

One Last Run

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Harsh, gritty noises pierced their way into Captain Dick Hammer's peaceful slumber and pulled him from the pastels of dream to the stark colors of wakefulness. On every other day, he'd sit straight up, grab the radio, hike on his bunkers and face the day.

But this day was not like every other day. His heart was heavy, had been all shift and he'd found himself moving through it as if in slow motion. He'd felt different these last twenty-four hours, could feel himself detaching, as if slowly releasing a lifeline meant to guide him out of the inferno to safety. His men had looked different to him; like watching old home movies of people and scenes from forty years prior or a reunion with his old Air Force buddies from...half a lifetime ago. People that were familiar yet...distant, somehow. There had been moments during their downtime last night where that sense of distance was so acute that he felt disoriented when someone responded to something he'd said, surprised to realize he was, in fact, in the same room as the men he was watching, men he was watching over.

For the last time.

Captain Hammer remained supine, his eyes closed, listening to the subdued stirrings of his men in the dorm, a captain's career's worth of memories wafting through his senses in the long series of wake-up tones and grumbling voices of his crew.

They felt it, too, he realized.

An affectionate smile twitched at the corners of his lips. Hammer sighed deeply, laid aside the sheets and rolled off the bunk to grab the mic and acknowledge the tones to dispatch.

An eyebrow hiked up a notch as he entered the office: his captain's chair was occupied.

"Aren't you charging the line before it's off the rig?" Hammer teased.

Hank Stanley looked up at his tall counterpart and snorted a laugh. He tapped the log book he was reading. "Going through the squad's runs from yesterday." Stanley proffered a mug of coffee.

Hammer accepted it with an affectionate 'thanks'. He took a sip and realized with regret that it wasn't Stoker coffee. If he missed nothing else, he was going to miss *that* and suddenly the anxiety shifted in his chest. He took a breath. "You feel like you've gotten in enough field time with Gage and DeSoto?"

"I have a feeling I'll never *feel* like I've had enough field time with Gage and DeSoto," Stanley said, leaning back in the chair.

"I hate to break it to you, Hank, but that feeling isn't going to go away anytime soon."

“Thanks. ‘preciate it. Well, listen, Chief and the others should be here, by now.” Stanley closed the log book and set it back in the drawer. He rose from the desk to find Hammer staring at the calendar, his mug chest-high as if holding it at the ready. Captain Hammer’s eyes remained glued on the boxes and numbers that marked time in steady rhythm, memories and events and the countless life and death struggles stamped within those thin black lines.

Hank scrutinized the older captain’s pensive expression and he followed Hammer’s eye and noted the date his gaze had fixated on: August 14. It was circled in red, in fire engine red; a mark, a symbol, a demarcation to denote the beginning and end of chapters of lives in transition.

Hank moved around his counterpart, as if his very positioning would cause gravity to shift and pull Hammer toward the door. His ploy seemed to have worked. Hammer blinked, pulled his gaze to Stanley, sipped. “Chief is here, you said?” he asked.

“Probably. “

Hammer’s eyes shifted back to the calendar and that red circle around that inauspicious number that held auspicious memories. Red lights, red rigs and red blood that marked a week, a day, indelibly forged upon an indifferent number that would not be forgotten.

“Let’s not keep him waiting, then.” Hammer followed Stanley out of the office, feeling not unlike a circle in a square box.

Captains Hank Stanley and Dick Hammer followed the aroma of coffee to find one battalion chief, two captains, an awakened A-shift and a smattering of B-shift men filling up the dayroom.

The B-shift captain caught Hammer’s expression, inwardly sighed and forced a smile. “There’s the man of the hour,” Captain Charles Van Orden nearly yelled over the din of conversation.

All eyes turned to Captain Hammer and mugs of coffee were raised. “Here here!” the men shouted. Hammer answered back with a lopsided smile and the raising of his own mug.

“Speech! Speech!” the cry went out among the crews, laughter and applause and the occasional whistle punctuating their request.

Captain Hammer’s gaze swept through the ranks of these men he’d come to know and love over his tenure at 51s. Affection and deep trust and camaraderie, not unlike what he’d experienced with his buddies in the Air Force, warmed him from within. He rocked on his heels, that lopsided grin forming at his lips. He curled his mug to his chest, glanced down, looked up again at these crews, these men. His brothers.

Hammer sipped at his mug. “Don’t you all have chores to attend to?”

Laughter, applause and cheers echoed through the room.

Chief Conrad gestured for silence. “You through?” he asked Hammer from the counter he was leaning on, a puckish expression on his face.

“Yeah.”

“That was some speech, Hammer,” Conrad said.

“I worked on it all night, Chief.”

“I can tell. Now, if you boys don’t mind, I’d like to speak with your captains before this one yakks our ears off,” Chief Conrad pointed to his outgoing officer.

A- and B-shifts noisily made their way out of the kitchen, congratulating Captain Hammer on his inspirational and moving words. Someone joked about the chief needing a “private chat” with Captain Hammer and soon the men were chanting “Wedgie! Wedgie!” as they made their way out.

“Stoker!” Captain Hammer leaned out the door and gave Mike a list of chores for the men to do.

Hammer entered back in and four fire captains and their battalion chief watched the dayroom door swing close, a wordless cue that the kitchen was theirs and that their private, informal gathering had commenced.

Stanley took a seat at the table adjacent to Hookrader, who was perusing the morning paper and passed Hank a section. Hammer grabbed another cup of coffee while Captain Van Orden was refilling the back-up coffee pot with more ammo.

Chief Conrad shifted on his feet. He took off his dress cap with a sigh of relief and combed fingers through his thinning hair. He set his dress cap down on the counter and laid eyes on the newest captain under his command with a hint of amusement. “You ready, Hank?”

Gene Hookrader shifted in his seat at the table and eyed the lanky captain. “You’d better be. You’re up, whether you like it or not.”

Stanley’s eyebrows rose to his hairline as he swiveled his head to take in the white-haired captain. Eyes shifting down to the table as he cocked his head, Hank let out a breath and then glanced in turn at the other captains, expectant expressions from his experienced counterparts looking back at him. A decisive nod, a confident thump of his fingers on the table. “I think so, Chief.”

“What do you think, Dick? Think the youngster’s ready?” Hookrader teased.

Stanley rolled his eyes.

Hammer was leaning against the stove as he sipped his coffee, eyes boring a hole in the floor.

“What’s the matter with him?” Hookrader asked no one in particular.

“I noticed that same hangdog expression when those two walked in here. What’s the matter, Dick?” Van Orden asked, pouring himself a new cup and leaning on the counter next to Hammer.

A hush seemed to fall on the kitchen, like the world was waiting and listening.

“I saw the calendar this morning in the office. For some reason, it didn’t hit me until just now what day this is,” the taller captain answered, eyes still on the floor.

“It’s your last day as captain, chief.” Van Orden sipped his brew and crossed his ankles, angling to catch Hammer’s expression.

“That’s not what he meant,” Conrad interjected as he watched the outgoing captain, his voice carrying the weight of a command that had seen more than its share of misery.

“What, you changed your mind?” Van Orden’s hands splayed out.

Hammer pushed off the stove and sat across from Hookrader, the scraping of the chair across the floor jarring the already awkward feeling in the room.

“Tilson,” Hank Stanley softly answered from his chair.

Van Orden looked around at the faces around the room. “Tilson?”

Hookrader glared at Van Orden. “You do know what day this is, don’t you?”

“August 14,” Van Orden stated matter-of-factly, his eyes darted amongst his colleagues wondering what the deal was.

Conrad quietly cleared his throat and threw a meaningful glance at Van Orden, and then at Hammer. The captain’s eyes were on the table, his face impassive, yet revealing a parade of stiffly controlled emotions.

“Gene,” Chief Conrad nodded to 51s most senior captain then cocked his head toward the refrigerator. Hookrader rose from the table, strode over and brought out a bottle of champagne. Van Orden whistled at the brand and Stanley immediately jumped up and grabbed coffee mugs for the five of them.

Chief Conrad gestured for Hookrader to hand him the champagne. “I’d have one of you boys do this, but someone has to show you how to do this properly.”

“Champagne? At 7:30 in the morning?” Van Orden wondered, his interest being piqued even more.

“You never heard of a champagne breakfast?” Conrad asked as the cork went flying with a loud concussion and bubbly escaped and oozed down the side of the bottle, causing the chief to hold it out in front of him.

“Uh, yes, sir. Just...not on shift.” Van Orden grabbed some towels and mopped up the liquid mess.

“Dick? Thought maybe you’d like to...” Conrad offered him the bottle. Captain Hammer took it and poured the golden liquid into the mugs.

Stanley stood and allowed his more experienced colleagues to take the lead. “Seven years,” he murmured as he stared at the corner of the table. “Damn, has it really been that long?”

Van Orden’s face clouded for a moment until realization brightened and understanding lit his eyes.

“Don’t tell me you *forgot?*” Hank noticed the light go on in Van Orden’s eyes.

Van Orden looked at the dark expressions of the other three captains, hands out in supplication. “I wasn’t there.”

“How’d that happen?” Hammer asked.

“I was on vacation. My wife and I were in Atlantic City. I missed the whole thing.”

Nods and grunts bobbed about the table. Chief Conrad cleared his throat. “Captain, would you like to do the honors?”

Captain Hammer raised his glass. “To Tilson and Laxague. And all the rest.”

The others mirrored Hammer. “To Tilson and Laxague. And all the rest.” They all sipped the scintillating beverage.

“So Chuck wasn’t there,” Hookrader began. “Were you there, Chief? Did you work the Riots?”

Chief Conrad coughed against the burn of the beverage. “Only a couple of days. It was mostly the city firefighters. We were told to be on standby and act as back-up for those city crews being called in. But boy...we could see the destruction. The smoke just hung around like a thunderstorm. It was just horrific. I was still a captain and one of my lineman had to drive through some of those areas to get to the station. Said he could hear the gunfire at night, smell all that smoke, hear the yelling, the cheering. He’d drive in the next day and see new buildings that had gone up in flames, a lot of them still smoldering. It was a horrific, horrific thing.”

“What about you, Dick?” Hookrader quietly asked.

“I was stationed at 16s.”

Hookrader whistled among the fidgeting of the other men in the room.

“Jesus Christ,” Stanley muttered, breathing out.

“We were called out to a furniture store,” Hammer continued, eyes distant with memories. “The city guys had been called to...something else...I don’t remember. It wasn’t related to the Riots. Engine almost got hit with a Molotov cocktail. We could see it flying right at us. Gus and I thought it was gonna land inside the cab. Almost did, too. We just watched it sail right overhead. Could hear that...feathery sound that flame makes in the wind, felt the heat as it zipped right over us. Gave Gus the willies. He never got over that. Gave him nightmares ever since.” Hammer let out a deep breath. “Anyway, we got to the scene and didn’t see any police, so we knew we were on our own, but we could hear the gunfire awful close. So Leslie...” Hammer smiled. “... Leslie, that son of a gun, grabbed the Life Gun while me and the rest of the guys hauled hose off the back and tried to knock the fire down. He walked all around the engine, pointing that Life Gun out every time he heard a shot. After a couple minutes, it got quiet. Kept the gunfire off our back. The minute I decided that fire was out we high-tailed it out of there. Two days later, we got pummeled with rocks as we turned a corner rolling on another fire. Gus got beamed on the side of the face with a brick. Knocked him out cold, just like that. He was bleeding from his ear. Brick busted the windshield. I had to climb over him to stop the rig. Peter, Ernie and I scrambled to get Gus over to my seat so I could drive. They came at us, again. Peter got stoned so hard, he dropped right next to the rig. Ended up with internal injuries. Coulda used a coupla paramedics, right then. I just drove straight to the hospital ‘cause I wasn’t sure we could wait for the ambulance. Gus didn’t regain consciousness for several hours and...he never returned to duty.” The room got quiet. “I’ll never forget the sound of that Molotov long as I live.”

“What about you, Gene?” Van Orden asked.

Hookrader sat up straight, like he’d been called by the teacher then shifted in his seat, squaring off with the men. “I got shot,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Eyes widened around the room and Hank Stanley whipped his head around and stared at the senior captain. “You got *shot*?”

As if confused by all the surprise, Hookrader looked at each of them in turn. “Yeah,” he answered curtly, as if gunfire were some routine and mundane aspect of daily firefighting operations. “Heard some guy yell ‘Kill Whitey!’ and then I heard the report go off somewhere behind me. I was still putting on my coat when it happened. Engine took most of it. Grazed me in the arm, right here,” he gestured to a spot on his upper left shoulder.

“You didn’t roll with your coat on?” Van Orden asked.

“It was too hot.”

“So what happened?”

“I was fine. Went to the hospital an hour later. I was more pissed about the engine.”

“No kidding. Hank? What about you?” the B-shift captain asked.

“We were at a liquor store, I think it was. The rioters had knocked over the nearest plug so we had to lay a supply line from across the street. Cars kept revving up and down, trying to keep us from laying the line. It was like Russian roulette. We’d charge across the street toward the hydrant and they’d come at us, full tilt, and we’d have to back off. They’d lie in wait, watching until we tried again and then they’d come tearing up the street. Make a beeline right for us. Guess they finally got tired of that game and decided to charge with rocks and broken bottles. We had to hide under the rig until the National Guard guys came around.” Hank breathed a chuckle. “I remember...rolling to one fire and I turned us onto a street. Bodies and body parts were littered everywhere. All over the road. Just turned our stomachs. I had the rig zig-zagging through the carnage, trying to wind our way through the mess. Wofford lost his lunch back there on the jumpseat. It was only when someone picked up a limb and threw it at us did we realize that it was a bunch of mannequins lying on the road.”

Laughter rolled through the room and dispersed the tension that had settled like a thin, sticky film of unease.

“Looks like I missed all the fun,” Van Orden muttered.

Hank smacked his lips against the spicy burn of the champagne. “So, Dick, you ready to rub elbows with the top brass?”

Van Orden swirled the champagne in his mug and stole an affectionate glance at Chief Conrad. “Yeah, Hammer. You’ve got it easy, now. Air-conditioned office. The big comfy leather chair. Nice window view. All those hazardous meetings.”

Hammer chuckled to himself. “Better watch it, Chuck. You’ll be next.”

Conrad set his empty mug on the table. “He’s right, Dick. Keep your turnouts. You’ll need them for those meetings with the upper brass.”

“You’re beginning to scare me, Chief.” Hammer looked almost sheepish.

“You didn’t know?” Stanley’s mischievous eyes belied his serious expression. “They roped you in pretty good, there, Dick.”

“He’s right, you know. Even *Stanley’s* got that figured out. Promises of a nice oak desk and a view of the city,” Hookrader’s gravelly voice took up. “The nice, easy life. Once you’re in, they know they’ve *got* you. Pretty soon, all you care about is how many paper clips versus staples the department is using and Come Hell or Highwater! you’re gonna put a stop to all the goddamned *waste*.” 51’s C-shift captain thumbed toward Conrad. “He should know. God knows he reams my ear off about it every time I’m on shift.”

Laughter filled the room.

“He calls me when he’s at home, you know,” Hookrader continued, eyes on his fellow captains but his peripheral vision was clearly gauging the Chief’s Tolerance Load. “‘Damn Navy brats,’ he yells in my ear. ‘You don’t know your fucking hands from your ass. Us Army guys gotta pull you by the nose to keep you straight! So quit using those goddamned paper clips before you plunge my department into the red!’”

Laughter poured into the room at Hookrader’s perfect imitation of the A-Shift Battalion Chief, though Hank Stanley’s eyes found Chief Conrad’s unmoving expression firmly fixed on Hookrader.

“I’m *personally* recommending you for promotion, Hook.” Conrad’s even voice threatened through the fading chuckles.

Another round of chortles and sniggers erupted and Hookrader shifted in his chair as he pretended to maintain an air of seriousness, but the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth betrayed him.

“And for the record, I have *never* called you a Navy brat. Us Army grunts have too much class for that. I *have*, however, told you you didn’t know your hands from your ass. *That* I will confess to.”

More laughter echoed throughout the room.

“You ready to tackle the establishment, Hammer? It won’t be easy, you know that,” Conrad said. “I’ll tell you now, there are still some old-timers who don’t take too kindly to change.”

“I know, chief. But I think it’s worth it. There needs to be a focus on integrating the paramedic training with the rescue program. Personally, I wish all the guys on the line had some basic paramedic training. After seeing the difference it’s made in the field... You know, we could’ve used something like that during the Riots. Now that the bill has passed, I’m looking forward to expanding the program to get all our rescue guys trained as paramedics.”

“There’s his speech, Chief,” Van Orden teased. “Seriously, though, how is this an issue?”

“Well, as I said, someone needs to better coordinate the academy rescue training with the hospital paramedic training, but field training will be a challenge, too. There may not be enough qualified paramedics to oversee the field component of the training if the majority of current rescue personnel want to certify as paramedics. Then there’s the question of voluntary versus mandatory paramedic training. At the moment, paramedic training comes with no raise in pay. It’s still not in the civil code, so as far as the county and the fire department is concerned, folks like Gage and DeSoto aren’t considered specialized and therefore it doesn’t factor in to their promotion.”

“Until some real factual data on the success of the paramedic program happens, there are gonna be a lot of people who aren’t real crazy about the idea,” Stanley added. “It makes sense. Change doesn’t come easy, especially when you’re dealing with specialized medicine and emergency situations. People want experts to handle it, not trained monkeys.”

“You think the paramedics are trained monkeys?” Chief Conrad inquired.

“I don’t, Chief. But the public doesn’t know the kind of training these guys have gone through. They see firemen showing up at their house and wonder why they’re administering IVs. I’ve seen it happen with Gage and DeSoto and your guys,” Hank gestured to Van Orden and Hookrader. “Heck, you guys know that even a couple of the *division* chiefs weren’t all that keen on the idea, figuring that paramedic duties were the job of the ambulance attendants. They were worried that the rescue guys would get tied up with medical calls and sacrifice real fire calls because they were busy with a scraped knee. It’s not, necessarily, an unfounded concern.”

“It took a lot to convince Kel Brackett about its feasibility,” Hammer pointed out. “I would imagine there are still a lot of doctors and nurses who are leery about amateur medics out in the field managing serious cases like heart attacks and burns without a real, live doctor on scene.”

“Hank, how many ride-alongs you manage to get in?” Captain Van Orden asked as he moved over and sat on the corner of the table, arms crossed across his lap.

“Got in three full shifts with Gage and DeSoto and a couple ride-alongs each with your guys and Dwyer and Hanson. I’ve also got that list of drills you all made up — I mean, worked diligently on — for the crew. I think I’ve got it covered.”

“Ohhh, the newbie’s got it alllll figured out,” Van Orden challenged.

Memories of his probie year paraded into Stanley’s mind’s eye and he shook off the old anxiety. “Well, after seeing the constant mistakes *you guys* have made, you oughta thank your lucky stars that the chief suggested I *take* this assignment so I could help save all your *butts*.” Hank countered.

Chief Conrad coughed and turned away to hide the smirk on his face.

“Watch it, there, Hank. Hammer doesn’t take too kindly to Army rug rats.”

“I like the Army, fine, Chuck. It’s the Navy and Marine brats that get on my nerves,” Hammer countered evenly, eyes pointedly on the B-shift captain. Both officers were trying their damndest to out-serious the other and failing spectacularly.

Hookrader’s eyes suddenly narrowed and he leaned across the table. “Wait a minute. Chief, you mean to tell me, Hank was originally assigned somewhere else and you talked him into taking *this* assignment?”

“I needed someone with strong leadership skills and a knack for quick learning,” Conrad answered after a quick sip. “Thank God, the rest of you weren’t on that list.”

Hammer and Hookrader exchanged a slow, wordless glance but it was Van Orden who parried. “You just wait, Chief. Ole Hammer, here, is gonna fill up the Department with paramedics and flush out all fire service operations. And then, one day, you’ll find yourself at home, your wife yammering about cleaning out those damn gutters. And there you are, on the roof, when suddenly, out of nowhere, out of the blue, that rotting grapefruit tree gives off a mighty crack and falls, bam! right on top of you, pinning you underneath its heavy, lifeless branches. ‘Help!’ you yell. ‘Help!’ Your wife is frantic. Your neighbor calls and the rescue guys show up. You wave to them ‘Over here, young bucks. Over here!’”

“‘Young bucks?’” Hammer echoed, his mug dropping to the table like his incredulity.

Van Orden waved him off. “Quiet Hammer, I’m on a roll.”

“I can see that. Old coot,” Hammer muttered the last under his breath behind another sip of his champagne, his eyes twinkling.

Van Orden paused to do a double-take at Hammer as Hammer caught the Chief out of the corner of his eyes. “Not you, Chief.”

“Appreciate that,” Conrad muttered, unable to hide the mirth in his eyes. He gestured to the B-shift captain. “Continue on, Charles. I’m eager to hear about my future mishap and the travesty that will befall the Los Angeles County Fire Department at my expense.”

Van Orden did another double-take at Hammer. “You mind? You’re messing with my stride, here.”

Hammer took another sip. “I apologize. Please. Go on.”

Captain Stanley mildly shook his head as he tried to contain his laughter.

Van Orden took a breath. “‘Over here! Help me! Help me, I’m pinned! The young, strapping rescue men will climb up, take one look at you, and say, ‘This is the guy who dissed our beloved Chief Hammer and the paramedic program Hammer took such pride in promoting and supporting. Too bad for him this is an unincorporated section of Los Angeles. Mount up, boys, we’re leaving!’ and off they’ll go, leaving you to rot like that sad grapefruit tree.”

Hammer leaned back and laughed.

Chief Conrad reached over and took Van Orden’s mug. “That’s enough champagne for you.”

Hookrader’s expression, on the other hand, turned a little dark. “That’s the *dumbest* story I ever heard,” he ranted. “Thank God you’re a fireman, Van Orden. I’d hate to think you were writing some kind of novel, or something. Take this as a lesson, Stanley.”

All Captain Stanley could do was nod against his laughter and wonder just what he'd gotten himself into.

"Which brings me back to my original question. What assignment did you request, Hank?"

"The snorkel."

"What in the tobes of Hades would make you want the *snorkel*?" Hookrader demanded to know. "That has to be one of the dullest assignments. They don't roll that often, you know."

"Welllll, can't help it. It's always been my favorite," Hank answered with a shy grin.

"Hook's right, Hank. Engine and rescue squads are where the action is," Van Orden agreed.

"Snorkel," Hookrader huffed in derision.

"Yean, now you've done it, Chief. You've ruined his life," Van Orden said, gesturing to the youngest captain. "The future of the fire department rests entirely on his shoulders."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"Sorry, Hank. Looks like they roped *you* in pretty good. Just like Ole Hammer. It's the Curse of A-shift."

"Yeah. Barely out of his engineer diapers and now he's gotta carry the whole department. We're screwed."

"Engineer *diapers* —?"

"Outta the mouths of babes and —"

"—*babes*—?"

"—and into the fire. You're right, Van Orden. We're screwed."

"Damn kids, these days. They take their captain's exams and think they know everything."

Before Captain Stanley could utter another protest, the tones sounded.

"Station 51, Station 116, Truck 110, Battalion 14. Structure fire at end of Carbon Canyon Road. Mile marker 8. Mile marker 8. Time out: 0752."

"That's me," Chief Conrad said as he set his mug down and grabbed his dress hat. "Keep the champagne and tell me the details of that promotion party when you know it, okay, fellas?"

“Sure thing, Chief,” Van Orden answered as Conrad was out the kitchen door to his chief’s car. Van Orden grabbed Dick’s shoulder and leaned in. “Hammer, let me and the boys take it. It’s only ten minutes till the end of shift.”

“I don’t mind rolling out, Chuck.”

Understanding passed between the two fire captains and Van Orden patted Dick’s arm. “Sure thing. Bring my rig back in one piece, though, will ya?”

“Fat chance. Don’t want you bored all shift with no engine to clean.” Captain Hammer started for the door. “Hank? You coming? One last ride-along with the squad.”

Captain Stanley rose from the table, ready to follow then stopped. He’d overheard the captains’ conversation but it was Hammer’s reasoning and the recollections that flew through his mind of his past week with Hammer and A-shift that gave Hank pause. His shoulders relaxed and he faced Hammer squarely. “Go on, captain. I’ll take the next shift.”

Hammer smiled briefly, nodded then ran to join his men, alone, for one last run.

A/N: The Watts Riots in south central Los Angeles erupted on August 11, 1965 and raged for 6 days as people protested racial discrimination. Stores were burned and looted during the riots and 15,000 National Guardsmen were called in. Arsonists, in an effort to keep their fires going, shot at and hurled objects at firefighters who were trying to put out the blazes. In some cases, firefighters had to work while police and the National Guard protected them from snipers, essentially forming a war zone. Amazingly, no firefighters died from gunshots. Tragically, the Watts Riots was the last run for one firefighter. Fireman Warren E. Tilson was killed and his colleague Robert Laxague suffered broken ribs when a supermarket wall and marquee fell on them at 120th Street and Central Avenue on August 14, 1965. Both men were assigned to Los Angeles Fire Department Engine 61A. Two other firefighters, Fireman Frank J. Harrison of Truck 3 and Fireman Malen “Jim” Jacobs of Truck 28 crawled under the wreckage to rescue them and later received the Medal of Bravery by the City of Los Angeles.

The accounts provided by the characters in this story are based upon real accounts as told in the book “Burn, Baby, Burn!” by Jerry Cohen and William Murphy.

Los Angeles County Fire Station #16 is located in Watts.