

# At This Canny Leap (Captain H. Stanley)

## Chapter 5

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*"Proverbs often contradict one another, as any reader soon discovers. The sagacity that advises us to look before we leap promptly warns us that if we hesitate we are lost..." -Leo Rosten 1908 -1997*

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Saturday, October 2

*Station 51, respond to man trapped at Carriage Crest Park, 23868 Figueroa Street, two-three-eight-six-eight Figueroa, cross street Sepulveda Boulevard, time out 0735.*

"We'll take it, Hook," Captain Stanley told C-shift's captain as he set his coffee mug down. "My guys are all here, and yours might as well start their one day off on time."

Captain Hookrader lifted his own mug in thanks as the other captain strode out of the office. Both crews met the captain of A-shift on the apparatus floor; his own having already guessed that this run would be their's.

The men of C-shift made their way back to doughnuts and coffee and plans for the day as the squad and engine pulled into traffic.

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"Try lifting him more," Marco grunted from where he was tugging at the nineteen-year-old. His arms passed under the kid's armpits and across his chest.

"I *am* lifting!" came Chet's emphatic declaration through gritted teeth as he raised the pair of knees he held a bit higher.

"Here, shift over, Chet, I'll take this side." Roy got a grip on the boy's belt and put one arm under his right knee as Chet moved to do the same from the other side. "Maybe if we tip him upside down..." Roy started to suggest.

"Ugh! Man, what *is* this stuff all over the seat?" John asked, pulling his hand away from prying at the baby swing and glaring at it and his hand in disgust.

"It's just cooking oil," Troy, the swing's prisoner, answered. "I used it so I would slide in better. Could you just get me outta this thing? I've been hanging here for two hours now, and my legs are starting to go numb. I think they're starting to swell too."

"I hope he at least collected on that bet," Hank said to no one in particular from where he stood off to the side with the groundskeeper who had summoned the fire department. Mike trotted up with the bolt cutters and a tarp. "Thanks, Mike, it looks like he's stuck tight. He's probably been hanging there long enough. Go ahead and cut him down."

Once gravity was no longer working against them, the firemen made quick work of liberating Troy from his toddler-sized torture device. Although flesh and rubber came apart intact, a pair of corn oil-slicked and muddied corduroys might never be the same.

During a brief conversation with Dr. Early over the biophone, it was decided that the victim could be released on his own reconnaissance as long as he promised to see a doctor if the numbness and swelling didn't reduce by the next day. Troy didn't join the ring of good-natured smiles his rescuers wore after the Doc's final transmission, "51, tell the victim to refrain from swinging for a few days, and after that he should consider graduating to the strap swings designed for bigger backsides."

Roy walked the stiff-but-ambulatory Troy to his car, leaving the rest of the crew to deal with clean up and his captain to deal with a disgruntled Jack-the-groundskeeper. Jack was going to have to replace the cut chains since the ones the firemen had left dangling were now too short.

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"Tax payers' money don't grow on trees, you know. You'd think a *college* student would'a figured out how to use the grey stuff that the good Lord Himself placed between a pair of dang-fool ears by now." Jack gestured with an emphatic shake of the disconnected baby swing he now carried. The remaining crew refrained from mentioning the going rate for a full fire company's response; Jack seemed plenty riled without that added bit of fuel as he stomped off to get a new set of chains and a ladder.

Mike and Captain Stanley each grabbed a piece of equipment and followed a few paces behind the still muttering man until he headed towards the Parks and Rec truck sitting off by itself in the parking lot.

"It looks like he doesn't keep a ladder with him. Should we offer to loan him one off the engine?" Mike asked.

Hank gave the suggestion some consideration. "No, I'll bet he doesn't have spare chain either and he could probably use the drive to cool down. We need to get the rigs back in service." They stopped to drop off the medical equipment beside the squad where Roy was now standing.

"You'd think that a college freshman *would* have graduated to big-boy toys by now," Marco commented, as he too, paused on his way to the engine. He had been close on his shift mates' heels carrying the bolt cutters and the tarp.

Mike handed the biophone to Roy who was stashing gear in various side compartments of the squad. "You'd think that a college student's *friends* would have hung around to help him get unstuck after the fun was over, not leave him in hopes that the whole neighborhood would see him dangling there."

"*Es difícil imaginar* a grown kid trying something so potentially embarrassing over a two dollar bet," Marco said over his shoulder as he continued on to the engine that was parked a few yards behind the squad.

Cap's response of, "No, pal, it's not hard at all to imagine certain people operating without a lick of common sense," followed by Mike's "Looks like they took Dr. Early's prescription for big asses to heart," had Marco turning back around in question. His eyes widened. "*Hijole*, if Jack was watching, he'd be having kittens. They're going to break a piece of the tax payers' playground equipment for sure."

Chet and John had commandeered two of the strap swings. The swing set was bucking and lifting an occasional leg in stomping protest as two over-grown kids pumped to greater heights in obvious competition.

"Marco, leave those," Hank ordered, indicating the items his non-swinging lineman held, "and go back and tell those two to stop messing around and bring the rest of the equipment, pronto." As Marco trotted off to deliver that message, Hank added the bolt cutters to what he already carried and started toward the engine. Something made him turn in time to catch John's showy dismount; it might have been the swift intake of breath from the paramedic standing next to the squad.

"I'm gonna kill him," Roy muttered as they watched John's body launch from high in the swing's arching path. He landed on both feet but had to take several stumbling steps in a momentum-swallowing run-out. Since he remained standing, Roy turned back to the squad's side. "What were you saying about common sense, Cap?" he asked before slamming a metal compartment door. He leaned on the squad's hood as his captain strode to meet Johnny and the two linemen who were finally headed back to the rigs.

"In about ten second's, he's going to be sorry he didn't land in the next county and keep on running." Mike commented, easily interpreting the irritation radiating from the man he'd joined beside the squad.

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"...Nah, Gage, that was a full point deduction when you failed to stick your landing," Chet argued.

"Uh-oh, now you're in for it," Marco interrupted the disagreement over the score John's recent flight would have garnered during the Summer Olympics last July in Montreal. All three firemen stopped in their tracks as a glowering captain approached.

A no-argument, "Kelly, Lopez, I'll see you back at the rig," separated mere witnesses from the actual epicenter of Hank's irritation. Once he had that individual reasonably isolated, he began, in as *reasonable* a tone as he thought the situation warranted. "WHAT THE HELL, Gage?" He took a deep breath, forcing himself to follow his own rule about not reprimanding his men publicly. He kept walking, trusting that his junior paramedic would be wise enough to follow and keep pace. He halted back at the scene of the crime and considered the still swaying seat. *Only John Gage could put his own ass in a sling by jumping out of one.* John, showing more sense than he had recently displayed, remained standing at a respectful near-attention.

"Gage, that was an idiotic stunt you just pulled. I thought you *knew better*. And while on duty? Good Lord, you're a paramedic; you *know* how dangerous a fall like that can be."

Hank was glad once again that his paramedic demonstrated some degree of a sense of self-preservation, because although John offered no comment, his captain thought he could detect evidence of several rebuttals just boiling to be released. He held up a reinforcing hand to help the struggling man hold his tongue. "Not yet, John, I'm not quite finished. I shouldn't have to say this over something as frivolous as ..." John's captain made an at-a-loss-for-words sweeping arm motion that encompassed the swing set, the general height and breadth of a paramedic's recent trajectory and, *thank the Lord*, safe landing. "... but John, that amount of needless recklessness on the job really disappoints me."

Hank knew he had connected with that last stinging statement; he'd meant to strike a nerve. The man before him might have been braced to absorb a physical blow judging by how rigid he now stood. Steeling his own self against the look of true regret he read in John's eyes, he let that pain settle for a moment before launching into the second phase of any truly useful correction.

"What *were* you thinking?" He started to head back to the rigs, again assuming a still silent paramedic would join him. "You didn't give a thought to how much hassle it would cause me if you broke your damned neck, *did* you?" he asked in a quieter, less intense voice.

A relieved, apologetic smile flashed across John's face. He reached a hand to rub the back of the neck in question. "No, Cap. I can't say that I gave that much of a thought. I guess I didn't really think of anything at all when I jumped; it just came as second nature. We used to do it all the time when I was growing up. Sorry, if I gave you a scare."

"It wasn't only me; you're probably the number one cause of Roy's receding hairline." Hank stopped for a moment to be serious again and bring home one final point. "John, that just wasn't a good example to set for the public. This morning's swing-related response was enough to last us awhile; I'd hate to be back here tending to any copy-cat performances of your playground vault."

John smiled, realizing his captain had recognized the same parallels between the athletic events he and Chet had just been discussing. He turned with a scanning look of mock-disbelief to take in the deserted nature of the playground at this early hour. Not even the groundskeeper was in view. Hank's eyes narrowed in a warning which, of course, went right over John's head. The paramedic, who in actuality *rarely* disappointed his captain protested in a tone that held enough mischief to keep it from straying towards disrespect. "What? I'm going to be a bad influence on the *squirrels*?"

Hank took the comment as the playful rejoinder it was meant to be and responded with an equally lighthearted, "It should be as simple as 'you jump when I say jump, but not until I say so', kapeesh? Now stop messing around and get your rear end into that squad before I decide to chew on it some more."

"But, Cap..."

A raised eyebrow signaled a captain's opinion that the conversation had ended and sent a paramedic making tracks to obey. Hank headed toward the engine at a more leisurely pace.

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John had his head in a compartment on his side of the squad as his silent partner listened from where he stood on the driver's side.

"Man, Roy, the whole *point* of doing something spontaneous is to spend less time *deciding* to do it than it will take to explain *why* you did it after the fact."

Roy's attention to a spot just off John's right shoulder should have been a head's up, but John missed that subtle clue and started to take a step back after he closed the compartment door. He felt a steadying hand just below his shoulder blade and swallowed his next comment before turning to face the captain whose feet he'd almost stepped on.

"That kind of flies in the face of the concept of risk assessment, doesn't it, John?"

"Well, I, ah...of course I wasn't talking about a *fire* scene or a *rescue*, Cap. I was referring more to everyday things like..." John leaned a shoulder against the squad and cast about for an appropriate example. The look of delighted inspiration that bloomed across his face gave warning that what was going to fall out of his mouth next would be vintage Gage. "...like jumping off a swing in broad daylight in front of impressionable wildlife."

"Or like saying something guaranteed to get you even *more* latrine duty," Roy said under his breath as he opened the squad's door and slipped into the driver's seat.

A captain's promise to deliver something precisely along those lines was interrupted by a voice calling from their HTs, "*Station 51,*"

"Saved by the bell," John commented as he joined his partner in the squad and lifted his helmet from the bench.

*"Respond to broken water main and mudslide on Crenshaw Boulevard, one-point-three miles south of cross street, Palos Verdes Drive North; Crenshaw Boulevard, one-point-three miles south of cross street, Palos Verdes Drive North. Engine 106 and Battalion 7 are also in route, time out 0842."*

"Wishful thinking, Junior," Roy said as he pulled the squad into traffic. "Personally, I hope he rained fire down on your acrobatic ass for pulling that little stunt, and I hope he made an impression, which is probably wishful thinking on *my* part. You about gave me a heart attack back there..."

John leaned back against his seat and settled in to endure his second tongue lashing of the morning.

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"Man, this would be the life," Chet said in a near shout to be heard above the engine's siren as he took in the uniformly white rancher-style homes and the miles of equally white wood fencing. Horses trotted along those fences, agitated by the passing fire rigs. A peacock hopped out of a roadside tree to drag his indignation and extravagant feathered train off across a pasture. Hank considered running with lights-only in order to spare the animals but there were bends in Crenshaw as it wound its way up the rolling hills and along steep canyons and cliffs. On such a road, motorists could use all the warning the oncoming emergency vehicles could provide. Both lights and sirens stayed on.

"Just look at these views..." Chet continued to rhapsodize.

"And just think of all those house payments," Marco's voice was also raised. "I hate to burst your bubble, Chet, but I'll bet there's not a single lot out here that's less than an acre."

"You'd want to be careful looking for any property with a view on this peninsula even if you *could* afford it," Mike commented, raising his voice even more to be heard from the front seat. "This road leads to Portuguese Bend, one of the most geologically unstable areas in the world. It's been moving off and on for millennia."

"Thank you Mr. Encyclopedia," Chet grumbled from his perch on the jump seat.

Mike reached to downshift as he maneuvered the engine around yet another climbing curve. "Don't tell me you've never heard the history of this road. Some folks say the county triggered a landslide when they tried to extend Crenshaw Boulevard to Palos Verdes Drive South in the late 1950's. Over one hundred houses were destroyed; there was a huge lawsuit and settlement. That bluff has been on the move since."

Chet wasn't giving up his daydream without a fight. "You heard what dispatch said. This mudslide was caused by a broken water main not the shifting sands of time. And anyway, Portuguese Bend is only one part of Palos Verdes; the whole peninsula isn't crumbling into the ocean."

Hank was getting ready to end the shouting-over-a-siren match when Mike delivered his closing argument. "Any structure is at risk of major movement if it's built on a slope or rimming a canyon like these above us are. If it's not a broken water main, it's leaking storm drains or improper landscaping. We've all seen what even a minor earthquake can do; we just drove right over the Palos Verdes fault line."

Chet gave a small sigh and aimed a wistful gaze out his window.

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Mike and Roy parked the rigs well before the barrier of mud that had been carried from the terraced hillside rising from the road to their left and down into the canyon on their right.

Hank hopped out and walked past the squad, HT held to an ear. "Battalion 7, this is Engine 51, how do you read?"

*"Engine 51, this is Battalion 7, we read you, go ahead."*

"Battalion 7, we've just arrived on-scene at Crenshaw Boulevard." Hank paced the edge of the layer of the mud flow as he continued to scan the slide area in front of him. The section of roadway involved was maybe thirty-five feet across. Vehicles had begun to back up in both directions. Some drivers had gotten out of their vehicles for a better look at what was blocking traffic.

*"51, we see you from our position up on Canyon View Lane to your west. Our crews are evacuating several of the homes up here. The water main has been turned off. Check it out down there and give me a report when you can."*

"Ten-four, Battalion 7. Could we get some help with traffic control?"

*"Already on its way, 51."*

"Thanks, Battalion 7, I'll get back to you A.S.A.P., Engine 51 out."

Hank continued his survey and noted a Buick sedan and a Mustang that must have been heading north at the time of the active slide. Currently, they both sat caddywhompus in their lanes and up to their hub caps in slate-colored ooze. He turned back to the rigs, noting the civilians milling to the side of a residence on same terrace as the road. It looked like the long, low house had caught and channeled the flowing mud onto Crenshaw. He collected his paramedics when he passed the squad on his way back to the engine.

"Mike, you and Roy check out those folks next to the house down here; make sure they all got out and know they can't be going back in yet. And set out a few flares and cones when you get a chance." Hank turned to the balance of his crew. "Each of you grab a few flares yourselves for the other side of this mess. Let's go see what we've got going with those two cars. I guess we'll see if we can even stand up in this, let alone make any head way. Just keep away from the canyon edge."

It was an exercise in exaggerated limb-swinging motions as they moved toward the vehicles while fighting to keep their balance.

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"This one's empty too," Chet called.

Hank scanned the milling crowd of motorists for signs of mud-splattered self-extricationists. "Okay, let's go set those flares. Keep an eye out, fellas; ask around and see if we can locate the people who were in these two cars. I want to be sure they got out okay." Each of his men turned to the canyon edge in shared concern, before turning to begin the slog to obey. He dug for the HT and faced the slope above, where he could see a white helmeted figure silhouetted against a red sedan. The distance was too great to make out which chief it was.

He was still working on freeing the Handi-Talkie when he heard a call from the fire-rig side of the scene off to his left; he let the HT slip back into its pocket and almost fell as he rotated his upper body faster than the sucking mud would allow his feet to turn. Hank caught his balance and moved toward the man who was trudging entirely too close to the drop-off for a captain's comfort. "Sir," he called. "You need to get away from that edge."

The man didn't obey; didn't even look up. His attention was focused on the very slope he'd just been warned to avoid as he scanned the falling slope at his feet.

Hank had a sudden sinking feeling that there might be a reason for this man's anxious canyon-side scrutiny. "Sir, stop, I'll come to you."

The man finally looked up with a tortured face and called back, "It's my son! He must have gotten out of our car back there while I went to see what was up with the stopped traffic. When I got back, he was gone; I can't find him. God, I can't find him!" The man took a step forward as he continued his frantic study of the dropping terrain.

Starting his own sweeping scan; Hank once again reached for the HT as he called, "Guys!" Three heads snapped up at their captain's summons. "We have a missing child; start a search!"

They were nine feet away from each other when the man cried out, "Damon! I'm coming, hold on son." The father threw himself to his knees and leaned so far over the edge Hank was sure he was going to continue in a fall. But the man righted himself, hauling a small boy to his chest.

"Battalion 7, this is..." Hank's right boot slid on a mud-camouflaged rock and he was pitched sideways. Both arms swung wide in an instinctive balance-grabbing motion that flung the HT from his grip. He didn't go to his knees but it was close.

Six feet separated him from the pair when the man tried to stand, lost his footing and fell to his side.

He was almost there when the two disappeared over the edge. Only a hand and its scrabbling fingers remained in view.

A fireman leapt.

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Hank lay full across the pavement, both arms over the edge to firmly grip a right arm. *Please, please still be holding on to your son.* Looking down, he could see the boy clinging to his father like a monkey; a panicked monkey who feared the muddy slide to the jungle floor far, far below.

"Ropes and life belts!" He raised his voice to carry over the noise the kid was making. The dad was punctuating the steady squeal with shouts for help of his own. "Okay, now just hang on, I've got you. Help is coming." Hank really did have a good hold, perhaps not as solid a grip as the four-point, prehensile one the kid below was maintaining, but one he judged as adequate for his needs at the moment. He planned to hang on until...his body was pulled two inches forward.

He felt something fall across his lower legs, and although he felt the impact, he welcomed the pinning weight and the hand that wormed under the back of his turnout coat and the fingers that curled around his belt. *Marco had been closest.* He couldn't turn his head to check. "Marco, that you, pal?"

"*Si*, Cap. Mike and Roy are bringing the gear from the engine. Hang on..."

Hank felt the tilting shift beneath him from his chest to his knees. He dropped his head over the edge and was treated to the scenic view of the underside of the pavement, exposed by the trenching water that had found a path beneath the roadway. He envisioned what was going to happen next, but was helpless to do anything about it.

The jutting ledge of asphalt sagged further, then folded beneath him. "Hang on!" he called to the pair below. He closed his eyes in regret when he realized that Marco would also hear the order and possibly die for his willingness to obey. In his heart he knew that it was no order that kept his lineman clinging to his knees as the four of them were tipped into the canyon below.

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A captain hung upside down.

He lifted his face out of the soggy earth and spat some of it from his mouth but could do nothing about the mud that packed the sockets of his eyes. He still had a two-handed grip on the arm which was still gripping back. He *thought* someone might have him in a bear-hugging hold just below his knees. He shifted them a bit. *Yep, Marco could be one tenacious son-of-a-gun.* He coughed and spit again.

"Sir? Are you alright? Do you still have your son?" *Please, God, let that kid still be there.*

Damon himself provided the answer by treating them to the same high pitched wail that he'd had going before.

"Yeah, we're still here. What next?"

*What, indeed?* "Marco? How're you doing, pal? Got a firm grip on something other than my knees?"

"Ah," Marco must have swallowed more than the daily suggested dose of minerals himself, judging by the sputtering and spitting going on at what Hank guessed was about the level of his own feet. "*Si*, Cap, I'm alright. You?"

"In one piece, but I can't see a thing through all this mud, can you?"

"*Si*, the view from here is... stunning."

That made the man below snort, perhaps in agreement, perhaps in dealing with his own taste of the hillside. His son, having checked in with his opinion had fallen into a series of whimpers that while lower in volume, were disturbing on a different level. "Okay, then, care to share it with me? Describe where we are."

"Cap, it looks like we slid about thirty-five, maybe forty feet. The slope eases a bit where we are, which slowed our speed some, I think. I'm standing on *una diminuta* ledge, holding your legs," Hank felt a squeezing demonstration, "and I can't see much else because a pair of size thirteen-and-a-half boots keeps kicking me in the face."

It was a captain who snorted this time, but he made a concerted effort to still his legs. It was just such a disorienting feeling, this inverted, sightless position he found himself in. "What about the rest of the slope besides where we are? Anything we can tie off too?"

"Not within reach, and Cap, we don't have a hand to spare between us anyway."

"Okay, I'm getting the picture. How about you, Sir? You and your boy still doing alright?"

"We're hanging in there."

Hank would have rolled his eyes at the man he held, if not for the mud mask which still prevented such an expression. At least the guy was in fine enough spirits to try to crack a joke.

When he didn't get a laugh, the man added, "Actually we stopped sliding above a spot where I can brace against the root of a tree. Your man is right; the slope here isn't as steep. We're good for now, although I think I may have gone deaf. My name's Mark Dudley, by the way."

Hank could sympathize. He knew what that shrieking wail had sounded like from a few feet away; Mr. Dudley's eardrums might've started to bleed soon if little Damon hadn't run out of steam. "Marco, what about the guys, any sign of our posse?"

There was a twisting shift of Marco himself, but not of his hold on a set of knees. "*Si*, Cap. There's a tree off to our right, and up about twenty feet. Chet is anchoring John from there; John's almost down to us now."

"What're they using, rope? Are they wearing safety belts?"

"Well, Cap, they're using their webbing rescue loops. And...well there's a lot of mud... and I think they must've headed down right after we, ah, did..."

Hank would have closed his eyes at the mental picture Marco was painting if his eyelids hadn't already been glued in that position. "They're not wearing belts, are they? Tell me Chet is at least tied into that damned tree."

"Well, there's a lot of mud..."

"Never mind, I'll just assume they're on the second pitch of an unprotected belay unless you tell me different. Any sign of Mike or Roy?"

"Hey, Cap, Marco, you two doing alright?" John's cheeriness somehow rubbed his captain the wrong way.

*If he says one thing about "hanging in there", I'm going to take that knife he carries in his right front pocket and fillet him alive, with my eyes glued shut.*

"You guys just hang on, more help's coming."

*Close enough.* John was lucky both of his captain's hands happened to be busy. "Stow it, Gage. Give me a report. Marco says Chet's belaying you from a tree trunk?"

"Ah, well, *near* a tree trunk... maybe a few feet *below* it now. What webbing we had on us, didn't quite reach, so Chet slid down to a boulder, well a rock really, and has me from there."

Hank shook his head to try to clear the mud from his eyes. He *really needed* to open them so that he could glare at the bearer of this disturbing news. It didn't work. "Where are you Gage? You'd better be on something more solid than a 'rock-not-a-boulder' or 'una diminuta' ledge."

"Hey, are you okay? Cap? I'm standing right here. Did you hit your head?" Gage sounded worried. Hank felt the chin strap of his helmet loosen enough to allow searching fingers to probe through his hair and he imagined a dangling paramedic performing an assessment.

"*No* I did *not* hit my head. If you want to do me a favor, scrape the mud off my face so I can see what the hell you are all up to."

Obedient hands did just that and Hank got his first peek at the rescue scene. He turned his head to the right. John wasn't dangling but he *did* seem to be kneeling on Marco's ledge.

"John, do you have enough slack to reach the boy?"

"Sorry, Cap. I can barely reach your head," John answered as he righted his captain's helmet and gave the loose strap a cinching tug. "You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, as things stand, I'm not supporting any of their weight. Little Damon here isn't going to be the one to let go and I've got a good grip on Mr. Dudley, so they're not going anywhere, unless I do." Stretched out as he was, facing the slope, Hank couldn't turn his head enough; not enough to do a proper size up; not enough to see anything of much use at all. "Either of you got a bead on Roy or Mike?"

John stood and there was another grip added behind his knees. After some shuffling, and captain-juggling, Marco was able to answer. "Roy's just headed down now, Cap. 'Looks like Mike has him on belay. They're using a rope. He's wearing a...yep, he's got a rescue belt on." Marco's voice brightened with this announcement.

"Okay, then. I guess I'll let *him* live to see his next rescue. Have him tie Chet off on his way down. When he gets to us, we'll rearrange things a bit and just wait for reinforcements to arrive. Please, God, tell me someone has called for reinforcements."

"Mike made the call," John said before relaying his captain's orders. There was some more shifting. "Hey, Cap?" John sounded worried again. "The angle is really only this steep right here where the running water eroded a kind of chute. When you get a better look at it...once you can see it right, um, right-side up, I mean, well, we were being careful..."

"Enough, John. I get it. We'll be discussing this later and you can regale the entire shift with your opinion on how safe this operation was from beginning to end. About how much further does Roy have to go before he reaches us?"

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After learning of the news team that had set up across the canyon, a husband wondered what his wife was going to think when she got wind of what he and the crew had been up to the last hour or so. Odds were, she would find out during the opening segments of the local news. Perhaps she wouldn't recognize him. He removed his helmet. No such luck, the white stripe remained clearly visible in spite of its wearer's recent mud excursion. Rosie was going to know. She was going to be frightened and concerned (which he regretted to his marrow) even if she realized they were all safe when she found out. Then all hell was going to break loose when she figured out who'd literally been dangling by his toes. The fear would last longer than the anger, and he could see no way to spare her either. They all had phone calls to make, the sooner, the better.

Hank stood with Battalion 7's Chief Kevin Delmonico who'd had a clear view of 51's mud-adventure and subsequent rescue from where he'd set up command on the terraced road above. He longed to take himself and his crew back to the barn to scrape off a few layers of adventure and make those phone calls.

Instead, he and the chief were discussing the house which was now overhanging the donor site of most of the dirt and rock that had been carried across Crenshaw and down into the canyon. The guys passed them on their way to the rigs and Marco paused a moment to consider that dwelling also. He looked around to make sure there were no civilians within earshot before calling, "Hey, Chet, I think I know of a place out here you could afford." He had to trot to catch up with his fellow lineman.

Chief Delmonico also checked to make sure Marco's words could not have fallen on ears that might be offended and then laughed himself. "I'm thinking I wouldn't care to own *any* of the houses on this hillside, it all looks pretty unstable at the moment. Oh, before I forget, I want to compliment you on that fine display of incident command, managed *upside-down*, no less. How'd that work out for you, Stanley?"

Hank started to open his mouth but snapped it closed to keep from ingesting any more of Rancho Palos Verdes. He imagined he would be tasting that posh brand of mud for days. He silently endured the ribbing his superior officer was indulging in.

"Damn, it looked at one point like two of your men were holding you up to shake the change out of your pockets."

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As was his custom after any involved run, Hank held an incident review session after the lunch dishes were cleared. He had his crew bring their coffee and a few extra chairs into the day room, so that they could use the chalkboard if needed.

He stood in front of the board, and waited for the guys to get settled.

"Okay men, I think I'll get the ball rolling. I owe you all an apology," Hank paused as every man before him shifted and drew themselves up to begin talking at once. "Hold on, you know how this works. You'll all get a chance to add your two cents, but for now I just want you to listen. I should have realized that the edge of that pavement on the canyon side was undercut. I should have guessed it wouldn't hold my added weight. I am always harping on you fellas about the importance of situational awareness, and well, this is a prime example of a time when a little more *awareness*..." He had to stop and glare two members of his crew into continued silence before continuing, "...a little more awareness on my part might have prevented what turned into a pretty involved and exposed rescue." He held his hands up to still the mounting unrest before him. *I guess this isn't going to be one of those sessions where I have to pull teeth to get audience*

*participation*. "Hang on, now, hang on. Having thrown that out there, I don't know if that knowledge would have changed my actions when I saw those two go over the edge or not. I guess we'll never know. But let's give this a shot.

"Let's start with what each of you saw and were thinking and work our way through the rescue that way. Then we'll talk about what we could have done differently and decide on what we'll do the next time we find ourselves clinging to one another as we dangle over the edge of a near-vertical drop. In a perfect world there wouldn't *be* a next time, but part of risk management is stored experience, and there a few lessons we can take from our earlier mud-encrusted adventure. Mike, the floor is yours." Hank dropped the chalk he hadn't used into Mike's hand as they exchanged places.

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A little over an hour later, uninterrupted by pesky tones, the chalk had made its way full circle. "I guess it comes down to the fact that no run is ever perfect," Hank admitted. "Taking a calculated risk requires that you take the time to make some calculations. I am here to insist we all *take that time* whenever it's at all feasible. There will always be situations that require quick action. Sometimes, there's the need for *spontaneous* decisions, made in the context of past experiences." He made eye contact with a member of his crew who wore a slightly crooked grin in recognition of the bone his captain had just tossed his way. "Think of risk assessment as time well spent on increased safety with the added bonus of cutting down on the effort you'll have to expend explaining your actions after the fact." Hank paused with a slight smile of his own. "All-in-all, I'd say 'well done' men."

"Still this doesn't lessen the need for policy and preparation, so on that note..." Hank dropped the piece of chalk into the tray, and dusted off his hands. "...I'll meet you gentlemen out back for some drills. Everybody grab the webbing from your turnouts. Bring whatever you've got stashed in those pockets along with some carabiners and gloves. I've just thought of a set-up I'd like to experiment with."

---

There was a definite nip in the early October air as they each practiced smoothly retrieving various lengths of webbing from personal favorite and hotly defended folds and pockets. They linked their loops of webbing together behind their backs, with gloves on, even hanging upside down while safely tied off to the hose tower's ladder.

"Chet, I told you twenty feet of webbing was better. Aren't you glad you listened last time we had this discussion?" John asked after performing a particularly long reach using the same two lengths he and Chet had used during the mud rescue earlier that shift.

"What I'm really glad about is that I had my turnout on. Did any of you get a look at Mike's back?"

There was a growl of displeasure from the new focus of everyone's attention. "Sorry fellas, nothing to see here, let's just be moving on," Mike said in his best *Adam 12* imitation of crowd control.

The advancing crowd of crew members was proving to be hard to control.

"I am *not* strippin' out here guys, it's too cold and it's..."

"Stoker..." the warning had the engineer shucking out of his turnout and untucking a blue shirt before an actual order could be issued. Mike allowed two paramedics and the additional rubbernecking spectators a peek.

Marco's low whistle at the angry red welts made Mike twist to get a view of his own lower back. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said as he tugged his white tee-shirt down, effectively dropping curtain on the show. "I didn't have time to set up a proper belay, let alone throw on a turnout or rescue belt."

They each gave their engineer a knowing glance. Every one of them had experienced just such a rope burn across a wide variety of body parts. None of them remembered the experience fondly. Such burns were not debilitating, but the fact that they usually didn't require treatment didn't keep them from stinging like hell for days. Much to Mike's relief, the crowd started to disperse.

"Mike, what was up with that? You *always* wear your turnout even if we're just on a grocery store run." Chet gave Mike an unbalancing nudge as the engineer tucked his shirt tails back in. "It's like you expect a flashover every time we leave the safety of the rig."

"Apparently not *always*, Chet, and not *every* time." Mike gave the lineman an answering shove as they turned back to where the others had continued the discussion of the utilitarian properties of a trusty length of webbing.

Hank turned to comment just in time to see the look that passed between his senior paramedic and his engineer. *Was Michael blushing?*

---

A hand on a shoulder kept Mike from joining the others after Cap called a halt to the drill.

"Meet me in the office, I have a question about those vacation days you asked for."

"Sure, Cap," Mike answered as he considered the possibility he might not get the time off.

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"Okay, Stoker, spill," Hank ordered as he closed the office door. "Why'd you let Chet go on about your not wearing your turnout to that run? *He* might not remember, but *your captain* does." He moved to sit behind his desk, but his engineer chose to remain standing. "You had it on at the park, and I distinctly recall you were wearing it during the ride to the mudslide scene." Hank pictured a canvas-covered arm reaching to downshift on the trip up Crenshaw Boulevard.

The man standing before him was turning red again; Hank sat back in his chair. *This must be a better story than I thought.*

Mike seemed to be having trouble with the start of the tale, so his captain gave him a helpful prompt. "You had it on when we arrived. We split up at the scene and then you took it off to..."

"Well, I, ah... took it off to... give Roy a hand with ...one of the ah...folks from that lower house.

Hank rested his chin in a hand. His engineer was sure choosing his words carefully. "Because..."

"Because... you told me to?"

A chin dipped; two eyebrows raised.

"Well, they all had to leave their house real sudden-like, having been told to evacuate and all. And no one was supposed to return to their homes until the chief gave them the okay..." Mike was monitoring Cap's face for the exact moment when his commanding officer was satisfied and he could leave off without having divulged more details than strictly necessary to end the conversation.

The expression he was tracking clearly said, "And...?"

"...and Cap, she was cold and wet from being in the shower and she was..." Mike's voice trailed off.

There it was again, that charming blush. Hank figured it was time to let Mike off the hook, having gotten a pretty good idea what was behind Mike's reluctance to share the story until it was forcibly extricated. "And you thought she needed your coat more than you did."

The played-out man folded into one of the wooden chairs facing the desk. "Yeah, Cap," Mike cracked his first smile since entering the office. "Even with my turnout on, she still looked, ah... uncovered and... aw hell, Cap, it was distracting as all get-out."

---

Over two months later, Hank's mind still occasionally wandered back to the mudslide scene and all the details he had missed during that particular rescue.

He turned his attention back to this rotation's pre-fire planning activities. Hank thought of these as their "get out-and-about missions". They were an extremely productive use of a fire crew's time, allowing them to kill a whole flock of birds with one stone. It was a rare shift when he didn't have at least one set up.

Sometimes, due to run volume, they missed the appointments, but engineers, managers and owners were all aware that the fire crew was on duty; they rarely complained.

These forays offered a chance to meet and support members of the community and also provided an ideal opportunity to educate and communicate. It never hurt for tax payers to see firemen working outside of the stations.

While they were doing safety checks and touring buildings they were also increasing their knowledge of their first-due district. A working fire was simply no time to be discovering the unique challenges each structure could present. In this context, "home field advantage" meant that they knew their own district well, had been out in it often, having imagined buildings on fire, roofs collapsed and roads flooded. Hank was a big believer in using these field trips as mission planning exercises and often tried to time them to coincide with recent training programs or to highlight key lessons he felt needed reinforcing.

He picked up the phone to confirm two appointments with business owners later in the shift.

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"Cap, of all the things I could write about that fire, and what they want to know is "At what point did you realize you had misplaced the piece of equipment listed on line 'C'?"

Captain Stanley looked up as his junior paramedic surged into the office waving a piece of paper. "Come on in, John, what's on your mind?" His sarcasm was completely lost on the wall of turmoil that was John Gage.

"Really? You know what? I hadn't even realized that an ax was missing until the next morning, when we did inventory."

Hank leaned back in his chair with his fingers steepled as his junior paramedic advanced towards his desk.

"And you know what else? I wasn't all that beat up over its loss then, and I'm *still* having a bit of trouble dredging up the proper amount of remorse to fill out this damn form today." There was a snap of paper as John rattled exhibit 'A'.

"Damn it! It was an *ax*, a lousy ax. I probably just set it aside, maybe when I started CPR on that victim, or leaned over to lift him to my shoulder. Or, it might have been later when that step gave way and threw me. I *might* have needed two hands to catch myself, I just don't remember. But I'll tell you what I *do* remember. I remember the exact moment when I realized I had misplaced my *partner*. John spun and took two receding steps toward the door, before turning to face his captain again.

Hank waited patiently for the next swell to build.

"Hey, do you think they want to hear about *that*, about how we were both searching for that second victim, belly down because the air above our heads was so hot we couldn't even raise to our knees? Searching blind because visibility was for shit? Or how with all the noise that place was making as the fire gnawed on it, I couldn't hear anything else except for the sound of my own breathing as the regulator cycled on and off?" The force of John's agitation broke against the front of Cap's desk as he curled in hovered suspension over hands braced against the solid wood. Hank thought the sound of John's breathing was pretty audible without any augmentation from an air pack.

He waited.

John twisted away and began a three-pace striding maneuver that served to dissipate some of the spilling storm-churn.

"Cap, I'm not making excuses here. I've been in the same exact position, on so many fires over the years that I've lost count; besides the fact you've drilled us until our eyes are crossed on how to function during the worst situations imaginable. I've gone over it, and over it, and Cap, I still can't tell you how I let it happen. One minute he was in front of me, and the next... Maybe *that's* when I lost the damn ax." John had reigned in his more dramatic arm gestures with a final agitated drag of his fingers through his hair but he was still on the move.

"You about done there, John?"

The paramedic stalled mid-pivot and ducked his head in chagrined awareness. "Ah, sorry, Cap."

"John." Hank paused, waiting for eye contact before he continued. "I know having to fill out paperwork can sometimes seem punitive. But I think the bigger issue here is that you need to stop beating yourself up for getting separated from Roy during that office fire last shift. We went over this during that fire's postmortem. Things happen during even the best-run fire scenes. We all know that." Hank bent

sideways to retrieve a form from a file in a lower desk drawer. "Since then, I've talked to Roy and I know you have too. After you two got split up and he was ordered out by the incident commander, it took him a few minutes to find his way back inside to join you again. Believe me, he was just as upset by the situation as you were - *are*. He chose different words to express that frustration, mind you. *He*, at least, has some healthy respect for the office of captaincy.

"Now buck up and fill out that *damn* form." Hank held out a crisp replacement for its beleaguered mate. "Give your best guess as to where you left the *damn* ax and just get the chore over with, *damnit*." He gestured to the shelves behind John. "And then maybe you'll want to borrow my thesaurus to pick out a few more curses. If you're going to swear, Gage, I'd expect you to at least be a bit more eloquent about it". Hank kept his face impassive.

John took a steadying breath. "Sorry, Cap. That was way out of line. And I *do* respect your office, I mean your being a captain and ah, well, *you*, Sir."

Nodding his acceptance of this apology, and squelching the smile that still threatened, Hank inserted a briskness into his next order. "Get to it, John. Have that on my desk by shift change, tomorrow morning."

After his paramedic left the office, Hank's face almost relaxed, but he shook his head and frowned as he turned his attention back to his own damn stack of paperwork.

---

He looked up from his clipboard when he heard the squad as it was backed into the bay. He had moved his desk work to the day room for a change of pace and was sharing the couch with Chet and Henry. He lifted a sleeping hound's lips as he provided a grumbly voice to the ventriloquist act in his lap, "Move it, Chet, your captain needs to get up."

Chet shifted and accepted a nudged doggy bulk onto his own lap.

"Up and at 'em, Chester B., there's about a mile of hose from C-shift's 3 a.m. fire that we have to get to sometime today. It shouldn't take long; I'll send reinforcements as soon as I make sure John and Roy know that their lunch is waiting in the oven."

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Hank set about placing dual foil-covered plates between the waiting silverware on the table. "Careful, fellas, these are hot," he cautioned. John had entered the kitchen right on Roy's heels with his usual animation, which signaled to their captain that their run had gone well. "How'd that last run go, guys?" he asked anyway, curious what the dispatcher's cryptic "child injured in a fall" might have entailed.

"A four-year old took a tumble off of one of those springing hobby-horses." Roy supplied as he pulled a chair out. The bemused shake of the paramedic's head held a clue that there was more to the tale.

John looked up from pouring two glasses of milk at the counter. "He wouldn't have needed a trip to the ER except for the toothbrush that ripped open the inside of his cheek. Don't even ask what he was doing brushing his teeth in front of *Sesame Street* while bouncing on a Palomino Radio Flyer named *Wonder*."

"He was lucky, I've read reports of kids impaling themselves up past the bristles after falling while they brushed their teeth," Roy said as he reached to accept the glass Johnny handed him.

"Man, that kid musta swallowed a ton of blood before we got there, 'cuz the scene wasn't nearly as messy as you'd expect judging by how much that wound was bleeding," Johnny said as he gingerly lifted the foil from his plate, releasing steam and an aroma he sniffed with appreciation.

"Yeah, that was right polite of the little guy. Next thing you know, they'll have to add the Surgeon General's warning on those things." Roy set the foil from his own plate aside.

"What, bouncy-horses or *toothbrushes*?" John asked around the mouthful of enchilada he was chewing.

"Next thing you know, there will be that warning on *life*," Hank offered over his shoulder as he went in search of Mike and Marco.

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They'd only managed to fold two fifty-foot sections of dry inch-and-a-half onto the hose bed of the engine after exchanging it for the wet lengths now hanging in the tower when the tones began to sound. Station 51 was among a string of companies responding to a multi-vehicle pile-up on the transition road between northbound I-405 and northbound I-110. They and Engine 10 were to approach from the south while companies from Battalion 18 were coming from the north. Two other squads would be responding.

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What would have normally been a six minute response time was slowed when Roy and Mike had to maneuver the rigs onto the shoulder as they merged onto I-110.

As they passed the lanes of stopped traffic, Hank keyed the radio. "Battalion 18, this is Engine 51, we are approaching the scene. Traffic is stopped; unknown how close to your location we'll be able to get our rigs."

*"51, this is Battalion 18, we have good access from the north. What we're dealing with is a chain reaction of collisions scattered across all of the northbound lanes. Multiple injuries. The paramedics on scene are triaging. Get as close as you can, and work from your end."*

"Ten-four, Engine 51 out." Hank hung up the radio just as the squad pulled to the far right of the shoulder, blocked by a silver Honda Civic lying across their path as well as half of the far right hand lane of traffic. Mike parked the engine behind the squad.

"Well, guys, 'looks like this is where we start," Hank said as he swung himself up to a standing position, bracing a foot against the inside of the cab door he'd just swung open. "Chet, pull an inch-and-a-half and check for gas leaks."

From his higher vantage point, he counted eleven vehicles with varying degrees of visible body damage lying strewn between his engine and the fleet of response vehicles set up at the northern edge of the carnage. A cluster of four passenger cars seemed to be claiming the lion's share of the available resources working the leading edge of the pile-up. One of those frame-twisted vehicles had smoke coming from under its hood. Firemen and officers from various law enforcement agencies had spread out and were working amongst the remaining wreckage. A pair of sedans and a sporty little Fiat looked like there had been some interaction of the rear-ending variety. A station wagon and a Jeep on its side rounded out the trail to the two vehicles his own paramedics were heading for.

The door of the van Roy chose to size up first seemed to be giving him some trouble and John was still circling the Honda. "Marco, get the battery cables on the Honda and Roy's van first." He jumped down from his perch. Mike was checking the gauges as Hank rounded the back of the engine and patted his engineer shoulder before reaching for a Halligan. "Join us when you finish with the hose work."

Hank started with the Civic. John was already inside, stretching into the rear seat from the front passenger seat. "Whatcha got, Gage?" He asked his paramedic's backside.

"A broken shoulder and some minor contusions. These three can wait for a bit." John's muffled voice preceded him as he wiggled out of the cramped space. He wrote something on a paper tag and slipped it under a windshield wiper. "I'll check the Jeep. Cap, it looked like Roy could use a hand," John called as he trotted across the concrete to where the nose of the Jeep had come to rest against the cement divider.

Chet and Roy had managed to pry the van's rear door into submission, so Hank moved on down the line to the station wagon.

He reached through the shattered driver's side window and felt for a carotid pulse just as the woman groaned. He placed a preemptive hand on her forehead anticipating her next sign of life, which was to try to jerk her head around in disoriented panic. "Easy there, try not to move, you've been in an accident." Hank kept his hand where it was and twisted to get a bead on what his paramedics were up to. Neither one of them appeared on the trail of his wishful thinking; Stoker did though.

"Hey, Cap, need some help?"

"Yeah, Mike. She looks like she cracked her head pretty hard. Grab a backboard and a C-collar for when one of the paramedics get here. Grab one of them too while you're at it."

Hank kept her head firmly pinned and asked, "Ma'am, were you the only one in this car?" as he twisted around to get a look at the back seat and the floorboards beneath.

"I, I was... what happened?" she stuttered without managing to answer the question. Her fingers came up to her forehead but bounced off a blocking wrist.

"You were in an accident," Hank repeated as he captured her fluttering hand. "Can you tell me if anyone else is in the car with you?"

"No, I was... headed to pick up..." she paused to close her eyes as she struggled to reconstruct her last memories. "...we were going to finish up a project and grab a bite to eat." The woman opened her eyes with a gleam of triumph but it faded when she continued in a tired, defeated voice, "I was alone, but I don't remember what happened." Her eyes drifted closed again.

"No, stay with me now," Hank commanded. "You're doing great. It looks like you ran smack dab into a freeway pile-up on your way to lunch. I need you to try to hold still until one of the paramedics can check you out. Can you tell me your name?"

He continued to make small talk and learned that Katie worked for a law firm and the project she was working on had been a pain-in-the-butt to get past the pain-in-the-butt bosses she had to deal with on what she claimed was a daily basis. He learned that although she talked a big talk, she really did seem to like her job. He was just grateful she kept up her end of the conversation until not one, but two paramedics he didn't recognize arrived to pick up the thread. Mike must have gotten tied up somewhere, after dropping off the backboard.

Hank pulled the HT from a pocket to test an impression that the sirens he had been hearing while he was engaged in discussing office politics with Katie had signaled the thinning of the ranks of those victims needing the most care. Command brought him up to speed, and he gleaned the general co-ordinates of his crew. Law enforcement officers were moving through the scene, taking measurements and statements. The first of the tow trucks were beginning to arrive. He headed towards the spot where he had last seen Gage.

Reaching the rear of the rolled Jeep, he quickly amended his earlier assessment. The scene had not completely shifted focus from rescue to investigation and wrap up. Clearly, there was at least one remaining victim that was going to command attention and skilled resources before they could fully sort and tally the toll at the end of this day. He stopped at what he guessed to be his junior paramedic's boot. He was guessing, because any truly identifiable parts attached to that boot were covered by a strategically placed tarp, or were hidden by the draping canvas flaps of the Jeep's tattered roof. But since his engine crew seemed to be key members of the bustle surrounding the Jeep, he figured it was a pretty educated guess.

The fireman inside the cribbed-in-place Jeep, contortionist extraordinaire, seemed to be supporting what must be the torso of a victim, also under the protective tarp. Hank was willing to bet it was a seat belt that had held the driver in place before aid arrived - that, and perhaps the steering wheel that must be within a foot of the leather of the driver's seat, judging by the new specs of the crash-redesigned vehicle.

"Ready!" a muffled, hypothesis-confirming voice called.

John had his one visible boot braced against the Jeep's roll-bar while Mike and another fireman used a chain and the jaws to pull the dash and steering wheel. The Jeep was protesting this process with the tortured grind and screech of metal twisting away from metal.

Hank reached to help support the expected sag of released weight just before one of the spotting firemen called a halt to the slow, relentless movement of the jaws.

"Okay, I think we've got him."

"Could someone get this tarp?"

A turnout covered arm brushed Hank's ear. He turned his head and recognized Marco as the man reaching up above their heads.

"Hey, Cap..." his lineman interrupted his greeting with a grunting stretch to cut the seat-belt. A backboard held high was waiting to catch the man as he was lowered from supporting shoulders. The victim-bearing backboard was passed to the waiting men outside. John stepped through the Jeep's hanging roof-flaps still holding C-Spine.

As John and another paramedic leaned over their patient, Roy's voice came over the HTs. "Engine 51, this is Squad 51. Do you copy?"

"Squad 51, this is Engine 51, go ahead."

"Cap, I'm back on scene. I've got a man here telling me there's a woman about to deliver a baby in a semi somewhere in the stopped traffic south of where we left the rigs. I'm going to go check it out. If you could have someone head this way with an OB box and some oxygen, I've got a drug box and a biophone with me. Over."

"Copy that, Squad 51. OB box and O2 to your location. We'll need an update on that once you know *which* semi we're heading for."

"Ten-four, Cap. I'll let you know. Squad 51 out."

"Marco, you're with me. Mike, you and..." Hank paused to locate his second lineman who was pulling the chain and the jaws out from underfoot. "...Chet stay and help Gage here. There's an ambulance queued up at the staging area to take this guy in when he's ready. Keep in touch," he ended with a pat to the HT poking out of a turnout pocket.

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Hank pulled himself up to lean into the cab of the semi. Roy backed out from where he'd been kneeling between the bucket seats in front of a young girl sitting on the bed in the sleeper section. She clutched a sheet tightly across her hips.

"Cap, she's in active labor." Roy announced as he reached for the bulky OB box. "How's Johnny doing with his victim?"

Hank turned to accept the green cylinder Marco was handing up to him. He tucked it into the space just right of the steering wheel shaft before climbing the rest of the way into the semi's cab. "He's managing. Mike and Chet are helping with that, along with the crew from 158. 'Looks like he'll have his hands full for awhile yet.'" A significant look told Roy volumes about how well *that* situation was likely to turn out. "She can't be moved?" He asked, already anticipating the answer. *Roy wouldn't have looked so eager to get his hands on the OB kit if he was planning on a leisurely trip to Rampart.*

"Not until we get them both stabilized. She doesn't know when the baby's due, but I'm guessing she's at least four weeks early." Roy lowered his voice further. "Cap, she's only twelve so that might complicate things a bit. She's a runaway, although she gave me her name and age easily enough. The driver just picked her up, so he's not going to know anything. Could you get an officer to put her in protective custody until we can get this all sorted?" The figure on the bed gasped. "The sooner, the better, cuz this baby isn't going to wait," Roy added as he move back to the sleeper section.

Hank sat back in the passenger seat as he pulled out his HT. "Battalion 18, this is Engine 51, do you read?"

"51, this is Battalion 18, go ahead."

"Chief, we need a law enforcement officer at our location on 405, a half-mile south of the accident scene, the black Peterbilt semi-truck, A.S.A.P; we need permission to treat a minor."

There was a pause before an answer came. "Copy that, Engine 51, a CHP officer is on his way."

"Battalion 18, do we have a time frame on getting an ambulance through?"

"51, best guess is another twenty minutes before we get a lane cleared from our end and thirty minutes minimum before an ambulance coming from the south would be available."

*Well, that's just dandy.* "Copy that, Battalion 18, send one when you can, Engine 51 out."

Hank rotated in the bucket seat to address the occupants of the semi's sleeper compartment. "CHP is on the way. They can get through on a 'cycle, but it'll be at least twenty minutes before we see an ambulance."

Roy again backed away from his patient who was now lying on the bed. Still in a crouch, he pivoted on his heels before swinging up into the driver's seat.

"Look, I know it will be tight quarters, but Cap, if you could sit up behind her and help coach her from there, that will help a lot."

Hank was folding himself into the indicated space on the passenger's side of the bed before Roy finished the request, but not before he made sure his paramedic caught the look he shot at him under raised eyebrows.

"You're doing fine, Tilde." Roy addressed the girl, but his eyes still held his captain's. "My Cap'n here is going to help you breathe and push and what-not when the time comes." He gave the girl a sympathetic smile that also encompassed his glowering leader.

"Tilde, meet Captain Hank Stanley; Cap, meet Tilde Shay-Chefler-with-a-hyphen. She's the last of a long line of Shays that were unwilling to let their name die out." Roy made sure the girl caught his teasing wink. He didn't miss the disbelieving '*AND WHAT-NOT?*'" silently but clearly mouthed from behind his patient's head as his captain finished getting situated.

Tilde had shifted to the middle of the bed to allow this new arrival space; she was up on her elbows to avoid touching him.

Roy reached to take another set of vitals.

"Hi there, Tilde Shay-Chefler," Hank offered with a reassuring smile as he removed his helmet to give himself more headroom. The girl tucked her chin to her chest and refused to make eye contact. "Tilde's short for..." He left the question hanging.

"Matilda," the girl's quiet answer came with a belligerent glare shot back and up over her shoulder, in an obvious dare to make fun of the old-fashioned name.

He ignored the look and continued. "My grandma's name was Matilda, she went by Mattie." Hank wondered how much longer the girl could support herself on arms that were beginning to tremble.

A bit longer it seemed, since she responded from where she was. "Mine goes by Maddie, but when they asked if they should nick-name me that, she told them she wasn't done with her name yet so they'd better just choose from the hundred-and-one other ways to shorten Matilda."

"A hundred and one? Really. Are there that many?" Hank egged her on with a challenging smile. He reached for a pillow and placed it across his knees.

"Let's see, there's Tillie spelled at least four different ways, Maude with and without an 'e', and 'Maudie' and Mattie, spelled four different ways. Then there's mine which is Danish, I guess, and you can spell *that* three ways. I'm *T, I, L, D, E*. Let's see..." there was a small gasp before she gamely continued, "Millie, MiMi, Mallie, Mally, Mat, Addy...and my brothers sometimes call me Attila the Hun, Lida..." The recitation ended in another gasp at the strength of the building contraction.

Roy gently eased her back to the pillow. "No, don't hold your breath. *Breathe*, like this. The paramedic demonstrated with three staccato pants of his own.

The girl obeyed, but her rapid-fire breaths came through clenched teeth. Hank leaned over to join her, wondering where he would land if he fainted from hyperventilation.

Tilde's face cleared as the pain receded. "Ella, Ellie and Tia. There're more, but damned if I can think of them right now."

"So how'd you choose 'Tilde' from amongst the plethora of choices?" Hank asked benignly, letting language slide that would have instantly earned his own kids swift sanction.

She rolled her eyes up to see his face. "Who gets to choose their own nick-name? Wait, I bet you did. They called you Henry until you were old enough to pitch a fit and you stopped answering to Henry until they all gave in and started calling you Hank. I'm right aren't I?"

"Nope, not even close, I was named after an uncle who went by Henry and to avoid confusion I was always called Hank. Now we call the fire station dog Henry."

Roy peeked around Tilde's raised and draped knees. "But we're not allowed to call the station pooch 'Hank'. Your grandma isn't the only one possessive of their nick-name. How you doing there, sweetie?"

Tilde gave him a single, quick nod before a gasp escaped.

"Okay, hon, this time I want you to *push*, real hard! Atta girl, keep pushing..."

She was squeezing Hank's hand with a force that demanded his attention. One would have thought that a father of three would recognize the feeling of holding a twelve-year-old's hand; he had held his own kids' often enough in the past. Before this, he would have told anyone he was an expert in the field. Over the years, his heart had memorized the quick, popcorn-bouncing clutch of fear during those eerie moments of building tension while watching some old horror flick. He'd known the tremble of a small hand during the truer terror of waiting for a turn in the dentist's chair and the "just hold onto my hand, son" grip performed while someone taped up a sprained slid-into-home-safe ankle. Since he had been banned from each of his kid's births back in the day of "fathers' waiting rooms", none of his prior hand-holding experiences resembled the crushing grip this petite girl marshaled as another contraction consumed her.

"Shit, that hurt," were the first words through lips that had been pressed so firmly together that they had blanched white in stubbornness. "So did you like your uncle?" Tilde panted as she slowly reclaimed control of her body.

"He was alright... always smelled like the ointment he used for his lumbago, but yeah, he was family." There was a pause as Roy hailed Rampart on the biophone he had propped on the driver's seat. Hank did not try to follow that conversation, but instead he worried at Tilde's question. He hated the dark spaces his mind swept through. *An uncle, was that who it had been? Who the hell was she running from? Where were her parents? He turned his thoughts toward even grimmer hypotheses. Were her parents even alive? Was no one looking for her? Where the hell were her people?* He *hated* that the whole of the human race was suspect; the entire world now the object of his silent railing for allowing the injustice he held in his arms.

*Fuck Fair*, his helpful mind dredged up from memories of the semi-military fire recruit classes of a decade and a half ago. *"I mean it,"* Hank pictured the officer as the man stood over a fellow probie. *"Whoever told you life was fair was a damned liar. I'm not here to be fair. A fire isn't fair. Death is not fair. Life. Is. Not. Fair. Now get your butt in there and complete that drill.*

"Can I call you 'Cap'n'?" Tilde provided a welcome re-routing of thoughts.

"That always makes me think of CapN Crunch and his good ship Guppy." Hank was pleased at the smile this admission produced - on Tilde's face and also on Roy's as the paramedic moved to the side of the bunk to get a set of vitals on the girl his captain was entertaining.

"Huh. I kinda like 'Seadog' in those commercials..." Tilde's face scrunched in pain. Hank moved to better support her from behind her shoulders.

"Okay, Tilde, I'm gonna need another really big push here." Roy was back in position to coach from beneath the sheet. "There you go... alright! Another few good pushes like that last should do it."

"O Captain, My Captain," the girl he held looked up at him appraisingly. He brushed the sweat-soaked bangs off her forehead. "You kinda look like 'Old Honest Abe,' well, before the beard, anyway. You ever think of growing one?"

*Who was trying to distract who?* "Nope, our air masks would never seal. Beards went out in the fire department sometime after masks came in. Hey, did you know that in the olden days firemen grew their whiskers long so they could pull the ends up..." Hank pantomimed with his empty hands. "...then hold them clenched in their teeth, and voila! Filtered air."

---

Roy was right. The next few pushes produced a few screams, some captainly sweat, a baby girl and (*thank God*), Johnny. In between the screams there had been a liberal peppering of phrases right out of a pirate's manual, but Hank had again ignored them on the grounds that he had to agree with the underlying sentiment they expressed. Sometime during the past half-hour, he'd ceased to regret missing his own children's deliveries.

Once the cord was clamped and cut, Roy had swung the baby around and placed her on the front passenger seat, all the while rubbing and drying in brisk motions with the sterile drape he had caught her in. A grim shake of John's head let his partner and captain know of the outcome of the desperate bid for a life that had been staged alongside the crushed Jeep. Efficient hands used a bulb syringe to clear tiny airways. "The guys are helping to clear a path for the ambulance. These two are the last that will need transport to a hospital." John stood on the running board and leaned into the semi's cab as he accepted the stethoscope from Roy and aimed the oxygen at the baby's nose and mouth.

Another fireman put a hand on John's shoulder. "We've got Rampart on a biophone out here, ready for vitals."

What ensued was a flurry of activity and communications that Hank interpreted as representing concern, but not grim, last-ditch efforts. The baby was crying. He gave Tilde's hand a squeeze. "Have you picked out a name?" He wished for a knife to sever his own tongue for uttering that last, but not before it was too late.

He steeled himself for her response, having no idea what to expect. Would it be an angry rejection of the baby or an eager clinging to the notion of a chance to play house with a real life doll, or somehow worse, the broken withdrawal of a child betrayed and alone?

"She's not mine to name."

Hank blinked in the face of this unexpected answer.

John had whisked the baby away and Roy was back to performing medically necessary things on the other side of the sheet/barrier.

"Tell them it's a "Shiny Schultz." Roy called out to the fireman still manning the biophone. His head appeared above the puppet stage of Tilde's knees. "Dirty Duncan or Shiny Schultz, it's just a way to describe the placenta," he supplied in smiling explanation as he wrapped something in another sterile drape.

Tilde seemed to have reached the bottom of her reservoir of strength and a tear escaped to trail down to the pillow still wedged between her head and Hank's knees. She turned to hide the next one and her gaze fell on the helmet lying on the floor in the corner of what Hank now viewed as one hell of a confined space.

"What does the white stripe mean, Cap'n?"

Try as he might, Hank couldn't come up with a funny rejoinder about his fire helmet, so he latched onto another tale about another hat from an earlier time. He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial tone. Roy was handing equipment out as he pretended not to be straining to catch the whispered conversation.

---

Ambulance is here," Mike's voice preceded the head and shoulders he poked into the semi's cab.

Law enforcement officers had made short work of collecting evidence in an effort to get traffic flowing again. Flares and cones had been placed in liberal array around this final set of the culminating drama which the freeway had served up. CHP Officers directed traffic around both sides of the semi's inert bulk.

Tilde lay neatly packaged in a stokes frame. She looked down at her blanket-covered feet where Roy had just tucked a bundle. "Who were Duncan and Schultz?"

Roy moved up to her head, arranging I.V. tubing and blankets along the way. "I don't know," he admitted with a smile. "Doctors, maybe?"

---

He held it together right up to the moment he gave the ambulance doors the requisite "all clear" double slaps, and then something began to well from that depth, that place that rarely made itself known to Hank.

He made furious, desperate eye contact with his engineer; made sure Stoker had a grip on the reins and then did something he'd never done in fifteen years of fire service. He deliberately turned away from a scene.

He didn't go far, but far enough to give himself some breathing, *panting?* room. He was more than taken aback by this sudden reaction. *Reaction to what? What the hell was going on?*

Of course he knew. Outrage had been building even as he chatted with the run-away. Even though they had recovered one person who'd gone missing, and in doing so, successfully birthed a new one, he had grave doubts about the rescue possibilities of Tilde' stolen *childhood*.

Hank leaned with his hands braced against his knees, and forcefully gained control of his visceral response to this sure knowledge that someone, *everyone* had let that little girl down. It was so unfair. He straightened, rejecting the punch line delivered so long ago by a captain intent on bringing his point home to the class of individuals he was trying to whip into shape.

Hank turned back to join his crew, who were pretending to be busy stacking the cones they had gathered in order to release the semi to merge with traffic and continue on its northerly route.

---

*Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me?... He pushed away from his desk where he'd been working since they'd hauled tail back to quarters after being released from the accident scene an hour ago...where are you-oo-oo?* Hank rubbed the strain from his eyes with the heels of his hands and grimaced as he realized some portion of what Jack-the-groundskeeper had termed "grey stuff" laying between his own "damn-fool ears" had locked itself in a continuous loop of two lines of bubble-gum pop. *Doesn't somebody want to be wanted like me? Just like me-e-e.* A sigh escaped as he realized what had resurrected this serenaded blast-from-the-past.

Tilde had mentioned sometime during their shared travail that she still had a crush on Bobby Sherman and had hummed a few bars of *Easy Come, Easy Go*. She must have been all of six years old during Sherman's hey-day as a teen idol.

Hank supposed some unused, dusty corner of his mind must have processed that useful tidbit and sorted through the stored soundtrack of the pop sensation it had been continuously bombarded with a few years ago. His daughter, Natalie had been all gaga over David Cassidy back then. The whole household had been ruthlessly subjected to repeat command performances as *Partridge Family* albums were played over and over and over. The tune currently stuck in his head had been her favorite and as such, had gotten extra play time. It had been as obnoxious as hell and forced the investment in an early Christmas present. Natalie had received the pair of headphones in July of that year. She had just turned twelve...

*Stop it.*

He actually agreed with the wisdom of his own advice. Tilde was not his daughter, was in truth, nothing like Natalie. Hank indulged in a mental comparison to prove the point.

Tilde was twelve years old - an age at which Natalie had still been playing softball in the sand lot and climbing trees. Her biggest worry at that point had been that her unfathomably square parents would not let her date for *three whole more years*.

His oldest child would turn fifteen next summer. She was inheriting his height, measuring 5 foot, 10 inches at her last check up. By all estimates, she was likely to add to that in the coming years, much to her "*no-one-will-ever-date-an-Amazon-anyway*" dismay.

Tilde was five-foot-two, tops, and although she was certainly young enough to have time for several extended growth spurts, Hank had no way of knowing if pregnancy and childbirth would allow for normal development. How the hell that child was going to ever have any sort of normal development of any kind was beyond him. And he hadn't been willing to ask the kid how tall her, *where the hell were they?* parents were and did she take after dear old dad?

*Stop it.*

This child had hard edges hewed into her that his daughter would, Lord willing, never face a catalyst to develop.

His daughter was kind and gentle and generous in a world that made it easy to be kind and gentle. And that, he realized was perhaps the biggest yawning difference between the two.

*Cut this crap out. She is not your daughter. This could never happen to your daughter.*

Looking at the wall clock, Hank decided there was enough of the afternoon left to make a few apologetic phone calls to the businesses they had stood-up to attend a more pressing engagement.

*But first, he pushed himself up and out the office door, I need to check on the troops.*

---

He entered the kitchen and noted the slumped positions of his crew scattered where they had flopped after slogging through the bare necessities of after-run chores and clean-up.

He peered at Marco's new look. It wasn't really noticeable at first glance; you just kind of knew something was *off*. It took a moment to register that the man sitting at the kitchen table was missing his eye lashes. His eyebrows looked a bit crispy too.

Mike noticed his captain's double-take and chose to pipe in with, "Marco, you look like my youngest niece after her big sister gave her a beauty treatment. She took a pair of scissors and trimmed Patti's eyelashes clean off." He shook his head at the coffee pot his captain lifted in an offer to top his mug off.

"You were just lucky your old pal Chet was there to rescue most of your eyebrows," Chet added from his supine position on the couch.

"Get a little close to an engine fire?" Hank asked, searching Marco's face for other signs of such an encounter. He wasn't really concerned, knowing he would have heard about any serious facial involvement from multiple informants.

"No big deal, Cap. It was a *pequeño* flare-up. I didn't move quite fast enough. Chet just used it as an excuse to get me really wet."

"That's gratitude for ya. You rescue a guy's facial hair and all you get are complaints." Chet didn't even open his eyes to deliver this last observation.

Hank swept his crew with an assessing gaze. Not one of them looked like they had it in them to chew, let alone whip up a meal. He pulled out his wallet. "I vote we order out for pizza." He placed a five dollar bill on the kitchen table. "Mike, since it was your turn to cook, you collect the money and remember..." The entire crew finished his sentence with, "...NO ANCHOVIES!"

Mike, grateful to be getting out of preparing the meal, heaved himself out of his chair and moved from man to man until he got to John whose payment included a two dollar bill. Mike turned it over. "These sure aren't catching on like the government hoped they would," he said as he added it to the stack and moved on to Roy.

Chet cracked an eyelid "Don't tell me, Gage tried to pay with monopoly money."

"Ha, ha, Chet. I got that bill yesterday as change at the dry cleaners."

"Well, don't try to pass any of your funny-money off on me. I think those are a pain to keep track of." Chet closed his eyes, but it was obvious to everybody in the room except John that Chet was winding him up.

And John levitated right out of the easy chair to take the bait, advancing on the smiling man on the couch. "You make it sound like I'm a counterfeiter or a money launderer or a, a ..."

The room waited in silence to see if John could come up with another example. Hank decided to put an end to a discussion none of them were up to listening to. "Pipe down you two; no one's calling anyone anything. Mike's going to order pizza in a bit, you two are gonna knock it off, and we're all going to relax while we can. Got that?" He turned, planning to sit at the table.

"I think the word you were looking for was 'crook', Gage. You should really invest in a dictionary..."

Hank rounded on his recumbent lineman. "Kelly. Hose tower. Now!"

*That* got Chet moving as he swung to a sitting position. "But Cap, that's not fair. You just said..."

It was Hank who closed his eyes in an effort to not over-react. Part of him wanted to lash out at something, *anything* for the hurt he had witnessed, no, *held* earlier, and if that was not a sure sign of the perversity of the human condition, he didn't know what was.

*It is not your hurt to avenge.*

He knew this, recognized it as truth and got up to leave before he purposely baited his lineman into crossing some invisible line so that he could indulge in raking him over the coals for the infraction in lieu of physically striking out at a target he could not identify, could not reach and had no right to hate. And yet he did. Hate.

"Now, Kelly," he ordered evenly before he spun on his heel and took himself off to his office.

---

Fifteen minutes later, he reentered the kitchen. Three heads rose at his entrance. "Where's John?" he asked, already knowing where the fifth member of his crew was.

Roy indicated the back lot with a tip of his head. Cap waited for further explanation as he refilled his coffee mug.

"You know, my son, Chris spends a fair amount of time with his nose pressed into a corner for tormenting his little sister."

Hank took a step out onto the apparatus floor, then moved to get a view of the hose tower where John was standing at the top of the ladder while Chet hoisted the hose up to him. He returned to lean a hip against the kitchen counter, sure there was a point Roy had yet to make.

Roy obliged by continuing his parable. "Often as not, we'll find her keeping her big brother company and glaring at us for being so mean to him. When they're not drawing blood, they're each others' staunchest allies."

A mug was raised in acknowledgement of Roy's spot-on analogy. A sip was taken, the mug was placed on the counter top and a captain strolled through the apparatus bay to exit the station and continue on to the hose tower.

It turned out finishing the rest of the job was no challenge at all to six pairs of hands.

---

Hank heaved a sigh which would have alerted anyone loitering outside his office that something was weighing on his captain's mind.

He raised his eyes from the form he was working on at the first head that popped into sight along the door jamb at about waist height.

He raised his eyebrow when the second head appeared just above it.

He leaned back and crossed his arms when a third head appeared.

He had to smile back at the totem of three heads stacked alongside the door jamb peeking in.

"Marco, Chet... John, anything I can help you clowns with? Where'd you leave the rest of the crew?"

"Roy is on the phone and Mike is paying for the pizza. It smells amazing. Man, I could eat almost anything right now, even Chet's nasty hash, oomph..." John was forced to pause his critique of one of Chet's culinary mainstays after his feet were swept out from under his already low, almost horizontal torso. He caught his fall by hugging the frame of the door to slide to the apparatus floor outside of the office.

Hank reached a hand down to lever an indignant paramedic up after he stepped over him on his way to join the other two men who were already half way to the kitchen.

---

*Squad 51...three heads were raised; three burrowed further under shielding pillows. "...Engine 51..."*

A muffled "Awww, crap," was heard before at least one pillow took flight. The night dispatcher's voice continued without sympathy.

*"...man injured in a fall, 1090 East Joel Court, one, zero, nine, zero, East Joel Court, cross street Bonita, law enforcement is responding, time out 0312."*

Hank looked over the brick divider as he snapped suspenders in place. *One, two, three, four, five...yep, all vertical and moving.*

---

The engine cab was quiet during the three-minute ride. Any run dispatched with law enforcement could mean, well, anything, especially at this hour, and Hank knew all minds were running through the possibilities. Mike slowed the engine as they approached the end of the cul-de-sac to allow a patrol car to pull ahead. He parked behind the paramedic squad, well before the turn-around.

"Watch yourselves, men." Hank warned as they climbed down from the engine's cab.

The firemen waited at the curb until an officer's head appeared above a side gate. "Its okay guys, he's back here."

The sheriff deputy led the way as they filed through a narrow courtyard. "He's right where we found him, pinned under the trellis. It looks like he was hurt in the fall, but there's no saying if some damage might have been caused from the homeowner standing *on* the trellis to make sure he *stayed* pinned."

The yard lights were on, illuminating the scene well. No longer near the fallen victim, a middle-aged man was off to the left standing with a teenage girl. He had a restraining hand on her elbow, which she was trying to wrench free in between sobs. Roy and John knelt on either side of the light-weight structure which was covered in vines. Roy stretched out on his stomach and reached for a pulse while John tested a corner. "Can we lift this off of him?"

The trellis was lifted then tilted back against the brick wall that had lost its grip on it.

---

The boy would live. So would the girl, despite her sobbing assurances that she wished she were dead. Hank sent his paramedics on their way to Rampart with their patient who had a dislocated shoulder and contusions that may-or-may-not have occurred in the initial fall. *'Kid's just lucky there hadn't been a shotgun in the house.*

Stepping back through the gate and scanning the backyard, Hank called, "Got everything?" The father and daughter had retreated into the house. His men met him, carrying gear and deep in a discussion of the tactical aspects of where the young couple had gone wrong.

"I'm just saying, the front door might have been more exposed, but woulda been a hell-of-a-lot safer. What do you think, Cap?"

Caught off guard, Hank opened his mouth to voice his appalled opinion.

"He should have used the oak tree; that branch right there looks sturdy enough, and reaches right to the window. The only reason her *padre* ever caught on was all the noise they made."

Hank's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"A ladder, would've worked better," Mike weighed in with an engineer's opinion.

Hank chose not to make a comment, other than a look of promised reprisals, should the subject not be dropped.

Well trained as they were, his grinning engine crew fell silent.

---

They each tumbled back into their bunks, and Hank ran through some re-landscaping plans in his head. When he heard the squad pull in, he rolled over. As John and Roy got settled, a father's last conscious thought was that he needed to buy some oil for the chainsaw.

---

It had been a quiet beginning to a shift. They'd toured the new storage facility at a refinery earlier. Roy and John had just gotten back from a mutual aid run that took them to Long Beach.

"Hey, Cap," Roy called from the apparatus floor, before stepping into the office. "We checked on Tilde. We didn't get to see her because she was taking a nap, but it sounds like she's doing well. We went up to the NICU; the nurses have nick-named the baby 'Mistletoe' until she gets adopted.

John couldn't quite make out what his captain was muttering from where he stood out in the bay, so he stepped to lean against a door-jamb in time to catch the end of a grumbled "What kind of a name is *that*?"

"It's only temporary Cap, they just didn't like calling her 'Baby Girl Doe' is all."

At the grumpy sound their commander made, both paramedics backed out of the office.

---

*Engine 138, Station 51, Truck 116, Engine 110...*

What was it about the act of a group of firemen lifting forks that was linked to the tones? Hank finished taking his first and last bite of what suddenly seemed the best sloppy joe Gage had ever served.

*...Engine 8, Battalion 14, Structure Fire, 23211 Panama; two, three, two, one, one, Panama, cross street 223rd Avenue. Time Out: 1156.*

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, Hank stood as chairs scraped and hands reached to grab a few fries "to go".

---

They were three minutes out when the rig's radio announced, "*County, this is Engine 138 on scene at 23211 Panama. We have smoke showing and missing occupants, continue all units.*"

*"Continuing all units. Station 51, Truck 116, Engine 110, Engine 8, Battalion 14, with Engine 138, 23211 Panama."*

They were the second company to arrive. The squad turned off at the corner of the block while Marco hopped out to anchor an end of hose at the hydrant. The line un-spoiled from the hose bed as Mike continued to drive south on Panama Avenue. A captain's eyes noted the brown smoke showing from the rear of the two-story structure and the thin red fingers that flicked into the space buffering the apartment building directly to the north. A dozen bystanders milled across the street where two LA county sheriffs held them corralled.

Mike stopped the rig parallel to Engine 138, which hunkered in the street waiting to be connected to the hydrant by the engineer standing at its rear bumper.

Hank's eyes scanned in search of a white-striped hat as he reached for the microphone. "LA County, this is Engine 51 on location at 23211 Panama with Squad 51." He swung down from the right front seat of the cab. Mike pulled the engine forward to park her further down the block, leaving the space directly in front of the involved building for the responding ladder truck to claim when it arrived. Hank continued to keep an eye out for 138's captain who, being first-in, would be the designated incident commander until relieved by Battalion 14. He stepped around the front of Engine 138; the look that met him engine-side was not reassuring. "What have we got, Cook?" Hank read the stenciled letters on the back of a turnout coat. "Where's your captain?"

A hand reached to make a panel adjustment; the charged inch-and-a-half snaking away from the side of Engine 138 gave an almost imperceptible shudder in response. Hank's eyes followed the line to where it disappeared through the front door of the ground-floor apartment on the right, northern side of the involved building.

"Captain Spencer took Powell and Watson in to do a search. 'No word from them since. It's been almost four minutes."

Hank nodded to the engineer as he reached for the HT he'd slipped into a turnout coat pocket. "Engine 138, this is Engine 51, do you read?"

The HT he held with expectation answered with silence.

Hank turned in slow rotation, taking in the closely spaced apartment buildings that occupied this block. The fire structure was one building away from the corner where Marco had taken the hydrant. That very lineman was just now trotting by on his way to Engine 51. Hank turned to join him.

Across the street the gathering of onlookers was keeping law enforcement busy. Palpable anxiety and panic radiated to meet controlled scramble as the engine crew of 51 moved to collect and don gear. More than one distraught spectator was weeping; there were shouts and desperate calls to the unaccounted-for. Every few seconds, the volatile cluster would lose its tenuous formation and one of its members would take an agitated step into the street before a uniform pushed them firmly back to the sidewalk.

Hank scanned the front of the involved building's four units, two up and two down. No trapped faces peered out of the windows; no one waved from the upper, shared balcony which connected to the street level via exterior wooden steps. He reached Chet's side as that man turned from adjusting a strap. He keyed the HT. "Engine 138, this is Engine 51, do you read?"

He paused a moment and lifted the HT again. "LA County, this is Engine 51, how do you read?" He handed the Handi-Talkies to his lineman to hold while he shrugged into an SCBA, mirroring the actions of his men.

*"Engine 51, we read you, go ahead."* The juggled HT changed hands again.

"County, we have a working fire with brown smoke and flames showing at the rear of a lower unit of a wooden, two story, multi-family structure at 23211 Panama. Reports of missing occupants. 138 has advanced the initial line in search, no report on their progress, and no response when hailed. Hydrant water has been established. Request an additional alarm, incident designation 'Panama' over."

*"Engine 51, LA County, we copy."*

Hank turned his attention back to securing the final straps of his equipment once the dispatcher's voice initiated the call for the additional units.

Roy and John joined them, suited up with face masks dangling at ready.

"Okay, guys, pull a two-and-a-half and another one-and-a-half off 138. Chet, Marco, we'll have you and Stoker stretch the two-and-a-half dry as far as you can for the interior attack. Roy, John, you'll have the backup line. Be ready to go in but wait for my say-so. That goes for every one of you." The captain spent a precious few seconds on making eye contact with each of his men, knowing full well what he was asking of them.

He started across the front lawn of the four-plex noting clear windows with no smoke showing in the first lower unit on the left but a smokey haze through the cool-to-the-touch panes of the unit on the right. "Engine 138, this is Engine 51-A, do you read?"

Hank stepped between the building and its neighbor to the north and was met with almost overwhelming heat. *Almost*. He tucked his face into the cover of the front lapel of his turnout, noting no windows or doors on either story as he trotted to the rear of the building, SCBA mask gently bouncing against his chest and right shoulder. Once he rounded the corner, he turned to face the crackle and pop of flame snacking on fuel as it reached through a shattered window of the lower apartment. Brown smoke rolled out, and roiled in thwarted escape against unbroken panes on the second floor. Hank opened the electrical box mounted at the corner of building with his gloved right hand and pulled the breakers.

"Engine 138, this is Engine 51-A, do you read?"

He scanned the rear of the building and back yard as he continued counter-clockwise. He placed a still-bare left hand on each ground floor window and tested each exterior door-knob as he passed them. To his right, he noted four empty carport spaces; a small group of people watched from the alleyway beyond.

*"LA County, this is Truck 116, on scene at 23211 Panama."*

Hank recognized Captain Alan's voice. "Truck 116, this is Engine 51-A." "Jim, I'm on my way around, electricity is off, send a crew to get the rest of the utilities. We'll need ladders placed at both rear balconies and some vertical ventilation. There's a lot of heat at the rear northern quadrant; the roof there's probably getting squishy so tell them to be careful up-top. 'Meet you out front for a face to face, over."

*"Copy that, Hank, Truck 116 out."*

"LA County, this is Engine 51, how do you read?" He was jogging past a much cooler southern face of the building.

*"Engine 51, this is LA County, we read you."*

"County, we have heavy involvement of a lower unit with fire and pushing smoke with more smoke showing on the second story. There is a threat to the adjacent structure just north on Panama Avenue, over.

*"Copy that, Engine 51."*

Hank came around to the front of the building. He finished his circumnavigation dragging a hand across a final picture window in front before stepping to join his men staged at the point where 138's attack lead disappeared through the lower front doorway it held blocked open. Two of them bounced on eager toes, a feat, considering they were wearing full turnout gear. The other three members of his crew managed to convey an equal measure of readiness, a perceptible *lean* towards the enemy, the search and their comrades within. Captain Alan and one of his men stood with them.

Hank climbed the steps to join them and turned to the waiting captain. "Jim, 138 made the scene three minutes before we did. Captain Spencer and two others went in. No one is responding."

Jim's "That makes you IC." acknowledged the necessary re-assignment of a vacant role.

Looking into the living room, the thick smoke hung from the ceiling to about eye level in a dark velvet churn.

Hank heard sirens approaching from the south as he loosed his men. "Okay, guys, you're up. Get in there, and find that crew. Pray to God all three of them are still on their attack hose. Keep in touch. We're only gonna have one shot at getting a handle on this before she flashes." He signaled to Cook to charge the back-up line and sent his men through the front door with a clap on each shoulder. Roy aimed a penciled stream at the ceiling in short bursts to cool the smoke and heated gases collecting there. When droplets of water rained down from above, the team duck-walked the lines forward.

*"Truck 116-A, this is Truck 116-B, how do you read?"*

Captain Alan keyed his HT. "I read you, 116-B, go ahead Tom."

*"Cap, the lower rear doors are forced, gas is off and those rear balconies are laddered. No victims in view. Tim and I are headed up-top once we ladder the front exposure, over."*

"Ten-four, Tom. Little Jake and I are heading inside. Report to..." Jim's brief pause asked the new incident commander his druthers. Hank's heart clamored for him to remain close, but he answered with a nod towards a location that would afford the big-picture view an incident commander needed. Jim relayed Hank's choice.

"Report to Command Base north of 223rd on Panama when you've got that hole punched, tread safe, over."

*"Copy that. Tread safe, Cap."*

"You and Little Jake..." Here Hank paused with a split-second upward quirk of his lips as he looked up three inches to indicate the six-and-a-half-foot fireman at Captain Alan's elbow. "... start with a search of the apartment above. Pull another hand line off 138's engine, there's a lot of smoke at the rear, where you'll find the kitchen."

Hank and his crew had toured a clone of this building in the past; he was confident that any one of the men he'd just sent inside could give the same description he was about to share with the two men standing before him. "The two apartments on this side of the building each have two bedrooms on the left with a bathroom in between. The kitchen and dining room are at the back corner on the right. The rear exit is straight back from this door. Those two units," Hank's hand swung to indicate the upper and lower apartments on their left, "will be mirror images of what you'll find on this side." He stooped to sort a reluctant section of hose and feed it to his advancing teams as Captain Alan and his lineman headed back to the street and the humming pumps of Engine 138.

The siren which Hank had been tracking with some recessed synapse gave a final *whoop-whoop*. *"Panama Command, this is Engine 110 on scene, over."*

Again, Hank knew the man making this announcement. "Engine 110, this is Panama Command. Chuck, head on over to Command Base at the north east corner of 223rd and Panama; I'll meet you there."

*"Ten-four, Hank, see you there."*

Hank reached to straighten the last loop of the now static two-and-a-half with his free hand and signaled Cook to charge that line. The captain forced reluctant feet to carry him away from the plumping canvas that connected him to his crew. He abandoned his front stoop/temporary command base and backed into the street, head on a swivel to survey the fireground before him. Greedy flames had lengthened their reach for that neighboring apartment to the north.

*"Panama Command, this is Engine 8 on scene."*

"Engine 8, this is Panama Command, send a team to evacuate the apartment to the north of the fire building. Have them turn off those utilities while they're at it. Lay a line from the hydrant at the corner of 223rd and Ravenna. Cut through the alley and give me a water curtain between the two buildings on that northern exposure."

*"Copy that, Command, will evacuate building to the north, get the utilities and stage a water curtain to cover that exposure, over."*

Hank swung fully around so that he was walking forward and waved the still raised HT in acknowledgement of the officers he passed on the way to the yet-to-be-manned Command Base. He noted the addition of another deputy tending to the civilians still lining the sidewalk across the street. Still another officer was directing traffic at the corner he was headed for; a corner where he met a fully geared-up Captain Chuck Olson and his equally prepared men. After a quick briefing, Hank sent one team of two to supply the promised backup to 116's searching crew. He sent Chuck and a lineman to follow 51's attack lead into the lower unit to lend a hand wrangling the two-and-a-half-inch line.

A new plume of smoke rose from behind the roof's ridgeline where Hank judged 116's "B" crew had just established vertical ventilation.

*"Panama Command, this is Engine 10, on scene."*

Hank's eyes continued to sweep the fireground as he keyed his HT. The building was still spewing a menacing brown cloud. Although the velocity of the smoke seemed diminished, he wouldn't term it "lazy" yet. The appearance of venting steam mixing with the smoke was encouraging, signaling that the attack lines were making a good push while applying 'the wet stuff on the red stuff'.

"Engine 10, this is Command, stage rehab at your choice of locations, over."

*"Copy that, Command, Engine 10 will set up rehab."*

*"Panama Command, this is Engine 51-B, reporting."*

"Engine 51-B, this is Panama Command, go ahead, Chet."

*"We've got all three of 'em, Cap; one was down. Gage is helping him out the back door. They had water on the seat of the fire located in the rear kitchen wall. We've finished the initial search of this apartment, no victims found, and have added our big gun to the mix. Visibility has improved markedly; 116 must have done their thing up-top."*

"Good job, 51. There are two men from 110 headed in to give you a hand. We'll start rotating in some relief crews in a bit. Keep in touch, Panama Command out."

Hank's last act as incident commander of the Panama fire was to formally turn over the reins to Chief McConnike when Battalion 14 arrived moments later.

---

The fire had been declared under control for the past 15 minutes. No victims had been found during subsequent searches. The "downed" lineman had perked right up with some O2 and a rehydrating I.V. Roy and John were already on their way back to the scene after escorting him to Rampart. Both the lower and upper apartments on the right side of the four-plex had sustained heavy fire and smoke damage. There'd been fire extension via an outer wall to the second story; drapes had wicked flames right to the ceiling and the roof had indeed become squishy. Salvage and overhaul crews would be on-scene for hours.

The fire had not gotten much more than a taste of the neighboring structure it had coveted; damage to that building being limited to a few boards of scorch-marked siding and the melted bouquet of rainbow-colored plastic Chief McConnike now held. The fused handlebar streamers attested to the amount of radiant heat that had reached a protected alcove the tricycle had been parked behind.

Captain Stanley stood with Chief McConnike near the front bumper of Engine 138.

"Hank, I need your honest opinion. Did Spencer simply get tunnel vision when he ignored his first-in duty as IC to join the search, or did he purposely disregard SOP? His initial report left a lot to be desired. Did he even bother with a 360?"

"Sir, I don't know what 138 met when they first got on-scene..."

"Which wouldn't be the case if Spencer had called in a decent initial report."

"I heard he just came into the department on a lateral transfer from upstate. Maybe he hasn't quite reconciled the differences between the two departments."

"Maybe he should. I guess we'll get to the bottom of things when we do the on-scene walk-through. Be sure to leave the lines in place until after we get that done."

*"Panama Command, Truck 46-B, reporting."*

*"Panama Command, Engine 9, reporting."*

"That being said, good work, Hank." McConnike clapped the captain standing next to him on a shoulder before he keyed the HT to take the incoming reports. "My first impression is that the actions you took during those first minutes after you arrived on-scene went a long way towards mitigating those *not* taken before you got here."

The chief lifted the HT to an ear and waved a hand excusing 51's captain to head off to check in with his engine crew.

The two officers turned without taking notice of the attention being paid by a crouching form swapping out an air tank. Aaron Powell's resentful glare followed an unaware back until that back's owner stepped out of sight.

---

Later, back in quarters, all but one of his men were sitting at the kitchen table. Two kibitzed while two moved chessmen across the board. Hank joined the fifth member of the crew, pausing to consider the newly chalked anagram.

Roy looked up from the magazine he was reading, obviously having stationed himself on the couch to catch his captain's reaction. The hand writing was reminiscent of a certain senior paramedic's distinctive script.

Captain H. Stanley

Plan Ye Hat Antics

"Cap, tell me again why you burned McConnike's hat. I didn't quite catch what you told Tilde."

"If ever you find me holding your hand while you're in labor, DeSoto, maybe I'll distract you with the tale."

---

Hank hung up the phone, and pushed away from his desk. It had been a helluva long day and he didn't know whether to be put out or amused by the conversation he'd just had. He was leaning towards irritation at having to field such a call at such a late hour. He went in search of Marco to find out which it would be.

---

"How was *I* supposed to know that he had a written SOP for washing the pots and pans? I've met some crazy captains..." Marco paused at the look Hank gave him. "...not you Cap, but Captain Price is one *loco déspota*." At his Captain's censorious look, the lineman continued. "Okay, Cap, you tell me what is *normal* about flipping shit over someone washing the dishes *the same way every other station in the county does it*, with soap and water?"

"He says soap and water ruins a cast iron pan and now he has to re-season them all."

"If that's the case, he needs to put labels on them, or maybe one on his own forehead warning of his *tendencia* to blow up. I'm telling you, I thought he was going to rupture something, that, or bean me with the skillet he was waving around." Marco obviously had taken exception to his treatment while subbing for one of Station 9's linemen.

Hank decided he might as well give in and be amused. "See, you should appreciate me more. I've *never* chased you guys with the cookware, no matter how much trouble you've served up."

"Hey, Marco," Chet called from the couch, "how exactly do you clean those pans? I gotta write this down; I'm picking up a shift next week at that station. No use repeating your mistakes."

Marco answered in Spanish, which Hank couldn't quite translate, which was probably for the best. He used his captainly judgment to decide it was time to diffuse the conversation before Marco went in search of a pan to end it with himself. "I guess we'll just stick with aluminum around here."

Hank leaned to get a better look at what the guys were watching. Wonder Woman seemed to be duking it out with a giant gorilla. He was tempted to join his men in cheering Linda Carter on as she defended the red, white and blue, wearing a scanty representation of each of those hues, but the show was almost over. He turned instead to move through the kitchen, checking that the back door was locked, the coffee pot unplugged and Henry's bowl had water. He set the air popper to making the first bowl of pop corn of the evening.

---

When he heard the closing theme song, Hank called, "Hey, fellas, listen up," he checked to make sure each of his men was listening. "I got a call earlier. The all-hands post-incident review of the Panama Fire is set for our next shift on, so we have a few days off to get our thoughts straight. Be ready with your observations and questions; they're planning on it taking at least a couple of hours. As usual, all the companies in attendance will take calls from wherever they decide to hold this shindig."

His men turned back to the television; John stood up to stretch. Hank put a stalling hand on his ever-empty junior paramedic's arm as he walked past on his way to the fridge.

"While I've got your attention, men, I just want to say something. You all did me proud back at that fire this afternoon. We were lucky, and there were no lives lost. Someday, I may have to ask you guys not to go in again, even though we know for certain that lives *will* be lost, even though every fiber of our beings demands that we do. Knowing you trust me to make that kind of decision means the world to me."

He carried the bowl to the comfortable chair John had just inadvertently forfeited and settled in to see what NBC's *Saturday Night at the Movies* had to offer.

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"Well, gentlemen, I'm ready to turn in," Hank announced behind a covered yawn that extended into an extravagant stretch. He retrieved the bowl from Marco's lap, rattled the old maids into the garbage and made his way to the kitchen. A quick rinse and pat dry had the bowl in the cupboard with the popper before he headed across the apparatus bay. A few moments later, a pillow was righted on the couch; a glass was rinsed in the sink, and one by one, Hank's men followed him.

---

"Look-it who we have here, boys," a sloppy voice was heard above the conversational hum of the crowded room. It joined the regular groans and cheers punctuating the NBA game that the television mounted above the bar was tuned to. *The Station* was a favorite hangout of Carson firefighters, due mainly to the fact that Pete Michaels was part owner and a retired fireman himself. Another drawing card was that his wife, Caroline could cook. It was not uncommon for most of the bar and grill's patrons to have some connection with one of the area's fire services and tonight was no exception.

"Looks like a pair of Stanley's wonder boys decided to honor us with their presence."

Mike Stoker and Chet Kelly shifted at the table they had laid claim to, wary of the trouble that was stumbling their way. Mike had been leaning over to retrieve a basket from the next table over. Tom Marsh, one of 116's engineers had absconded with it moments ago. The two exchanged glances as Tom relinquished his claiming hold on the unshelled peanuts and Mike sat back in his chair, but not before he cocked it slightly towards the center of the room. Two chair legs clapped back to the floor as Chet righted himself from the tipped-back-against-the-rear-wall position he'd had his chair balanced in.

"Stoker, Kelly, you two wanna swing around this way while we wait for the captains to get here?" Tim Blair offered in an even undertone.

Aaron Powell halted his unsteady progress across the center of the open room to where two of his station's crew were seated. They were from another shift and had agreed to meet the lineman who seemed to need to vent about A-shift's fire down on Panama yesterday. He was buying, so they had watched the game with patience while they waited for their tardy station-mate to show.

"Hey, Marsh!" Powell changed course and swung toward the firemen from 116s seated to his right. "Whatcha doin' fraternizing with these boot-licking chumps? Aren't you afraid some of their chicken-shit fireground-avoidance tactics will rub off on your rookie there?"

Tom, Tim and Scott Wharton, the rookie in question each pushed a chair back from their table. Chet made it half way out of his chair, but somehow Mike beat them all to a standing position and faced the coming confrontation without seeming to be in any sort of rush to do it. With a stilling motion of one hand he held 116's crew in place. He reached into a back pocket to remove his wallet and selected two bills to lay on the table behind him. In keeping with his aura of calm watchfulness, he never took his eyes off the man who was shifting from one leg to the other in agitation and belligerence.

"Chet, come on, we'd best be headed out. Tom, when the captains get here, could you tell ours that we decided to make an early night of it and we'll see him next shift?" He rotated sideways to make a path for Chet to pass behind him and waited for the lineman to accept the silent invitation to take point.

"What's the matter, Stoker? Did your textbook-perfect 360 make you think you weren't safe? Gee, I don't know that you took long enough to accurately weigh the *risk* involved in hanging out with the real firemen. Maybe you should take another few minutes to mull it over before you turn tail and run."

Mike and Chet were joined by a flanking escort from the three members of 116, who received a pair of grateful glances for their trouble.

"Exactly how long is Stoker's fuse?" Tim asked Chet as the group made their way through the closely placed tables. "I'da flattened the bastard by now."

They'd almost made the exit when Powell's voice marked his position and he caught up with them. The other firemen present in the room, none of them officers, seemed to feel the situation was in hand, but to a man they were monitoring the alcohol-induced drama being staged in a public venue.

"What the hell kind of firemen can stand and watch people and property burn, while their God-damned *fearless* leader carefully weighs safety and risk. Hell, hesitate long enough and every fire's a loser. I didn't become a fireman to be safe. I *fight* fire; I don't run from the beast. I don't stand around and deliberate; I get the job done. Someone should be keeping track of how many innocent folk have died on Stanley's watch. Who knows how many people would still be alive if he had the balls to actually command a company."

"Hold up a sec, Kelly," Mike said in a low voice that made the lineman suck in an expectant breath.

"Here's where we find out exactly how long that fuse you were asking about is," he said conversationally to Tim without turning around.

"Hank Stanley doesn't deserve to be called a firefighter; he's a coward hiding behi..."

At the crack of Mike's fist against what sounded like a jaw, Chet turned. "Just about *that* long, he said as he stepped to cover Mike's back in case this turned into something more than a less-than-private discussion between two firemen. The other three standing men stood close, keeping an eye on the men from 138 who still seemed content to remain seated.

The downed fireman came up spitting mad, but his under-the-influence balance imposed a hefty handicap so when Mike twisted and dipped to avoid a furious swing, he missed by a wide margin.

No one moved to catch the man. Mike stood calm, feet rooted in the spot he'd thrown his only punch from. Chet casually stepped out of the path of the flailing man to enjoy a landing with a critical eye. "He really needs to work on his form," he said to no one in particular.

Powell's whole-body follow-through had tossed him into a messy heap of foam and peanut shells. He rolled and slid beneath his pedastalled landing pad as the firemen seated there simply salvaged the pitcher that had survived and moved to another table. They raised their glasses in silent greeting as they passed the men from Station 51.

Mike turned to Chet. "I just wish this was one of those times where I was going to get away with spending more time considering an action than I do explaining myself afterwards."

They chose a table off to the side and sat at it, knowing that mere wishing would not spare them when their captain got wind of the altercation. The usual exodus after game-end seemed postponed. The Budweiser Clydesdales trotted to a catchy jingle; firemen seemed content to nurse their last beer and take in the post game analysis. The studio commentators would have been touched.

Pete Michaels harassed two firemen into picking their stuporous partner up and carrying him out of his establishment, exacting promises on the way that they would deliver him safely to wherever he lived. He thought a more fitting place might be on the curbside with the rest of his waiting garbage, but tomorrow was pickup day and the possibility of the man literally going out with the trash was too much of a liability. Also, there was the fact that the guy *was* a fellow firefighter.

Pete was positive that every firemen present had their own ideas of what bravery looked like. The belief that the only correct response was to rush in when everyone was rushing out was a time-honored, romanticized idea that got firemen killed on a regular basis. It hadn't escaped Pete's notice that he had been permanently barred from doing a job he loved because firemen were "doing what they do" and "getting the job done" during his last fire years ago. He had traded most of two legs for a structure, one that had been standing at the end of a hard-fought battle between brave men and the "beast". The building had been condemned and bulldozed before Pete had been released from the ICU.

As tempting as the symbolic gesture of "putting out the trash" was, family was family and brothers were brothers and with lawsuits being what they were, Pete settled on just arranging for the man's safe deposit somewhere else.

Pete trusted that this incident would not be swept under the rug. Someone, of some authority would hear of it. What worried him was that Mike Stoker might be caught up in the coming disciplinary actions. Pete didn't know the man well; Stoker was not what he would call a regular customer. The former fireman certainly had no personal knowledge of what kind of firefighter the engineer was.

But from what he had seen of the man tonight, he knew in his gut that here was someone who deserved the honor of working in a profession he himself missed almost as much as he did his own legs. He maneuvered his chair to intercept a man he did know well.

---

Captain Stanley paused outside of the tavern, as Captain Jim Alan held the door open for the men on the other side to exit. One of them was performing an excellent demonstration of a fireman's carry.

The man doing such a fine job of removing his fellow shift mate from Pete's presence obliged Hank's reach and twisted helpfully so the captain could turn the unresponsive firefighter's head towards the light. "Don't leave him alone tonight, and whoever you leave him with should check on him occasionally." Hank stepped through the door that Jim still held. "Mine better not be in that condition," he told his fellow captain as he walked by.

---

Mike eventually got his wish.

Pete met both captains in the lobby. They spoke for several minutes before Hank moved off toward his waiting men while Captain Alan headed for 116's table. Hank noticed that Jim was making better progress than he was able to manage. By the time he'd gained Mike and Chet's position he'd been given several accounts of the fight, most echoing Pete's with variations on the themes of "Stoker didn't start it" and "He was trying to avoid a fight, sir." The final man between Hank and his men ended with "He was trying to walk away, but Powell grabbed him".

Hank twirled a chair away from a table and joined his bar-brawling miscreants. "So, guys, I hear you had a bit of excitement while you were waiting for Captain Alan and me to get here. I guess I'm sorry we were late."

His men had tracked his progress across the bar room, and both were fully aware of what he'd been hearing.

Mike presented a single statement in his own defense. "Cap, some of the fellas got it wrong. I was trying to avoid the fight for a while there. But even if I might have technically still been walking, I was already planning to throw that punch before he grabbed me."

Chet followed Mike's example and began and ended his testimony with, "I was pretty impressed, Cap. Stoker turned his other cheek; he just drew the line at turning yours."

---

The next morning, Hank awakened to the second of A-shift's two-day-stretch-off with a vow to that he was not, not, *not* going to visit her in the hospital.

He'd made it through a morning of routine household chores and a round of preparations for the upcoming holiday weekend. His in-laws were coming to stay for the week. Their visits were always an adventure in family dynamics; he guessed he would learn soon enough who was speaking to whom when they arrived.

He'd distracted himself further by actually *volunteering* to finish wrapping the last of the Christmas gifts. The presents were artfully arranged under the Christmas tree with no illusions as to how long *that* would last. His youngest son was a notorious package shaker; he got it from his mother.

---

Hank had made that promise to himself in all sincerity and full of conviction, and yet, here he was, standing at Rampart's visitor's desk in the main lobby.

She was no longer a patient.

She'd been whisked away by a system unwilling to share pertinent details with an unrelated person. With one hand, he applauded this sudden, *belated* care and concern for a child who the system, the *world* had thus far failed. His other metaphorical hand refused to participate in the celebration. The resulting hollowness he felt left him rocking back on his heels.

*You are going to get a quick lesson on letting go of someone you should never have let yourself become attached to in the first place.* There was a raw place loitering somewhere in the vicinity of his lungs which was hanging onto the ache.

*Serves you right you moron.*

Hank ducked his head and made tracks for the most familiar exit.

---

Dixie McCall stopped him in the ER hallway. One look at his face caused her to tow him into an empty conference room. He looked around and drew a bracing breath. *Steady Hank, steady; no one has died. She has left. She is safe. She is not yours to keep safe. She is not yours at all.*

"What? What is it, Hank? Your wife, the kids? Is it one of the guys?" He could see that Dixie was concerned; about the people she had listed, about him.

"No, Dixie, it's none of the above. It's just I..."

He stalled for a moment, unable to explain why he was so shattered by this loss of something that he never should have tried to own. Under Dixie's watchful eyes, he did not try to hide the fact that he *was* shattered. *Lord, how can you be such a wreck over something that was never any of your business in the first place?*

"Look, I just came in to check on that little girl the guys brought in on Monday, Tilde Shay-Chefler. I guess it's just that I was hoping to see for myself that she was doing okay, but she's been discharged, without my consent, can you imagine that?" Hank shook his head in disbelief and self-chastisement as he acknowledged at least an tendril of the root of his emotional turmoil.

Dix listened as she conjured up a cup of coffee from some nearby nook. She knew he took it black. Hank was somehow comforted by this. He was not one of her favorite paramedics; she did not see him on the regular basis that she saw and interacted with Roy and John. He thought that perhaps he might be one of her favorite *fire captains* and wondered at the comfort he found in that singularly obscure distinction. An observant woman, this nurse, who had over the years, somehow joined his circle of friends.

A friend who was now telling him to wait, actually *ordering* him to. He settled into a chair as Dixie disappeared. He assumed she left to deal with one of the daily crises she dealt with as a part of her job and to let him deal with his own pathetic crisis. *Which should not even be a crisis.* Which he should be able to take in stride as a part of his job. *What the hell were you thinking?* He should have listened to that strident, *wise* voice that had been mercilessly scolding him for the past three days.

---

It turned out she hadn't, abandoned him, to wallow in his self-deprecating thoughts and flagellations.

She returned and settled back into the chair next to him. "Here's the scoop, Captain," she began.

It did not surprise Hank that Dixie had been able to breach the security and cocooning protection placed around a patient but he was slightly humbled at the trust she was extending him by sharing such 'classified information'.

"She's with her grandmother. Social services will still follow her, but Dianne up in Peds met 'Grandma Maddie' and says she thinks it will be okay. No promises of course, but somewhere to start again, somewhere safe to be a kid again..." Dix shrugged a shoulder. "...*finish* being a kid."

Hank shifted on his chair. *In for a dime.* "What about the baby?"

"Mistletoe had several families auditioning for the honor of taking her home. Although she's on the small side, she's doing well. The nurses up in NICU will have a chance to fatten her up, spoil her rotten while the powers-that-be finish screening the family that hopes to adopt her. It looks like a done deal - the ID card on her incubator has been edited to say 'Misty Danton' although I guess even her new parents have slipped and called her 'Mistletoe' a few times.

Hank smiled his thanks, suitably impressed by the depth of Dixie's research.

"Well, Captain, it isn't a fairy book ending, but it has the makings of one. I choose to believe it does; you should let yourself believe it too." Dixie reached to place a hand on his forearm.

"Hank, it's never a mistake to care. Sometimes it throws you for a loop and you have to redefine which set of rules you are going to honor. Me? I think 'Rule Number One' is something we memorize and practice as rookies and new grads. After awhile, we begin to find our own balance between compassion and detachment; discovering for ourselves just how much distance we have to maintain to be able to do our jobs and how much empathy we can afford to allow ourselves to feel." Dixie got up and took his mug and returned with a refill.

Hank wrapped his hand around it, absorbing more than the warmth of the coffee it held.

"I don't know what to tell you, except that when we decide to throw the rule book out, it pays to go in with helmets cinched, armor strapped on, and if we're wise, an exit strategy. They won't always need us, we won't always get to say goodbye, but we're always going to long for closure. Sometimes we get lucky," Dix said with a brightening smile. "Here, written on the hospital's finest stationary. Tilde left this for you."

"Well, I've got an ER to run." Dixie gave his arm a squeeze. "Don't be a stranger, Captain. Those sliding doors open for more than paramedics and injured firemen." The nurse stood and taking her coffee cup with her, slipped out of the room.

Hank opened the paper towels from the accordion folds they had been dispensed in.

*Dear Captain Stanley,*

He paused to note that her letters were formed in juvenile-fat loops. He caught himself scanning for the circles that his daughter had capped her "i's" with for years.

*This is not your daughter, that now familiar voice stubbornly began its mantra of caution.*

He began to read again.

*Dear Captain Stanley,*

*I wish I could have told you in person, but I have to leave with my grandma today.*

*I am going to live in Iowa. That feels like the other side of the moon.*

*She has cats. And \*\*\*\*\* chickens.*

Hank smiled at the notion that Tilde's internal censor could wrestle control of a pen where it had little luck managing her tongue. *Of course, he thought, she was no longer in labor when she penned this note.* There was that to consider.

*I am going to live with a cat lady who raises her own \*\*\*\*\* eggs. I am not going to learn how to pluck chickens. Can they make you if you are a vegetarian? I forgot to tell you I've decided to become a vegetarian.*

*I am sure I will be fine living with my Grandma Maddie who is not finished with her name, and not with me either, I guess. (smiley-face symbol)*

*Thank you for being there when I needed you.*

*Please thank Mr. DeSoto too.*

*P.S.*

*I asked my nurse about Mr. Duncan and Mr. Schultz. Here is what she said: she does not know who they were either. I guess she had enough to learn in nursing school without having to look up where the names of (carefully ink-obliterated space) stuff came from. I mean, if you had to know all the bones in the human body by Friday, would you be looking up something that's not even going to be on the test? She did tell me that a dirty Duncan is rough-looking, and a shiny*

Here, the loopy letters ended with a helpfully placed arrow artfully doodled with fletchings and a heart-shaped arrowhead that pointed to the lower right corner of the paper towel. Hank lifted the first "page" to reveal the second underneath.

*Schultz is smooth and satiny. I guess it matters for reasons which are just too gross to talk about. If I were Mr. Duncan or Mr. Schultz I'd be mad that they were going around naming placentas after me.*

*P.S. of the last P.S. You should tell your crew about the hat, sometime. I'm just saying. I bet they need to smile once in a while too.*

*Sincerely,*

*Tilde Shay Chefler*

Hank carefully re-folded the evidence that while it may not be his place to help her, perhaps this small, pugnacious person who had found a way through his defenses had a chance at finding a way to recover a portion of her missing-in-action-childhood. With a sigh, he made a conscious decision to take a friend's advice.

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"Rule number one: never get emotionally involved in your patients." Season One, *Brush Fire* (Roy to John, then John to Roy), and "Paramedic rule number one: do not get hung up on a patient." Season One, *Nurses Wild*, (John to Roy)

A/N: Who knows what Schulz and Duncan would have thought about their claim to fame in obstetrics circles? I suspect *Captain Stanley* might be a little appalled to find out that the working title of this anagram tale was originally "Satiny Placenta", which is what sent me delving deeper for a title I thought he would approve of.

P.S. (and a hint) Three anagram kids in this one. ("Mistletoe Danton" is the base you should use for her anagram.)