for a minute." She thrust the doll into Marco's arms, while she set to patting pockets and digging through the shopping cart again to produce a lone cigarette and a lighter. "Be back in a bit. You shouldn't smoke around babies, it stunts their growth." She paused for a moment to consider Marco. "That means you too. No smoking while you're watching Bethie."

Marco accepted the doll. "No ma'am, I don't smoke, so..."

The woman stepped up to his side and tugged on his turnout coat and motioned for him to lean down. "You don't need to lie to *me* about smoking," she said in a stage-whisper that got the rest of the engine crew's immediate attention. "Who am I to call the kettle black? But I gotta tell you, it seems strange that your friends don't already know. I can smell it on you a mile away. You absolutely *reek* of tar and nicotine."

Marco looked up when Mike and Chet both chose that moment to whirl away and disappear. They didn't go far. He could easily pinpoint their exact location from the muffled snorts coming from the front of the rig. Cap was suspiciously turned away from them as well, and Marco felt a smidgen betrayed by his commander's shaking shoulders.

She returned from her smoke break a few steps away and took up her childcare duties again.

She finished burping the doll, then began changing it. She handed Marco the diaper pins followed by an empty baby powder bottle. He held each item in turn and ignored the grins on Mike's and Chet's faces as they moved around the scene, stowing gear and finishing reeling in the hose.

"Amelia Mary Earhart," she offered her hand in a formal introduction. "Thank you for rescuing my baby, Fireman Mark. You were *so* very brave." Her eyes widened in horror. "Oh my, was she hurt? Bethie my baby! Are you hurt?" The woman tore open the wrappings. "Ooooo look at your tiny toes. My baby-my baby-my baby has fifth degree burns on her little toesies. Call an ambulance, Call a doctor!"

Cap crouched a few feet in front of the distraught woman, trying to stay up wind.

"Ambulance is on the way Ma'am, paramedics too. They'll get you to the hospital where a doctor can take a look." The woman was sobbing while she rocked the doll frantically. Mike retrieved a roll of gauze from the first aid kit under a jump seat and tossed it to the lineman sitting next to her.

"Hold her leg like so, Madre." Marco demonstrated so he could bandage up the scorched and partially melted toes. The moment the last wrap was anchored, the woman fell into a hiccup-punctuated silence and allowed Marco to re-bundle the doll and hand it back to her.

Squad 116 arrived moments later. Paramedics Peterson and Weile gathered a set of vitals and contacted Rampart. The men of 51 bundled up the contents of the shopping cart under the direction and eagle eye of the patient.

After some discussion off to the side, they decided to leave the shopping cart itself behind as it would not easily fit into the back of the Ambulance. The ambulance drivers also had a few things to say about transporting stolen goods, pointing out that the cart clearly belonged to Gold's Quality Food Mart, as evidenced by the placard affixed to its front proudly proclaiming that very fact.

The firemen each held their already guarded breath as the cart was unobtrusively parked back in the alleyway, steeling themselves for the woman's reaction. The tongue-lashing they expected was never delivered as an oblivious Amelia snoozed soundly on the gurney without pharmaceutical aid.

"Captain Stanley? Could you let your guys know that social services will meet us in ER and Bracket has called in a psych consult?" Peterson asked as he hopped into the back of the ambulance before they lifted the stretcher in behind him.

Cap closed the door with an "all clear" double slap, and a grateful, deep breath. "Weile, could you take a look at Marco's elbow, he cracked it pretty hard back there."

---

Chet swung up into the cab after finishing dragging the mattress to the curb. "Hey, you okay pal?"

"Yeah, just hit my funny bone is all."

"She was something, man. I'm sorry about what she said back there."

"Chet, she liked me just fine once she got to know my charming self."

"Yeah, I noticed how she warmed right up to you 'Mark!'."

The linemen were interrupted by a burst of lights and siren as Mike turned the ignition key. A moan/growl hybrid slipped from the engineer's lips as he swiftly reached to flip a switch. Startled looks from pedestrians walking by elicited another sound of displeasure. "How the hell did those two manage it *this* time? That's three times now, *four*, if you count the time I caught it last week before actually turning the key. Cap, I'm sorry. I've been trying to keep an eye out whenever we get a run with any of the guys from 116, but either Weile or Peterson must have slipped past me."

"Not your fault, Stoker. I'm thinking it's time we have a shift meeting back at the station to discuss the subject of retribution."

Chet turned to Marco to continue their interrupted discussion. "So it doesn't bother you at all? Because it sure bugged the hell out of me."

"Chet, she was breastfeeding a plastic doll. I'd hardly call that a teachable moment. And it's Christmas, *remember?* Let it rest, amigo. This lady, she wasn't exactly rational. That makes it a bit easier not to take things personally."

"So, you're saying that you need to consider the source?"

Marco refrained from answering that question right away, because he *was* considering the source and knew to be wary when Chet got the gleam in his eye that he was presently wearing.

"So, it'd be okay for me to call you, oh let's say, a loco Hispanic hombre - *considering* how I'm your friend and all?"

Marco shot back, "That, and it would be a mistake to ever accuse *you* of being particularly rational, you blithering bog-trotter."

Cap threw a horrified look at Mike's grinning face.

"What? Don't look at me, I'm a dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying, Yankee Doodle mutt. I got no stones to throw."

From the rear came a laughter-laced "Say, Mikey, that would make you a Heinz 57 mix wouldn't it?"

"Hush, Lucky Charms, you'll hurt the mongrel's feelings," Marco chided his friend with mock sincerity.

"Don't call me Mikey."

"Enough!" came the strained command from the front seat.

It took nearly the entire ride back to the station for the teary-eyed linemen to settle down enough to take even breaths. Hank was just grateful that his engineer seemed to be able to drive in a straight line.

Mike backed the engine into the bay. "Looks like the squad is back." He elbowed Marco as they shrugged out of their turnout coats. "You were quite handy with that diaper back there, Uncle Marco. You owe me a chamois cloth. I call first shower since I need to get lunch going."

"Well you did fine, Marco, real fine." Cap clapped him on the shoulder as they walked through the kitchen door and towards the day room.

Chet breezed into the kitchen, past the two paramedics seated at the table, and headed for the coffee pot. "Second shower!"

"Only if I can't beat your pokey butt to it, Potato Head!" Marco whirled back towards the door.

"Time out, time out you, you...cheater." Chet set his mug down to follow his friend out of the kitchen. "Never mind, be my guest. I forgot how much you 'absolutely reek.'"

Cap, plopped down on the couch to rub Henry behind an ear and looked over at Roy and John's perplexed faces

"Don't ask, guys - just don't ask." He rose and retreated to his office and shut the door, grateful for a few moments of sanctuary from his shift's shenanigans.

## Chapter 2

### December 23rd

"Alrighty then," Cap began to bring his crew up to speed after four days off. "News, news..."

"It seems we have survived our ill-advised field test of Racial Slur Day. Let's not make this an annual event, gentlemen." Cap paused to make eye contact with his linemen who each ducked their heads and bounced on their toes at having been singled out.

"I ran it by the missis, who talked to Mama Lopez, who talked to Joanne, and fellas, we have let the genie or in this case the Dalmatian out of the bottle, er, bag...or whatever. There'll be no turning back now. Operation 'Missy's Damnation Puppy Dogs' is officially launched. We may have created a monster, but I'm sure some of the other stations will pitch in, and it's an excellent idea. Rosie is going to start after the Holidays by pricing the stuffed animals while Joanne and Mama Lopez look into finding toy firemen's helmets that will work.

"Additionally, the Brass likes Marco's 'get-em-before-they-burn' idea to try and deal with juvenile arsonists. They're calling it 'Fire Quenchers'. A committee will be forming in the next few weeks.

"Okay men, here are the day's assignments: Roy, you and John will need to restock first thing. Dwyer and Bennington caught a couple of runs early this morning. When you get back, John's cooking. Roy, the bunkroom is yours. Chet, you've got the day room. Mike, you've got the bay and I'll need you to give the equipment a once-over first thing too; last shift was a busy one all around. Marco, that leaves you with latrines. Day's a-wasting men. Let's get to it."

"After you, La..." Chet bowed grandly for Marco to precede him but refrained from finishing his sentence with what *he* considered a rather clever turn of phrase when Cap cleared his throat in warning.

Before any of them managed to exit the apparatus floor, the tones sounded, prompting all six men to turn and hurry to the rigs. They rode in relative silence to what turned out to be a small kitchen fire. The morning bacon blaze was quickly doused with a fire extinguisher from the engine, leaving a few minor burns to treat, and minimal overhaul consisting mostly of opening windows.

The paramedics and the engine company parted ways with the squad heading off to Rampart and the engine returning to quarters.

---

Something on the rim of the sink caught Mike's eye as he walked by on his way to his locker. It lay half obscured by its own chain, a section of which draped into the bowl of the sink. Mike instantly recognized the gold Maltese cross with the figure of Saint Florian on the front, but he flipped it over to be sure it was Marco's. "San Florian, nos protegen" was engraved on the back, as were the lineman's initials.

Mike weighed the medal and its sturdy chain in his hand. Marco wore them around his neck on his days off, but transferred them to a pocket while at work because the chain tended to swing free of his shirt front at scenes and he worried that it would get caught. But he always kept it with him. On the way to fire scenes, it was not unusual to see the lineman reach into a pocket and briefly bow his head. Mike's hand enfolded the medal. "St. Florian, watch over him," he murmured before pocketing it himself for safekeeping.

---

"...and I'm telling you that it's a great idea. The green peppers will make the spaghetti sauce more festive." John set the grocery sack he carried on the counter as he turned back to Roy. "Go ahead and ask the guys what they think, you old Scrooge."

"Alright - Johnny here seems to think that we need to have Christmas themed lunch and dinner menus. To that end, he has planned hotdog, cherry tomato and green pepper kabobs for lunch and Spaghetti with green peppers in the sauce for dinner. I was afraid I was going to have to talk him out of ice cream stuffed-peppers for dessert."

"What *did* you get for dessert, Gage?" Chet moseyed over to have a peek in the sack Roy had set on the kitchen table. He pulled out a half-gallon of ice cream and turned to put it in the freezer behind him. "Good choice, Gage. I like mint chip." He rummaged in the bag and resurfaced with an onion and four peppers, and set them on the counter. "But I'll have mine plain, if you don't mind," he added with a wink aimed at Roy as he picked up the broom he had set aside.

Marco got up from the kitchen table to open a cupboard over the stove and pull down two cans of baby potatoes. "Here John, what do you think of adding these to your kabobs? I think there's some bacon we can wrap around the sections of hot dogs, let me check to see how much there is left."

Roy left the two chefs to plan lunch while he headed off to make up the bunks. He was hopeful that Marco could curb Johnny's new-found enthusiasm for the holiday mood setting possibilities of station cuisine.

---

Later that afternoon, the tones sounded as Cap was running through upcoming traffic revisions with the crew. He threw the chalk into the tray that ran along the lower edge of the chalk board as his men hustled out of the day room ahead of him. Sam Lanier's voice continued to call company names as the men of Station 51 moved to pull on turnouts and bunkers.

Mike veered from the most direct path to the driver's seat, to deliberately brush past Marco, who turned in question, only to run into Mike's closed fist tapping his shoulder. Their eyes met in silence as Saint Florian changed hands.

---

They pulled up to the parking lot-turned staging area across the street from the three-story warehouse. Black smoke was rolling out of several windows on the western exposure. As Captain Stanley pressed his HT to an ear, the balance of the response, totaling 5 engines, 2 trucks, and the squad joined Chief McConnike on scene.

Hank turned to his crew. "Okay, men, this warehouse has been in the process of being gutted for remodel for the past three weeks. We've got maybe an hour of good light left, let's use it to our advantage. Kelly, you and Lopez are joining two of Truck 105's guys on the roof, so gear up and head on over to the northeast corner. Take an HT. The aerial is just now being secured.

DeSoto, Gage, reports are that everyone is out, so go ahead and set up a rehab area between our rigs. Stoker, give them a hand. I'll swing back around after I check in with the Chief.

---

Truckman Dan Castillo turned to check on how the rookie was faring after stepping off the ladder onto the roof. "Hold up, Piney." He motioned for the younger man to wait as he scanned the flat roof of the warehouse sizing it up. Captain Thacker had instructed him to keep an eye on the kid and he didn't aim to lose him. He used his pike pole to sound the roof several feet in all directions from where they stood.

"We're not just up here to ventilate. Cap needs us to supply a bird's-eye view too. He'll expect us to check the rear and sides of building for fire spread and trapped victims. That's why we placed the first ladder at the corner, so we can sight two sides of the building at once. We'll use the opposite fire escape to get down. If there wasn't a fire escape, we would have set an egress ladder on that side, comprende?" He finished what for him, was a long-winded speech just as Lopez and Kelly joined them on the flat roof.

"There goes the neighborhood, kid. Us truckies'll just have to show these two hose jockeys how to manage a roof." Castillo's forearm reached to grasp Marco's in greeting before he turned to continue to sound a path to the eastern edge of the building. He made his way back to the group and 51's linemen could see the exasperation on his face as his snagged a handful of his partner's turnout coat. "Guys, this is Aaron Piney. Piney, that's Chet Kelly and an old pal of mine, Marco Lopez. Mierda, kid, try to stay with me. I don't want any of these two's lineman-like habits to rub off on you."

Marco, holding a Halligan bar, moved to join Chet who carried an ax. They sounded a wider portion of the roof while Castillo pulled out an HT. "Command One, this is Truck 105, Castillo. How do you read?" He kept a grip on the kid's arm to keep him at his side.

"Castillo, we read you loud and clear. Go ahead."

"Command One, the roof looks pretty solid on the north-east corner, no fire showing along the eastern exposure. Clear of victims so far."

"Ten-four, Castillo..." Marco lost track of the conversation as he concentrated on the surface of the roof.

Castillo, rookie in tow, met up with the linemen nearing the south-west corner of the building. "...like this," Marco and Kelly looked over to where Castillo was pointing out a slight sag in roof under a patch of melted asphalt as he and Piney joined them. "...this is the kind of thing you're sounding for with that ax you've got in your hands." Castillo leaned a little weight on his pike to demonstrate the sponginess of the spot. "You've got to always watch where you put your feet when you're working over a fire - actually anytime you're prowling a roof. That's one of the most important things to remember," he finished as he turned to face the waiting firemen.

"Marco, Kelly, the kid and I've got the vertical here. Command needs some horizontal ventilation established, like yesterday. Captain Thacker says to start with the fourth window from the right on the southern exposure, then the two flanking windows to ventilate where he's sending nozzle and hose teams."

Turning back to Piney, Castillo said, "while our pals here rig a Halligan to swing into those windows, you and I are going to supply that vertical ventilation Cap ordered in the southwest corner here."

"So, which skylight looks good, Piney?"

The rookie gestured towards the nearest one with his ax.

"Well, think it out kid. This one is close to where Cap wants it, sure. 'Bout as close to the fire as we could hope for, but with the wind coming from that direction, the smoke and gases would be pushed down into the guys working the lines inside. That skylight over there is the better choice because with it being closer to the leeward side of the building the wind will help draw the rising smoke out."

Castillo tried not to bounce with impatience as he watched Piney punch through the skylight and then through the vertical walls of the returns to ventilate the space between the roof and the ceiling of the floor below. "Check for fire and take a peek at the roof construction while you're at it," he said as he spared a glance towards the firemen at the southern edge of the roof.

"Command one, Castillo here. Cap, the skylight's open with no apparent fire extension to the cockloft at our position. Looks like we've got parallel cord wood trusses here. Lopez and Kelly are just wrapping up making things look brighter over on the south side. The four of us will be headed down ASAP. Where you want us next?"

"Castillo, let's have the four of you report to the staging area for re-assignment. Command One out."

"Ten-four. Heading down now, Castillo out."

"Come on kid, no dilly-dallying - this isn't a marshmallow roast. Let's grab Lopez and Kelly. We've done what we came to do, so vamos.

Marco recognized Castillo's signal to meet them at the fire escape. Piney set out first, ax held horizontally in both hands. Before Marco could shout a warning, Castillo reached to pull him back. Off balance, the kid took a wide step sideways, and started to go down.

"Cas, watch out!" Marco shouted as he turned towards the men from 105. Chet moved to join him; both were slowed by the need to probe ahead. They watched the drama play out, feeling as helpless as dreamers at the end of that impossibly long hallway in a nightmare.

Castillo moved to brace Piney and in doing so, put all his weight on his right foot which punched through the surface of the roof. Daniel Castillo dropped to his left knee and continued to fall forward, rotating almost gently, to tip through the roof and disappear.

Marco approached the hole that had swallowed his friend by flattening to his stomach as he reached the edge. "Cas! Castillo! Can you hear me? Respóndeme!"

Chet got a good grip on the arm attached to the still form of the rookie who crouched nearby. "Marco, you see anything?" he asked as he used his free hand to fish in his turncoat pocket.

As Marco carefully backed away from the edge, Chet handed him the HT.

"Command, this is Lopez, Castillo is down. He fell through what looks like a painted-over skylight positioned ten feet southeast of the one they opened. He's not moving. Kelly, Piney and I are heading down the fire escape on the southern exposure. We'll try to get to him from there."

"Negative, Lopez, return to Command Base. We have a nozzle team already staged near his position and will advance from the interior. Repeat: Kelly, Lopez and Piney, do not attempt a rescue, return for reassignment."

"Ten-four. Returning to base."

---

Between the two linemen, the shaken rookie was safely delivered to a fellow member of Station 105.

Cap strode to join them, a cup of water in each hand. "Head on in there, you two. DeSoto and Gage are asking for Marco's help with Castillo. Take fresh tanks, and here, drink these first."

---

Marco and Chet approached the wall of men congregated at the base of the stairwell below the broken-out skylight. Chet turned to help move the lengths of rebar that were being passed back from the crowded space as Marco made his way to his friend's side.

He met Roy's eyes fleetingly before he turned to the form both paramedics worked over in a flurry of activity that did not quite hold his attention. Instead, a small sound of dismay escaped his throat as his mind struggled to make sense of the image that his gaze settled on.

"Here, Marco, hold his head. Talk to him. He's been calling for you, we think. His jaw is broken, so try to keep him from moving or trying to answer."

Marco automatically did as Johnny requested, kneeling at his friend's head and replacing the paramedic's hands with his own as the pieces of the puzzle his mind wrestled with refused to snap together. An electric lantern was brought close and held aloft by a fireman standing to the side.

"Hey, Cas. It's Marco, I'm here. We need you to hold real still."

"Marco, keep this in the corner of his mouth, it'll clear some of the blood."

"Rampart, this is Squad 51, how do you read?" an unfamiliar voice broke above the voices Marco had come to associate with working alongside of paramedics in the field.

"Hang on, amigo. We'll have you out in no time. Shush - no, don't try to talk."

"Fifty-One, we read you, go ahead."

"Piney is fine. Cas, you have to hold still."

"... bolt cutters or the Hurst?"

"Rampart we have a Code I, victim of a 12 foot fall through a roof." John's voice, as he rattled off a string of vitals followed by, "Rampart, victim is impaled by a six-foot length of 3/8th inch rebar entering proximal to his left lower mandible and exiting through the cheek on that same side. The rod was standing in a barrel, so it's free, but we'll have to do some cutting to transport him. Lower jaw is broken in more than one place. Victim is conscious and alert, laying on his right side. Portable suction is being used to aid in keeping his airway clear, blood loss is estimated at..."

"...here turn him a bit more on his side so he doesn't aspirate any more blood."

"Careful, watch the bar...sorry Dan, we'll try not to move it again unless we have too."

Marco let John's and the other voices fade from the foreground as he gave up trying to glean more details to add to the jumble of images bombarding his brain. The look in his friend's eyes told of pain and barely contained panic and Marco changed tactics as firemen stepped close and around them, arranging a canvas tarp under Roy's direction.

Marco lay flat at nearly a right angle to Cas's body with his own face pressed against the floor, two inches away from that of his friend. Both of their cheeks now lay in a puddle of pooling

blood. A turnout-coated arm reached under the tarp to place a lantern near their heads. "Look at me hermano, open your eyes. We will get you out, I promise. Breathe. With me. Nah, nah amigo, don't try to talk. I will say the words out loud, you must pray silently."

The pump of the portable suction whirred in a steady rhythm interrupted by an intermittent slurp.

"Our Father, Who art in heaven. Satificado sea tu nombre..."

Captain Thacker's voice called from above. "Hang in there, Castillo. We're almost set. There'll be some noise, and we'll try to get it done as fast as possible, then we'll have you free."

The tarp was rearranged one last time, tucked in and around Marco's shoulders. Marco brushed at the tears gathering in the corner of his friend's eye with a thumb.

"Santa María, Madre de Dios, pray for us sinners..."

His own, he let fall.

### Chapter 3 (Christmas Eve)

Marco knocked before stepping into Castillo's crowded hospital room. Cas's shattered jaw was wired shut so he quietly endured the teasing his captain and shift mates were relentlessly serving up.

"Castillo, what were you thinking? I told you to open *one* skylight, close to the southwest corner. The *extra* hole you punched was way-the-hell too far east."

Too handicapped to eloquently rebut, Cas snorted and rolled his eyes at Marco for support.

"Don't look at me, you know as well as I do, Captain Thacker only asked for one hole in that roof." Marco answered the silent plea with a laugh from the foot of the bed.

A nurse poked her head in the door. "Okay, fellas. My patient needs a break from all this partying. He needs his beauty rest, because he has a consultation with the plastic surgeon later this afternoon." The 20-something-ish RN made her way into the room, eyeing the mistletoe above the bed. "I hope they didn't step on you getting that hung," she said with a smile and a shooing motion.

"They" filed out of the room without protest but not without a few parting shots.

"Don't talk her ear off, Dan."

"...and no caroling, people are convalescing around here."

Marco stepped to the bedside. "Mama sent some champurrado." Marco waggled the paper sack he held. "She made it thinner, so you can use a straw. She sends her love, too. You get some rest. I'll drop by after tomorrow's shift."

Cas managed a wink before his eyes drifted closed, and Marco backed out the door as quietly as he could manage. "Feliz Navidad, amigo," he whispered as the door swung closed.

"Hey, wait up a sec," the nurse called as she joined him in the hallway. "What exactly is in this, *champanado* you are tempting my patient with? You had better not be offering him anything with alcohol in it. I don't care that it's Christmas Eve. If I can't imbibe, then he isn't going to either," she softened this declaration with another smile. "I already confiscated *a gallon* of eggnog from his cohorts."

"Champurrado," Marco corrected with an answering smile, "is made of chocolate, masa, which is a type of dough made out of corn, pilocillo - a cane sugar, and milk. There are also spices and ground nuts. I think my mother left out the egg to make it thinner. No alcohol, I promise," Marco gave the woman his most winning expression. "We have it at Christmas time. I have personally seen him put away gallons of it over the years." Marco weighed the sack in his hand. "Feels like

Mama only sent about a quart. I'll call ahead to see how this goes down, I can always bring more."

"Sounds nourishing. I'll put it in the fridge, then warm it up for him when he wakes up."

"You may need to stir in some more milk to get it through a straw. I should get going. I left my mother in the chapel with Cas's and I promised them both rides home. "Merry Christmas," he paused to dip his head to read her name tag, "Andrea."

Andrea stepped into the kitchen by the nurses' station to put away the sack she held, thinking that her patient was lucky and not only because he survived his fall.

---

His mother held his arm in a vice. It felt like she was taking skin off.

"This has gone on long enough, hijo mío," she whispered in admonishment as she towed him out of the chapel and into the courtyard.

Marco remained silent, deciding to let her vent and wait for the moment when she would lose some steam.

"Can you not light a candle for your friend? Do not think that your mama did not notice you didn't take communion after your Cousin Carmen's Thanksgiving play at church last month. And Father Anthony tells me you have not been to confession in weeks. Do not give me that look of such indignación, there is no breaching of the sanctity of confessional until someone actually shows up to confess. And what are you smirking at, you impertinent diablillo?"

Marco shook his head, declining to share the mental image of an irate banty hen which sometimes came to mind when his mama got her feathers ruffled.

"What are you grinning about, chico malo?"

"Nothing, Mama."

His mother made a harrumphing sound of patience being stretched.

"Father Anthony is not the only one you need to be speaking to, you know."

"I am sorry Mama. I have been so angry. It is difficult to..." Marco spun away and took a distancing step down the path. He ground a small stone under the toe of his shoe before turning back to his mother. "How do we begin again, the Lord and I?"

"He is not the one being obstinado, mi hijo amando."

Marco stepped closer and bent his head down until their foreheads touched, closing his eyes.

"Come, light a candle for your friend. Find your way to confession. Talk to Father Anthony. Face your Maker and let him help you heal. It is painful for a mama to watch. You have given me more grey hairs than all of your brothers combined."

"Mama! I have not." Tucking his mother's hand into the crook of his arm, he drew her toward the chapel. He continued in mock outrage, "Jose and Alejandro are responsible for more than their share of mischief, and Martin before me, not to mention the twins. And Mama, we all think your hair is lovely. And it is not merely grey, you know, but a maravilloso shade of silver. Very beautiful, especially in this light."

He walked with his head angled to catch his mother's next sentences. "It is a very hermoso tin cross you fashioned for your sister's birthday next month. Your grandfather will be impressed. Are you still planning on taking the cousins skiing next weekend? They can speak of nothing else..." Marco's mama's voice dipped back into a whisper as they re-entered the chapel.

## Chapter 4

### December 27th

The morning started with the squad being called out on three consecutive runs, two of which didn't even require the patients be transported to Rampart. The third was a seventy-five year old diabetic who perked right up with a glass of orange juice, once he remembered he hadn't eaten yet. This epiphany took place before Roy and John even arrived. Dr. Morton wanted him transported anyway, but for once didn't order an I.V., so the paramedics sent ambulance and patient on their way before returning to the station.

The engine crew spent the morning doing two inspections and shopping for the day's meals.

"What's for lunch, Chet?" John asked as he peered into the pot on the stove, while pilfering a carrot from the stack Chet was chopping.

"Soup, but that's not it. That's going to be a surprise for supper. I got the recipe from Tim over at 116's and..."

"Now, hold on a minute," John cut in as he gestured with the carrot stick in agitation. "You're telling me you'd trust the very jokers who've been messing with our sirens every chance they get for the last five *weeks*?"

"I wasn't born yesterday. This recipe is legit. It came out of a magazine. Not everything is a practical joke, Gage. It doesn't work that way."

"I read the ingredients, John. It seems a lot like something my mom makes, without the chilies and with a different kind of cheese. I'm willing to give it a try." Marco tried to diffuse the growing argument.

"I'm not saying I won't try it. I just think we should accept such offerings in the spirit that they were probably offered... if you get my meaning. Nothing comes out of that station without there at least being the possibility of suspiciousness attached."

Chet snorted. "The only thing with 'suspiciousness' attached to it is your brain, Gage. They win if they've got us so paranoid that we can't even cook a simple casserole for dinner."

"Casserole, huh?" John went back to the stove, face clouded with skepticism. "Guess there's always pie if there *does* turn out to be something wrong with it." John wandered over to peer in the fridge. "What'd C-shift leave us?"

"One and a half pumpkin, one mincemeat, two pecan, two and a half apple - one of which has streusel topping and three-quarters of a lemon meringue," Mike fired off from behind the paper where he sat in the easy chair in the day room. "There's vanilla ice cream too."

"Wow," Roy whistled low from where he sat with Henry draped over his lap. "How many pies did that bakery drop off yesterday?"

"An even dozen," Mike answered. "Some folks appreciate the fire service, I guess. This is the second year in a row they've done something like this. Last year, they brought them to 10s and 105s. This year they've spread out to include all the stations in Carson."

"Well, at least we won't starve if we decide to wait it out and see if Chet gets sick from his own cooking," John said as he sidestepped the snap of the wet kitchen towel Chet held.

He stole another carrot stick and held it in his teeth while he reached for the bowls to set out on the table. "Wonder what Cap has in mind to get even with those clowns up north. Do you know Mike?"

"I thought we'd talk about it over lunch," Cap said as he strolled into the kitchen. "How much longer, do you think, Chet?"

"Bout 10 minutes Cap, I just have to heat the soup." Chet straightened from checking the grilled cheese sandwiches warming in the oven.

"Good, just enough time to fire off a quick letter. Call me when it's ready. You won't be interrupting anything I can't finish later."

"Sure thing, Cap."

---

"...if we all show up at the training center on the 22nd in turnouts, we'll blend right in, at least long enough to get in and exact some pay-back." Cap reached for a second sandwich. "I know it's our shift off, but that's the afternoon 116's A-shift is scheduled for a bit of overtime to run through the new SCBAs the department just purchased. One of the training Captains owes me a favor." Hank paused to gauge his men's reactions, although he would have been surprised if there were any objections. Both of 51's rigs had been targeted on multiple occasions and he sensed Roy and Mike in particular were feeling a bit vengeful.

After a unanimous chorus of "I'm ins" and "me toos", they settled in to enjoy the rest of their lunch.

Since dispatch was cooperating, they lingered over pie, on the theory that you never knew when you would miss the next dessert when you worked in a firehouse.

Roy suggested they get the families together to celebrate New Year's early, since they all were scheduled to work New Year's Day. He'd already talked it over with Joanne and it was set up for the night of the 29th.

"One thing, though, I should warn you that Joanne is kind off touchy about the Christmas tree, as in *please* don't make any fire hazard related comments."

"He means it guys. When I was over Christmas Eve, there was a note tucked in amongst the boughs basically telling me to keep my nose out of her tinsel. So tread lightly, and ignore the six-foot stick of tinder standing in the front room."

Roy, recognizing the concern in his fellow shift mates' eyes, turned to face the questions he read in his captain's. "Knock it off, Johnny. You'll have Cap laying an inch and a half through my front door as a precaution."

"Cap, guys, here's the deal. Joanne's family always used to put their tree up at Thanksgiving and left it until after New Year's. It always got way too dry, but her parents still do it that way, and when we first got married, Jo expected to too. Over the years we have both compromised some. So, here are the negotiations as they stand this year: the tree goes up a week and a half before Christmas, it comes down on the kids' first day back at school. Lights are unplugged, except after school when the kids get home until bedtime. Someone is always home and once the tree starts to get dry, round about Christmas break, the lights are only on for a few hours in the evening. In exchange, the only open flames I have to worry about are the Advent candles and the ones for those little angel bell chimes. And we only buy one box of..."

"Sorry Roy, I didn't mean to imply you didn't have it under control," John interrupted with a grin. "You forgot to mention the red fire blanket you have masquerading as a Christmas tree skirt and the undercover fire extinguisher/Santa Claus loitering next to the Nutcracker on the hearth. Oh, by-the-way, I picked up several boxes of candles for the angel chimes on clearance at Newberry's. The kids and I kinda used up all the ones you had. Remind me to give them to you when we get off in the morning." John pushed his chair back, reaching for his plate to begin clearing the lunch dishes, seemingly oblivious to the amusement shared between those still seated.

---

It was, as shifts go, a quiet evening, filled with extra slices of pie and a hotly contested chess tournament. Roy and Mike were engrossed in the championship round when Roy moved his bishop and declared checkmate.

Chet leaned over Mike's shoulders as he studied the chessboard. "Too bad, Stoker. I saw that coming two moves ago."

"Sure, Chet. It was those same mad skills you employed when you lost your first *and* second games before we did those building inspections earlier. I'm not the one doing dishes tonight, now am I?" Stoker asked mildly. He reached over to shake Roy's hand. "Good game..."

The tones interrupted, sending them all out on the apparatus floor as the dispatcher announced a Code I at the scene of a working fire.

"KMG365," Captain Stanley responded as he wrote the address down, hung up the microphone and moved to pull on his turnout coat. He swung up into the engine's cab just as Squad 51 cleared the bay doors. Mike pulled the engine out to follow.

---

The house fire had just been declared contained moments before 51's rigs arrived. The owners thanked the battalion chief, each captain and every passing fireman for their quick and efficient response. All were grateful that there had been no one inside.

Engine 51 had been dispatched to join Engines 110 and 96 and Truck 96 for salvage and overhaul. Squad 51 was responding to treat Truck 96's tillerman who had twisted a knee.

"Marco, Mike, Chet, full gear. Take 96's new recruit over there with you and keep an eye on him. Name's Frank Knight. Captain Forsythe is shorthanded and needs a sitter. The usual, check each room for hot spots, keep track of each other. Watch for what might have caused the fire and let's try and get a handle on where it started. 110's engine crew left a line inside and are set up with another in the alley ready to soak whatever you bring them."

As the four men geared up, John knelt by the injured fireman. "This will help with the pain, Will," he said as he pulled out supplies for the I.V. which Dr. Early had ordered.

Roy swung by Engine 51 on his way to the squad to grab a different splint. "See you guys in a bit, we're going to need to go in with him once the ambulance arrives. Don't have too much fun without us."

---

Stepping into the front room, 51's engine crew each carried an ax or a pike pole as well as a salvage cover. "Hey, Knight, ventilate that window, then we'll you show you how a fireman really earns his oats." Chet turned away to disappear in the smokey haze to make sure the inch and a half was secure in its place as it draped to hang out of another window.

A minute later, 51's engine crew gathered to watch the new recruit as he continued to struggle with the latch on the window. Chet stepped up to his side, shaking his head. He turned, tapped the pane with his ax and swiveled away without comment.

Mike suppressed a chuckle as he nudged the boot, who seemed transfixed by the shards at his feet. "Remember, glass is inexpensive and relatively easy to replace. Our priority in this situation is to ventilate to improve safety and visibility. It also reduces smoke damage to the interior."

Marco leaned his ax against a corner to the left of the door to wrestle a smoldering easy chair into the center of the room and out the front door with Knight's help. The two men manhandled it to the side alley way. Marco led the way back to the engine, Knight trailing behind him, to grab another stack of covers. He changed directions when he recognized the weak warble of a fire alarm.

Turning the corner, he just caught the shadow of a figure as it disappeared through a door. He spun Knight around and gave him a shove towards the front. "Go, tell Cap we just saw someone run into the house on the north side. Looks like an outside door to the basement. I'm headed in." Marco grabbed a Halligan tool that had been set against the house and broke into a trot. A minute

later, Captain Stanley raised his HT to send Chet, Mike and a man from Engine 110 to join Marco. He directed Knight to take over the abandoned hose.

Once through the basement door, Marco turned to smash the upper hinge, leaving the door to hang slightly askew. He tromped down the steep, narrow staircase into the darkness of the windowless space. "Fire department. Hello?" He kept his right hand to the wall, and played the beam of his flashlight out in front of him. There was more smoke down there than he had expected, but with the flashlight he could see a few feet in front of the toes of his boots. "Fire department! Can you hear me?" The stuttering warble of the malfunctioning fire alarm was his only answer as he dropped to his knees to sweep the floor with the forked end of the bar. He crawled forward to continue the methodical advance, sweep, advance, rhythm that was ingrained in his fireman's psyche. "Hey! Anyone hear me?"

Other than only having very limited visibility, conditions were not too bad - as long as you were wearing a fully charged SCBA. Somebody down there wasn't. "Hello, Fire Department! I need you to tell me where you are!" Advance, sweep, advance; he came to a closed door and without conscious thought took a hand out of a glove to feel for heat. There was none. He reached up to open it from the side, but found himself flung to the basement floor as someone fell on top of him. It only took moments to untangle himself and stand. He reached to support the person who had tripped over him, only to find his arms filled with the lighter figure of what he guessed was a teenage girl. He stooped to boost her to his shoulder, and grabbing the arm of the other victim pulled him along as he headed for the stairs. The sickly twerp of the alarm sounded just above him as he retraced his own steps along the wall

"Marco!" Chet's voice called from where he estimated the foot of the stairs to be.

"Chet! Over here, I've got two!"

Hands reached to lift the girl, and through the smoke he saw Chet dip a shoulder to swing her up, aided by another fireman. A turnout stenciled 'O'Brien' supported the pair as they retreated back into the smoke. Mike gathered an arm of the second victim, and between them they guided the stumbling boy to the base of the stairs.

O'Brien must have tripped, or missed a step, or just lost his balance in the disorienting, smoke-filled space. In any case, something sent him sliding down the steps head first to scatter the three forms below like bowling pins.

Marco shook his head to stop the ringing in his ears as he rolled to his knees. The sound would not clear and he realized the fire alarm had merely shifted tones to a steady, low-pitched whistle. "Stoker? O'Brien?" He called as he started to search the cement floor around him. His arm clashed against another, and he pulled a kneeling, turn-coated figure around to face him.

"Marco! You okay?" Mike's voice called as Marco felt the engineer brush along his left side to join him in replacing O'Brien's dangling mask.

"I'm fine. You?"

"I'll live. O'Brien! Here, look at me! Are you hurt anywhere?" Mike turned the man's head towards him in an effort to get his attention.

"Mike, you get him out of here, I'll get the other victim. You think you'll be okay?" Marco stood to help lift O'Brien to his feet, and Mike half dragged the dazed fireman up the first step only to hesitate. "Go, Mike." Marco gave him an encouraging shove, before turning into the smoke.

He knelt again, and swept the floor with his hands, having lost the Halligan. He searched in an ever-widening pattern from the stairs out, orienting himself with the whistle of the fire alarm, knowing it to be to the right and slightly in front of the stairs. The guy should be right *here*. The sickly wail, though weaker than a fully functional alarm, did nothing to calm Marco's growing concern. "Miedra," he muttered, and then much louder: "Hang on, man. I'm coming. Make a noise if you can," he called. The situation was becoming more urgent as the boy he was searching for was exposed to breath after breath of the carbon monoxide-laden smoke. Where the hell had the kid gotten to? Even being knocked unconscious or succumbing to the toxins in the smoke should not have rendered the boy so completely immune to Marco's thorough searching techniques. Coming to the wall facing the stairs, he sat back on his heels to tip his head back in frustration.

"Now, Father? *Now*? Will You not help me this time?" Marco shouted into the smokey blackness and dropped back to his hands and knees, turning to his left to continue his search. "Hey, answer me, let me know where you are." Reaching another wall, he turned to continue counter-clockwise, sweeping the interior of the space. "If you can hear me, I need you to answer me!" "Damn it, I need you to...Padre Dios te necesito! Please, help me!" Marco ended in a half sob that fogged his mask. He smacked his searching hand against a support beam. The whistling fire alarm gave a last little upward lilt, reminiscent of a miniature Piccolo Pete on the Fourth of July. "Father, *please*." Marco's SCBA low air bell went off to fill the silence - but not before he heard a low moan.

Since there was no active fire showing, he spared a moment to share his mask with the victim and took his gloves off to check for a pulse and feel for respirations. He put the mask back to the unmoving boy's face after a few deep breaths of his own and withdrew the HT.

"Cap this is Marco. I've got a male victim. Unconscious but breathing. Base of the stairs."

"On the way, and Marco get that mask back on your own face and leave it there, damn it."

Returning the HT to its pocket, he reseated his mask as the air pack continued to alarm.

Chet and a truck man from 96 found them just as Marco was mounting the stairs and between the two of them they drug the victim one on each side, opting to not institute spinal precautions in favor of getting him out of the smoke. They herded Marco up in front of them, determined to keep him and his alarming SCBA in their sights. Squad 39 had just sped away with the girl and O'Brien. Cap had called for yet another squad but it was still a few minutes out. Squad 51 was further out still.

Once clear of the building they lay the boy down on the lawn, not taking the time to carry him around front. Marco held his head in a belated spinal precaution.

Sometime during the trip up the stairs, the teenager had stopped breathing.

Mike began artificial respirations, steeling himself to continue in spite of the taste of stomach acid he encountered as he sealed his mouth over the victim's. He turned his face to spit between breaths as vomit bubbled up through blue-tinged lips. The three men quickly log-rolled the boy to his side and Mike used his fingers to sweep stomach contents out and onto the grass. The still form was flipped smoothly to his back again. He never missed a breath as Mike leaned in to begin again. Marco and Chet could smell the beer-laced vomit that Mike was gagging on. Chet wiped the kid's face with the edge of his rucked-up T-shirt each time Mike turned his face away.

Cap appeared with the oxygen tank and resuscitator from the engine and Marco relieved Mike using the mask and valve. He seemed unaware of the mumbled monologue he was holding peppered by firm commands to the chico to breathe. His crew members exchanged a few knowing glances as they recognized Spanish phrases that had been absent from the lineman's vocabulary in the past weeks. Chet had his fingers on a carotid to be sure they didn't miss it if the boy's heart joined his lungs in arrest. By the time Squad 49 arrived, the teenager was starting to obey Marco's instructions by taking some breaths on his own between bouts of jagged coughing.

Marco rose to his feet to give the paramedics room and staggered back until he caught his balance with the help of his captain's supporting grip on his shoulder. He stumbled once on the uneven landscape as he made his way to a secluded spot at the edge of the property, partially shielded by a few ornamental trees. To his captain's practiced eye he seemed steady enough, all things considered.

Hank allowed him to go and searched the controlled chaos swirling around the fire scene, until he picked out another set of eyes studying a crew mate. Chet had made his way to the side of one of Truck 96's men, who along with Knight, was soaking a growing pile of smoldering lathe and plaster in the alleyway. After a brief conversation, Chet was taking over the hose and boot-sitting duties. The pile of rubbish was a convenient distance for an unobtrusive, yet clear view of the spot where Marco knelt.

Hank found Mike where he had disappeared behind the engine, just as his engineer was rinsing and spitting into a bucket filled with more than spit. Stoker looked up with an expression that reminded him of a puppy being caught in the act of some misdemeanor. Mike visibly shuddered before he straightened to take the necessary step to tuck the bucket behind a wheel of the engine.

With a nod and a "hey, Cap," Mike stepped to the side of the rig.

"They're just loading the boy up." Hank didn't try for eye contact, since Mike's head was buried in an open compartment. "Tanner, one of 49's paramedics said he looked good."

Mike closed the metal door that separated them, and flashed his captain a reassuring smile. "Thanks, Cap. I'll be back in a minute," he said as he moved to the other side of the engine. He reappeared as he headed off towards the front of the property toting an oxygen tank which he set within easy reach of his friend. He passed the lineman with a pat on the shoulder, having effectively given the man a clear alibi. The casual observer would now guess that Marco was simply recovering from his efforts, which he was. They might also assume that he was being looked after, which by any measure, he was.

Mike jogged back to where his captain stood. "Think I'll give Donahue over there a break at the pump, if that's alright."

"Sure, Mike. I expect we'll be done here soon. There's plenty of manpower to wrap up S & O."

Mike joined 110's engineer and took up a carefully triangulated sentry duty. His captain was more than confident that he would spare the gauges an adequate amount of his attention.

Hank turned and walked over to the staging area to huddle with Captains Chuck Olson and Drew Forsythe. They were able to share what they had learned from talking to the home owners and parents of the sixteen-year old. The boy had been seen driving away to pick up his girl friend to give her a ride to a school basketball game where she was cheerleading. The parents themselves headed out for dinner and a movie. For whatever reason, the young pair had returned to the house without showing up at the game. Speculation ran that the boy left the girl alone in the basement, probably to pick up more beer. Crews had discovered several cans in the downstairs rec. room as well as open cans in the car that he drove. Both teenagers were lucky that they would live to fill out these sketchy details.

Captain Stanley turned to wave Mike and Chet in, as their counterparts from Engine 110 and Truck 96 returned to relieve them. 51 had just been released to quarters by Chief McConnike. Olson's hand on his arm made him stop and turn back. He followed his fellow captain's nod toward the group of pines, where Marco still knelt.

"Your man over there going to be alright, Hank?"

Captain Stanley's thoughtful gaze settled on his lineman just as a hand traced a path, forehead to breast, shoulder to shoulder. That hand reached to replace a black helmet on a bent head and then joined its mate in bracing against a knee to bring the fireman to his feet. Searching eyes lifted to locate crew members as they approached from opposite sides of the yard. 51's engine company converged, with Chet's and Marco's shoulders colliding in the inevitable horseplay and Mike reaching to keep them both on their feet. They turned as one to join their commander.

"Yeah, Chuck, yeah. I think he is."

---